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The Trauma of Life's Meaninglessness:

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The Trauma of Life's Meaninglessness: A Philosophical Reading of Monty Python's *Life of Brian*

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Abstract

How would it feel if one day we could fulfill a dream that many of us share—to spend a few hours or days in a beloved time and place we consider unique and unrepeatable? Personally, I would choose to visit Athens during the height of classical antiquity, to meet the man I regard as the most avant-garde artist of all time, Euripides, and have a "coffee" with him. But that, of course, is another story.

Monty Python, on the other hand, chose a different setting in "*Life of Brian*": not the classical world, but the hazy transitional period often mislabeled as "Late Antiquity"—a time teetering on the brink of the Middle Ages. Medieval society is unable to confront the trauma of finitude, the existential void of a life stripped of meaning, whether on an individual or collective scale. It is precisely into this world that Monty Python, with characteristic wit, drop their unwitting hero, Brian, not in search of answers, but for the sheer absurdity of it. The deeper philosophical implications of this move, however, are left to us to untangle.

Keywords: *Trauma, Sophists, Nietzsche, Gauchet, Castoriadis, Existentialism, Bad Conscience, Bad Faith, Alienation, Salvation, Finitude*

Faith is the path of least resistance
Woody Allen, *Match Point*

On Comedy

Comedy—especially when it veers into farce or the grotesque[1]—is often dismissed as nothing more than light entertainment, a disposable product meant to offer a couple of hours of amusement in the darkness of a movie theatre. The very term "serious comedy" sounds like an oxymoron. Simply labeling a film as a comedy seems to carry an implicit devaluation, regardless of its actual depth or quality.

Let's be honest: comedies are rarely hailed as masterpieces. With very few exceptions—the film of our topic and perhaps Hal Ashby's "*Being There*" or Larry Charles' audacious "*Borat*"—comedies are seldom described as a masterpiece.

Consider Peter Weir's "*The Truman Show*": how many more Oscars might it have won had the lead role not been played by Jim Carrey, an actor with unmistakably comic instincts? And yet, comedic elements are present even in the most "serious" films. Works marked by violence—even extreme violence—such as the Coen brothers' "*No Country for Old Men*" or Quentin Tarantino's "*Pulp Fiction*", are often deeply funny without in any way undermining their gravity. In "*Pulp Fiction*", following a blood-soaked shootout, a group of hardened criminals scrambles—almost farcically—to clean the trunk of a car before the owner's wife returns from the supermarket and discovers the carnage. The same can be said of Woody Allen's entire oeuvre, though his films typically lack farce or grotesquerie (with the possible exception of his earliest work). "*I'd never join a club that would allow a person like me to become a member*," he declares in the opening scene of "*Annie Hall*" (1977). The philosophical insight here is so immediate, so stark in

[1] Naremore James, *Stanley Kubrick and the Aesthetics of the Grotesque*. Film Quarterly, vol. 60, no. 1, Fall 2006, pp. 4–14, DOI:10.1525/fq.2006.60.1.4.

its simplicity that it becomes comic—whether or not it intends to be.

Perhaps, then, comedy is merely a matter of phrasing—or even of framing. Something appears when it is least expected or fails to appear when it is expected. Comedy belongs less to content than to context.

As will already be apparent, this essay takes a philosophical look at *Monty Python's*[2] *"Life of Brian"* is a legendary comedy that premiered in 1979. Like all great works of art, its reputation has only grown with time, achieving the status of a cultural icon.

In general, the philosophical analysis of film—even, or perhaps especially, of comedy—should not strike us as odd or pretentious. Every major work of art is underpinned, at its core, by a philosophy—or at least by philosophical assumptions, however unsystematic. For us, there is little distance between Plato's dictum, "*For no one is willingly wicked*",[3] and the line delivered by Sissy Sullivan (Carey Mulligan) in Steve McQueen's "*Shame"* (2011): "*We're not bad people. We just came from a bad place*."

