

Survival and Existentialism

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Abstract

This paper explores the pressing challenges currently confronting humanity, examining how these obstacles impact our capacity for progress and resilience. Key areas of focus include political polarization, economic hardship, environmental degradation, and a growing reliance on religion amidst a societal retreat from reason, curiosity, and higher education. These factors contribute to a widespread apathy toward global issues and the state of the world. By analyzing these issues, this paper advocates an embrace of existentialist principles, particularly those of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, as a philosophical framework for navigating modern crises. Sartre's philosophy emphasizes personal responsibility and living fully in the present, providing a way to foster resilience and proactive engagement rather than passive reliance on external salvation. This paper ultimately argues that humanity's core nature grounded in progress, survival, and knowledge will persist through adversity, leading us toward a future of exponential growth, albeit not without hardship along the way.

Survival and Existentialism

Throughout history, humanity has faced profound challenges that have been devastating to the population. Yet, time and again, we have shown resilience and an unyielding capacity to overcome adversity. It is easy to view the crises we confront as indications of an inevitable decline: deepening political divides, widening economic inequality, escalating environmental degradation, and the resurgence of religious dependence amidst a retreat from science and reason. These issues can make it difficult to imagine a future of progress. However, humanity's true nature, rooted in a pursuit of knowledge and relentless progress, has always prevailed, and it will continue to do so. Our fate is that of exponential growth and innovation, though not without significant hardships along the way.

The duality between self-destruction and advancement is a critical aspect of human experience. On the one hand, political radicalization and division threaten to tear communities apart, weakening our capacity for collective action. Economic hardship, especially among the working class, has intensified frustrations with political and social systems, heightening social unrest and instability. Declining birth rates could spell potential disaster for future generations. On the other hand, environmental issues, including global warming, worsening natural disasters, and shifting weather patterns, endanger our survival. Psychological and spiritual factors reveal a renewed desire for guidance, with many turning to religion, often at the expense of curiosity, reason, and a commitment to scientific inquiry. This turn away from

higher education and critical thinking only exacerbates these crises, creating a vicious cycle of apathy and division.

Yet, in this very moment of crisis, humanity's capacity for progress shines. A broader acceptance of existentialist philosophy, such as that proposed by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, could offer a meaningful framework for tackling today's issues. Existentialism invites us to live fully in the present and take responsibility for shaping our future. As Sartre wrote, "There is only one day left, always starting over: it is given to us at dawn and taken away from us at dusk."⁷ (Sartre, Act 10 Scene 2). This perspective encourages us to transcend fear and dependency, placing faith not in predetermined salvation, but in our capacity to create a better world.

Evolutionary theory suggests that human behavior is shaped by adaptive traits that have been preserved to ensure survival, social cohesion, and reproductive success. Early humans survived by prioritizing close-knit cooperation, developing trust within their communities, and efficiently allocating limited resources. These evolutionary traits contributed to human progress by enabling societies to expand and solve immediate challenges for collective benefit. An abundance of resources in industrialized nations has led to a societal shift from survival-focused behavior to consumption-oriented lifestyles. A surplus of resources, particularly in economically developed regions, has both benefited and hindered humanity's collective progress. While advancements in technology, agriculture, and medicine have drastically improved living conditions, resource abundance has led to a sense of complacency and slowed global progress.

In countries with high levels of comfort and stability, there is often less incentive to innovate, as basic needs are already met and risk-taking becomes less attractive. Resource surplus has also intensified social inequalities, creating economic divides that hinder progress. In many cases, resources are concentrated within elite groups who prioritize maintaining control rather than addressing global issues such as poverty, environmental degradation, and political instability. This misallocation fosters social unrest and impedes collective progress by diverting resources from potentially transformative projects. These disparities underscore how an abundance of resources, if poorly managed, can paradoxically slow down human advancement. As per the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, “The top 10% of households by wealth had \$6.9 million on average. As a group, they held 67% of total household wealth. The bottom 50% of households by wealth had \$51,000 on average. As a group, they held only 2.5% of total household wealth.” (Kent & Ricketts, 2024). This disparity of wealth depicts an unsettling reality, where wealth is at an all-time high, however, it is concentrated in the hands of the top 10 percent. Inadvertently, we have created a world in which millions of people throw away food daily, while millions on the other side of the globe live in extreme famine. The duality of mass famines and morbid obesity is one that truly captures one of the pillars of humanity, greed.

