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## **Surrendering to Risk:**

### **A Brief Account of Existentialism, Fear and Art**

Some time ago I wrote a short text about creativity and existentialism. I was quite afraid of the idea of taking risks at the time. Uncertainty and senselessness were difficult for me to digest after having had a difficult upbringing. I wanted control and predictability, but I knew I would not get anywhere without risk and discomfort. What follows is that text with a few interjections I make a few years later. Not denying the initial ideas but rather updating them slightly. I still use and read these arguments every time I find existential and political fear paralysing me. Now being one of those moments. In the original text I was very assertive, and I affirmed almost unequivocally that writing, art and creative life in general are the tools humans have against nothingness, helplessness, anguish, nostalgia for home, and ultimately, ghosts. The artist safeguards and protects herself from that nothingness she has been told contains the universe, that precedes it. I still share some of these ideas but struggle to be so confident with anything that comes from a human mind.

I was sure that nostalgia and anguish are the product of a memory, an intuition, of having belonged somewhere, of the fear of being responsible for ourselves and others, of the unease caused by the tyranny and arbitrariness of chance. Nevertheless, some of these are the conditions that make art possible. Aristotle points out in the Nicomachean Ethics, reminding Agathon, that art and chance have a pact. All human endeavour requires an empty space, a lack, something indeterminate and unknown, a blank page.

Human beings are free to choose what they will do, how to act, and what to say because their nature and future are not predetermined. Sartre's existentialism proposes precisely this: existence precedes the essence. A person is not given an essence before they are born, rather it is made as they live. The French author explains that there is no God who knows the nature and essence of humankind, so 'man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism' (2002, p. 138-139). Thus, human beings have no choice but to be free; they are what they choose to be and do, and, in that sense, they also have the possibility of choosing to do nothing or not to choose at all. They are responsible for their actions, their projects, for what they have done, are doing, and will do with their lives. Likewise, according to Sartre, what humans choose for themselves they choose for everyone; that is, anyone in the situation in which they find themselves would act in the same way as they do, or at least that is what is expected; and when one chooses something, one thinks that anyone in that situation would choose the same thing. We tend to think that we have a common sensibility. In this sense, we human beings are our own legislators and do not need to abide by pre-established laws that treat us as objects, as machines that always work the same way if a button is pressed.

According to this, human beings are distressed because we bear responsibility for what we consider the choices of others should be, for our own actions, for our lives, our projects, and, above all, we are distressed that our own choices are not, in all cases, as firm as we would like them to be. We do not always maintain our choices alive. For example, we tend to quickly break our promise to live healthily. However, the anguish we're talking about is not the kind that stops us. For example, a father and mother are truly distressed by what it means to have a child in their care, but this does not always mean that they decide not to have the child. Existentialism invites people to define themselves through their actions; it reminds them of the responsibility they have to others simply by existing; it does not incite them to stop acting because of the anguish that such responsibility causes.

This was the first part of the text I wrote, and when I wrote it, I thoroughly agreed with Sartre. Now I am not as concerned with metaphysical freedom as I am with the many other ways in which humans are not free. Particularly if they are part of an oppressed group of people. Still, if I am thinking in existential terms, I can clearly see the deep fear that the existentialists refer to, the one of accepting that our lives are in our hands. We distrust ourselves and others so much and we may have good reasons for this. We base this fear on our experience, and we know that there are robberies and violations of freedoms every second we breathe. We do not want the world to be in humanity's hands, nor our lives in ours.

I have to be honest with myself and look at this fear in the face. It is right there telling me to stay at home watching T.V avoiding other humans and sometimes I do. It is needed, but there are other times when I should open a flexible dialogue between my fearful and my adventurous part, when adventure should take over. René Maheu points out that 'to the ancient tragedian, dominated by blind fate, Kierkegaard contrasts the modern tragedy, which is the adventure of the Individual' (1970, p. 15). Modern humans, according to the Danish author, are not the heroes of a Greek tragedy in which they are struck by fate, but rather those who take a chance on their life. The adventurer accepts and seeks risk, and nothing prevents her from taking action.

Kierkegaard also says that human anguish is a fainting before the vast freedom we have. According to this philosopher, humankind ceased to be infinite and close to God. It is then finite and is an 'affirmed nothing'. This 'affirmed nothing' can be seen as Paul Valéry's 'divine absence': people are not what they do: they are not a waitress, nor a journalist, nor a murderer, nor a cashier, nor a teacher. In Sartre's words: 'Reality escapes all definition by behavior' (1966, p. 111). Thus, behaviors or professions are not our essence, but rather roles

we play, as if we were theatre actors. The essence of the actor cannot be captured in that theatre because the curtain falls, and he abandons the character.

We cannot be captured in predetermined essences in the mind of God because there is no such God who predetermines anything. In this sense, humans fear being themselves. Their options are twofold: either they take responsibility for their life, or they do not. Either they decide to take the reins of their life, or they do not. We also find this idea in Heidegger's approaches. *Dasein*—that is, humans, ‘the being who questions being’—have two options: either being themselves or not. However, according to the German philosopher, they must choose to be themselves, to exist authentically, and, in this sense, take responsibility for their life.

Existentialism is a reminder of our freedom. It invites us to movement, to have projects, to live, to be active. It invites us to give way to life, to Freud's *eros*, rather than to *thanatos*. However, humans are not all *eros*, movement, desire, project, and life. We must also make room for *thanatos*, not as death, but in the sense of self-forgetfulness, rest, and vacation. Existentialism's invitation is for attendance, not for permanence. We do not want it to last forever, to be present at every moment of our lives. An invitation to a lifelong party is like never stopping work. We want to make our lives the theatre of *eros* and the interludes of *thanatos*. However, a ‘vacation from ourselves’ does not imply an evasion of responsibilities. It is not about abandoning ourselves or ceasing to be ourselves, but rather a moderation of work and activity. We hesitate at the idea of being completely responsible for ourselves, of not having a god to share the burden, of inhabiting a world of risk, but this uncertainty and unpredictability are not only a cause for anguish; they are what allows for freedom, surprise, and even art. Art is a vocation that begins by surrendering to risk. Modern tragedy is a tragedy of adventure. The protagonist is the one who exposes herself to chance, the one who plans the spontaneous.

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