But enough. Let us now turn, philosophically, to "*Life of Brian"*—one of the most deeply reflective films of the past fifty years. Ontology, ethics, and political philosophy are not merely present in the film—they are woven into its very structure. Our guideposts in this analysis—undertaken in the shadow of the primal trauma of mortality and the absence of inherent meaning—will be Nietzsche's "*On the Genealogy of Morals"*, and two major works of French thought: Jean-Paul Sartre's celebrated "*Existentialism Is a Humanism"* and Marcel Gauchet's lesser-known but equally significant essay "*Primitive Religion and the Origins of the State"*.

[2] Monty Python, British comedy troupe (Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin).

[3] Plato, *Timaeus*, edited with Introduction and notes by R.D. Archer – Hind, M.A. Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, London MacMillian and Co. and New York, 1888, 86d–e. Cf. Antoniadis, C., "Knowing: The Zone of Interest from a Philosophical Point of View", *Dia-noesis*, 17(1), 2025, 351–374. https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41718.

On Humanity's Innate Thirst for Meaning

Contemporary philosophy, particularly in the wake of modernity, does not always take the meaning of life as its central concern. Instead, it often pivots around the concept of *freedom*. And within this framework, we can broadly identify two dominant strands of thought:

1. **The German Idealist Tradition**, particularly as articulated by Hegel: Here, the experience of finitude—of life's fragility and apparent lack of meaning—is seen as an error or illusion. Life *does* have meaning, and this meaning is predetermined. Everything that occurs is part of a larger rational plan to which both human beings and the world at large contribute. This doesn't reduce humanity to mere instruments; on the contrary, individuals have the opportunity by fulfilling their roles within this greater design to participate in the freedom of creation. In this vision, freedom is not arbitrariness but rather the certainty that one's actions—indeed, one's very existence—are meaningful within a cosmic or historical totality far beyond the finite self.[4]

2. **The Existentialist and Relativist Perspective**: From this standpoint, life does *not* possess a predetermined or intrinsic meaning. Rather, meaning is optional—something that must be chosen, created, or projected by each individual. Left unexamined or unshaped, life is fundamentally meaningless: what we might call its *original version*. However, the power of human freedom lies precisely in this creative act of meaning-making. Meaning is neither universal nor eternal—it is personal, contingent, and ever in flux. The world is a canvas, not a script.[5]

It is not difficult to see that these two perspectives represent the extreme poles of human thought—two radical interpretations not only of life and the world, but of the human being himself. In reality, we are always negotiating a balance between them.

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[4] Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, edited by Leipzig, F. Meiner, 1907; *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, edited by Leipzig, F. Meiner, 1911.

[5] Sartre, Jean-Paul, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme, Existentialism is a Humanism,* translated by Carol Macomber, edited by John Kulka, Yale University Press/ New Haven & London, 2007.

Man is finite. How does Saul Bellow put it? "*Life! Everyone who had it was bound to lose it*".[6] That is the primal wound. It is not simply a matter of age; death is there from the very first moment—from birth itself—presiding over life, shaping everything: what we eat and drink, how much we work and rest, where we go and for how long, what we should and should not do. Life becomes, in other words, a ceaseless and anguished attempt to avoid the inevitable. This awareness of finitude—of decay, of the countdown—must be tempered if life is to be bearable.

The usual way is to seek meaning in something theoretically higher than ourselves. As the poet pleads: "*Friend—if you believe I have not come too late once more, show me a path. You, at least, know that I search for a nothing to believe in so wholly— that I may die for it*".[7] What a magnificent line! The wound inflicted by the knowledge of death must at all costs be healed. Man poses questions about the meaning of his existence and answers them with myths. This has always been our reality—our intellectual condition. Our fate, across an entire lifetime, is to try, without hope of success, to conceive the inconceivable: the dissolution of our own being.