In addition to an inequality of resources, humanity is also plagued by an inequality of knowledge and intellectual divides in society. In an age with such an abundance of information, it seems that many have no interest in exploring any of it. Higher level education is also not nearly as prominent, with the U.S census showing that “In 2022, 30.1% of men aged 25 and

older had completed a high school diploma or GED as their highest level of educational attainment, compared with 27.0% of women aged 25 and older. In 2022, 39.0% of women aged 25 and older, and 36.2% of men in the same age range, had completed a bachelor's degree or more as their highest level of educational attainment." (Census Bureau, 2024). These statistics are an unfortunate sign for any developed, first-world nation. They show a general lack of curiosity and a lust for knowledge if over half of the population does not even have a high school degree. With such demographics, it is easy to see how a slowing in scientific progress is present in the nation, and in the world. A lack of curiosity is not the only limiting factor in higher education, however. The tie-in between these statistics and corporate greed is also an issue, as an average college degree will end up costing on average, about "\$48,690 in a public school [and] \$64,440 in a private school." (Hanson, 2024). This is a byproduct of the capitalistic society that the United States has, with four-year college degrees being economically out of reach for the average American. Due to an incentive to maximize profits above all, capitalism has inadvertently priced out many Americans away from obtaining higher education, further stifling the intellectual progress of our society.

A movement of anti-intellectualism has also begun rising among the people. This can be observed in many cases, including the COVID-19 pandemic, and the disinformation regarding vaccines and other remedies surrounding the viral disease. Anti-Vaccine rhetoric has now become deeply rooted in some echo chambers in the nation and caused unnecessary deaths. Furthermore, Hydroxychloroquine becoming a sort of snake oil in regard to the COVID-19 virus

is also a result of a lack of independent thought and the perpetuation of disinformation. These issues fall into a larger theme of confirmation bias and a lack of research, which is incredibly dangerous. Warnings about these exact issues have been around for centuries, with Galileo writing “Those who believe an argument to be false may much more easily find the fallacies in it than men who consider it to be true and conclusive. ... The more the adherents of an opinion turn over their pages, examine the arguments, repeat the observations, and compare the experiences, the more they will be confirmed in that belief.” (Popova, 2016). It is a lot easier to find flaws in arguments and topics you believe to be wrong, but if they confirm your biases, one is less likely to attempt to disprove them. In an age with mass corporate media and social media platform algorithms tailored to your biases, it is easy to fall into an echo chamber and not venture out due to the sense of comfort familiar ideas may bring. This is one of the biggest issues contributing to political radicalization and dividing. People will not venture outside of what they believe and repeat the same rhetoric they have been told. Anyone who disagrees is not paid attention to, and useful discourse that may bring about changes in mindset is often ignored or ridiculed. Mass media has become one of the most powerful tools the upper class and corporations have over the rest of the populace. The consolidation of media ownership has effectively given the owners exclusive control over how the public receives information. As a result, this also gives the owners massive influence over the political systems, allowing them to funnel certain viewpoints that further their interests to the public. This, combined with a lack of independent fact-checking or identification of fake news has allowed for the effective altering

of human nature and thought. An age of information has ironically enough become a bane to free and critical thinking, as everything is already available with a simple search with no need to arrive at most conclusions through complex thought and reasoning. This fact alone has altered human nature, with one of humanity's most important and unique, becoming diminished. Furthermore, past childhood, creativity, and a need for exploration and learning become unnecessary in the society that has been built. Many adults fall into dead-end jobs, or other careers they only deal with to support themselves financially and stay afloat. As determined by the Pew Research Center, "When it comes to assessments of job satisfaction, about half of U.S. workers who are not self-employed (51%) report being extremely or very satisfied with their job overall; 37% say they are somewhat satisfied, while 12% are not too or not at all satisfied with their job." (Horowitz & Parker, 2023). A statistic that assesses that only half of the workforce is fully satisfied with their employment is not ideal, considering the embrace of the 'work culture' that many capitalistic nations are based upon.