In antiquity, the salve for this wound was devotion to the community—then newly formed—in the city-states of classical Greece. Care for the *polis* reached the level of a metaphysical absolute. Then came the great conquests: Alexander, Pyrrhus, and Rome. Suddenly, the world became vast, boundless, uncontrollable. The search for healing turned inward. This is the meaning of Epicureanism and Stoic philosophy. Yet, let us be honest, these systems were to an irritating degree self-referential. Humanity longed to serve something beyond itself.

For precisely this reason, Christianity appeared—and then prevailed. It was deeply individualistic, and yet, paradoxically, not self-referential. Salvation is individual, but at the same time collective. The world as a whole is accountable, not merely each person alone. If accountability were only individual, Christianity could never have been a great religion. Here, the wound is expulsion from Paradise—an expulsion of all human beings without exception, the consequence of original sin. The pain exists, but the pain

[6] Bellow, Saul, Mr. Sammler's Planet, edited by, Viking Press, 1970.

[7] Anagnostakis, Manolis, *Search*, Nora Anagnostakis, & Anestis Anagnostakis, edited by Nefeli, 2000.

is healed. There is the great Guide, the One who oversees and presides over all. There is the present as fall, there are saints, martyrs, prophets, the Messiah, the promise of a better world—one without hunger, without disease, without death—there is eternal life in the Promised Land. God is one; the monarch, his representative on earth—indeed his incarnation—is also one; the body of laws is one. These laws are harsh, unyielding, but just. All are equal before them. The laws of the Monarch are, in essence, the laws of God himself mediated through the enlightened ruler. This is the medieval world. And until this promised world arrives, the present world remains in waiting—waiting for the healing of the wound of finitude, of mortality, of the slow and torturous road toward the end.

But let us be honest: even without God, without the enlightened ruler, without divine law, the world—having once set out on the path of seeking or awaiting a metaphysical absolute—is already, in essence, a medieval world. It is the world of Nietzsche's *bad conscience.*[8], of Sartre's *bad faith*[9], of Castoriadis' *alienation*[10]: a world already conditioned for the arrival of some great Meaning, if only so that the pain might finally stop. Because the pain, as Nietzsche writes, is unjustified. Not yet, at least.

A few centuries have passed—yet it feels as though thousands of years separate us from the intellectual vitality of classical antiquity. The world, once seen as perpetual becoming, as intellectual adventure, as discovery and self-interrogation, is now paused. It waits in an antechamber, anticipating the miracle of redemption—the healing of the wound. Along the way, it has abandoned its great aspirations: the pursuit of self-knowledge, of rational clarity, of progress; the vision of naturalistic determinism; the relentless questioning of authority launched by the Sophists. In their place, it has embraced a more comforting stance: the soothing belief that one is not responsible for the evils of the world. How does Pascal

[8] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Zur Genealogie der Moral, On the Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdalb, Vintage Books Edition, November 1989, Copyright © 1967 by Random House, Inc.

[9] Sartre Jean-Paul, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme, Existentialism is a Humanism,* translated by Carol Macomber, edited by John Kulka, Yale University Press/ New Haven & London, 2007.

[10] Castoriadis, Cornelious, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société, The imaginary Institution of Society*, translated by Kathleen Blarney, Copyright © this English translation Polity Press, 1987.

put it? "*Being unable to cure death, wretchedness, and ignorance, men have decided to be happy, not to think about such things*".[11]

This is the world of *Life of Brian*, as imagined by the ingenious Monty Python. A world that appears solid, and—how could it not be? All worlds are solid to those who live in them. "*We are all children of our world and of our time. We have passed through its schools, read its books, listened to its music, absorbed its art. What sense does it make to claim we feel alien within it?*" [12]