A combination of these factors has severely altered the political sphere in the US. Effective media campaigns by these massive corporations have been able to falsely convince citizens that certain political positions, which are only beneficial to large corporations, are also in the interest of the average citizen. Vague information and disinformation have been rooted deep into the crevices of society, and the effects of this can be seen on a large scale, especially following the 2024 election. Search queries for 'What is a tariff' and 'Did Joe Biden drop out' saw massive increases the night before election day, showing the extent of the apathy and lack

of awareness in regard to one of the largest cornerstones of the US as a nation: it's politics and democratic institutions. As per The Nightly, "Google searches for the term "tariff" have spiked after the election, as have queries about "Trump's tariff plan" — spiking more than 1650 percent since the election." (Noack, 2024). The most troubling part about this, however, is that these searches spiked after the election, not in the months before when both candidates were campaigning on these issues and policies. This somewhat blind and ignorant approach to casting a vote all comes back to the issues of a lack of education and apathy to knowledge and information in the general populace.

In this modern and revolutionized technological age, we are also faced with decreasing birth rates. And while there may be some issues that present themselves due to this, it is not all negative. Whilst the birthrates around the world continue to decline year over year, the Earth's population has reached a record high of 8 billion. Projections estimate that birthrates will continue to decline, however, there is reason to believe that this is not a worrying statistic. As society progresses, the need to have children decreases. Reasons for this include falling rates of child mortality, higher education in women, and more career prospects for women outside of becoming mothers. Many times, rather than being a sign of societal failure, lower birth rates often indicate improvements in living standards and the prioritization of human rights. However, these lower birth rates may be a sign of adaptation to changing times in which having large families is not the main goal like it once was. The focus has instead shifted to smaller families in which a smaller number of children are given a better opportunity and more

resources as a result. Even with a record-high population of 8 billion, birth rates and trends will continue to level out as time goes on, and the large population boom was more prominent in a time of relative peace following the Cold War. As all actions have an equal and opposite reaction, the population trends will continue to level out over time or perhaps even decrease, to reach a more natural and beneficial point, with global trends and statistics suggesting similar. Following the unprecedented growth of the 20th century, global birthrates have begun to plummet all over the world. A study conducted by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, and published in *The Lancet*, claims that “By 2050, over three-quarters (155 of 204) of countries will not have high enough fertility rates to sustain population size over time; this will increase to 97% of countries (198 of 204) by 2100” (IHME, 2024). This demographic shift demonstrates the changing societal norms and circumstances that are of consideration to families before they have children. An increased acceptance of smaller, and even child-free families has contributed to such shifts. Previously mentioned factors, such as a conglomeration of wealth and resources by the upper class, can also be seen as a demotivating factor when planning a family.

Due to societal influence and a lack of survival in wilderness conditions, much of human instinct and nature have been phased out of necessity. What remains now is mostly the result of the conditions in which one is raised. These conditions, especially the mindsets and beliefs of the parents will greatly influence the mind of a child during upbringing. This concept of nurture over nature is very prevalent in society. There is an argument to be made about the fact that

human nature, as it existed during the hunter-gatherer period, has been completely eradicated, and replaced with something else. Emphasizing ideas that would be more beneficial, such as the heightened importance of the pursuit of knowledge, and adaptation of philosophical thought, would greatly benefit the human experiment. For example, an adaptation of existentialism in place of organized religion and blind faith would be an improvement.

Considering the lack of human nature today, the application of Sartre's philosophy seems appropriate. For progress as a species, we must abandon the notion of "nature", as it pertains to humanity as a collective or notions of predeterminism and embrace the notion that we are meant to find our destiny and that everything is in our own hands. Jean-Paul Sartre says, "Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (Sartre, 22). Sartre argues that humans define themselves through their actions, as there is no predefined essence or purpose assigned to us at birth. He emphasizes individual responsibility in creating meaning and identity, encapsulated in the idea that "for if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom" (Sartre, 5). The idea presented is that people are entirely responsible for shaping their nature and destiny. Further, it conveys that there is no 'one size fits all' nature for our complex species. Instead, it proposes that every individual has a purpose that they must find in life. These ideas, at the

minimum, would bring positivity into one's life, and at maximum, change one's outlook on life.