And yet. Man carries a deep wound from the moment of his birth. He is in pain—and he seeks relief. But that relief, invariably, is sought outside himself. And the price of this external recourse is alienation: alienation from oneself, and necessarily, the renunciation of one's own freedom. As Nietzsche puts it at the very beginning of "*On the Genealogy of Morals*": "*We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge—and with good reason. We have never sought ourselves—how could it happen that we should ever find ourselves? It has rightly been said: 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'; our treasure is where the beehives of our knowledge are. [...] Whatever else there is in life—so-called 'experiences'—which of us has the earnestness for them? Or the time? Present experience has, I am afraid, always found us absent-minded: we cannot give our hearts to it, not even our ears! Like someone divinely preoccupied, immersed in himself, into whose ear the bell tolls the twelve beats of noon—only for him to suddenly start and ask: 'What was that which just struck?'—so we sometimes rub our ears afterward and ask, utterly surprised and disoriented: 'What was that which we just experienced?' Moreover: 'Who are we, really?' [...] So we are necessarily strangers to ourselves; we do not comprehend ourselves. We must misunderstand ourselves. For us, the law 'Each is furthest from himself' applies for all eternity—we are not 'men of knowledge' in relation to ourselves*".[13]

Indeed, what meaning can freedom possibly have—what meaning can knowledge have—when the first demand is safety? In "*2001: A Space Odyssey*", moonwatcher gazes up at the moon, and in that moment, he becomes not only the first visionary, the first

[11] Pascal, Blaise, *Thoughts on religion* (1623-1662), published by The Peter Pauper Press Mount Vernon, New York, 1900.

[12] Bellow, Saul, *Herzog*, edited by Viking Press, 1964.

[13] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 15.

poet, but also the first thinker. He becomes the first *man*—in the full philosophical sense—who begins to comprehend the terrifying insignificance of himself and of the world around him. And thus, he becomes the first man called to confront the overwhelming silence of the universe, the unbearable isolation of consciousness in an indifferent cosmos.

Let us, then, try to put things in order. Survival comes first. As Sartre writes in his "*Critique of Dialectical Reason*", *"The origin of struggle always lies, in fact, in some concrete antagonism whose material condition is scarcity (la rared), in a particular form, and the real aim is objective conquest or even creation, in relation to which the destruction of the adversary is only the means."*[14] Then safety—the sense that one may, perhaps, find a place in this cold, vast, and unwelcoming world. Only after these can freedom emerge. If it did not emerge—if freedom were not born from this structure—there would be no societies, no politics, no myths, no religions, no ideologies, no philosophical systems. In other words, there would be no *world* as we know it. And the more the world expands, as it did during the Hellenistic era, the more the wound of insignificance swells. The more it demands healing. The more it demands meaning.

If there is one thing, unfortunately, that characterizes the human being, it is his unreasonable expectations of life—his insatiable demand that his needs be met. And the more these needs are fulfilled, the more new ones emerge. Deleuze and Guattari are right when they declare in "*Capitalism and Schizophrenia"* that there is nothing beyond desire.[15] But desire's shadow is frustration. And the wound of frustrated desire is no small thing. It is not secondary—it is foundational. In fact, one could say that mortality itself *is* the ultimate frustration: the frustration of the desire for immortality. Today, we live longer than at any other point in human history. But it is not enough. And it never will be. As the "replicant Pris" says in Ridley Scott's "*Blade Runner*": *"We're stupid and*

[14] Sartre, Jean – Paul, *Critique de la raison dialectique, Critique of Dialectical Reason*, translated by Alan Sheridan – Smith, edited by verso 2004, p. 113.

[15] Deleuze Gilles - Guattari Felix, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 1: L'anti-Oedipe, Capitalism and Schizophrenia, 1: Anti – Edipus*, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, edited by University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis, 1983, *The Desiring -Machines*, p. 8.

we'll die." A brutal, almost unbearable truth. This is pain. And this pain, again, is unjustified.