This 'Carpe Diem' mindset and pursuit of finding the truth of one's existence would bring about a decrease in the stagnation of progress as a species, given a wide embrace of the philosophy is achieved.

Regardless of whether humanity adapts to such a mindset, the human experiment will endure. The human brain simply cannot imagine or comprehend non-existence, and that is intentional. Regardless of the hardships we have faced, and ones we have yet to, Humanity will survive. Further philosophical ideas, such as that of Albert Camus may be applied. Camus uses the Greek myth of Sisyphus as a metaphor for human existence. Sisyphus is condemned by the gods to push a boulder up a hill for eternity, only to have it roll back down each time he nears the top. Camus sees this as a powerful symbol of the human condition: the endless struggle against a purposeless universe. Yet, Camus concludes that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 24) finding freedom in accepting his fate and continuing his struggle. This metaphorical analysis applies well to the progress of humanity, as we are often faced with hardships that act as major setbacks. Many such setbacks included the Black Death in Europe, the World Wars, and more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. However, even such harrowing times have brought about change and benefits in their way, with societal progress such as work from home emerging from the pandemic. The Tale of Sisyphus can be applied on both a personal and global scale. Personal applications are important, as they can teach one to find positivity in

even the worst of times and change one's outlook on life. Camus suggests that rather than seeking external validation or transcendent meaning, individuals must live authentically, finding their meaning within their experiences and actions. This call from Camus, to live passionately and freely, in a universe so indifferent and cold, is one of hope. If one is to envision human nature, as hard as it may be given the ever-changing nature of humanity, one constant remains the same, and it is that of perseverance. There is always an internal struggle within us, according to Camus. He argues "Man is the only creature who refuses to be what he is" (Camus, 10). We are creatures of limitation, yet we continuously strive to overcome those limits. This relentless pursuit of transcendence, even in an absurd universe, is what gives human life its tragic beauty. This internal struggle, however, is part of what continues to drive our perseverance and our ability to overcome anything thrown our way.

Therefore, existentialism offers a powerful lens through which to view and address contemporary global crises, empowering individuals to act with purpose rather than retreating into apathy. In an age marked by climate anxiety, political disillusionment, and economic instability, existentialist philosophy invites us to reject passivity and embrace the power of individual agency. As Camus posits, even in a world that often appears absurd and indifferent, the human spirit can find meaning through action. This perspective challenges the views that paralyze many in the face of seemingly insurmountable global issues. By taking responsibility for their choices and acknowledging their role within a larger collective, individuals can break free from feelings of helplessness. For instance, in the context of climate change, existentialism

calls for a rejection of resignation to inevitable disaster. Instead, it inspires proactive engagement in sustainable practices, political advocacy, and innovation. Sartre's assertion that "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (Sartre, 22) underscores the idea that humanity's future hinges on its willingness to shape it deliberately. Through this active embrace of responsibility, existentialism transforms despair into a rallying cry for progress.

Humanity's core nature is grounded in progress, survival, and knowledge. Over time it will continue to persist through adversity, leading us toward a future of growth, albeit not without hardship along the way. Taking into consideration the hardships endured by humanity, past and present, our fate is one of progress, which may be expedited by an adaptation of Existentialism such as proposed by Sartre and Camus. The current era, marked by both unprecedented technological advances and profound societal challenges, demands a renewed focus on humanity's collective purpose. This involves addressing systemic inequalities, combating misinformation, and fostering sustainable practices. The existentialist principle that "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (Sartre, 22) offers a compelling guide: we are the architects of our future, and the progress we achieve will reflect our values, priorities, and determination. While hardships may punctuate our journey, they are not our endpoint. By embracing our capacity for growth and progress, humanity can continue to overcome adversity and achieve a future of advancement, rooted in purpose and resilience. The human experiment will endure.

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