Let Nietzsche tell us the rest: "*What really arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering as such, but the senselessness of suffering. [...] To abolish hidden, undetected, unwitnessed suffering from the world—and honestly to deny it—one was, in the past, virtually compelled to invent gods and spirits of all kinds. Entities that dwell in the heights and in the depths, that roam even in secret places, that see even in the dark, and who would never let an interesting, painful spectacle go unseen. For it was with the help of such inventions that life knew how to work its oldest trick: the trick of justifying itself, of justifying its own evil.*"

And Nietzsche continues: *"All of antiquity is full of tender regard for the 'spectator'—for a world that was essentially public, essentially visible, and could not imagine happiness apart from spectacle and festival."*[16]

Exactly ninety years later, Marcel Gauchet—a pivotal figure in contemporary French philosophy—returns to the same theme, though with a different intention. Nietzsche, in "*On the Genealogy of Morals"*, remains grounded in the terrain of morality and religion. Gauchet, by contrast, attempts to trace the emergence of religion to the state. Yet both thinkers circle a common and vital question: how does humanity respond to the primordial wound of finitude? At the very beginning of his essay *Primitive Religion and the Origins of the State*, Gauchet writes: "*Meaning: what men throughout millennia professed to owe to the gods, what societies nearly always believed they owed to something 'beyond' for their workings. This term represents both the most elementary form of, and the most general reason for, religious belief. [...] Religion claims that we owe what we are to the gods—that is, to beings who by nature are different from us. This is an eminently political proposition, which is, in a sense, the basis of every society; it is a feeling of obligation that arises directly out of the primordial logic dictating society's existence".* By going back in time to the religious

[16] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, pp. 68-69. Cf. Ojimba A. C., "Nietzsche's Intellectual Integrity and Metaphysical Comfort", *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 9 (1), 2024, pp. 109–130. https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.34391

tie between supernatural founders-givers and human heirs-debtors, we can elucidate the system of primitive links that produces the social space".

Marcel Gauchet offers an intriguing connection between the emergence of higher powers—Religion—and the rise of the State. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that Religion serves as the precursor to the immense inequality born from the division of society into rulers and the ruled: "*This precursor*", Gauchet argues, "*lies in the dispossession and prolonged subjugation that human beings accept when they come to believe they are indebted to external forces for the very order of the world.*"[17] Taking his inquiry further, Gauchet insists that the State is not, in itself, responsible for this violent division of the social body into authority and subjugation. Religion laid the groundwork for this split the moment it was established—both in individual and collective consciousness—as the external foundation of society itself, not merely of individual life. "*Before the advent of the State, all societies projected their founding principles outside themselves: the source of their organizational logic, the basis of their values and emotions, the justification for their norms*".

This externalization of the very foundation of society, of its laws and institutions, seems to apply to the Greeks as well, since they too had an official State religion, recognized by the State itself. Indeed, it appears to have been a religion strict in the observance of its beliefs and rules, as the main charge against Socrates was that "*he introduced new daimons*." Several years thereafter, in the *Laws*, Plato himself proposes the death penalty for those proven to be atheists.[18] Moreover, in Plato—and especially in the *Republic*—the idea of the enlightened ruler (in this case the philosopher), the holder of the one and only Truth, is strongly present; that is, the answer to the agonizing question of meaning. Naturally, Plato does not have in mind knowledge for the sake of knowledge, or a kind of individual "salvation," but rather the collective. The philosopher, as bearer of the Truth, must transmit this knowledge to society, becoming its political leader. Two entire books, VI and VII,

[17] Gauchet Marcel, "Primitive religion and the origins of the State", pp. 116-122, *New Frenche Thought, Political Philosophy*, edited by Thomas Pavel and Marc Lilla, Princeton Legacy Library, 1994.

[18] Plato, *The Laws of Plato*, translated by A. E. Taylor, M.A., D.Litt., LL.D. London, J. M. DENT & SONS LTD, 1934, 908d.

are devoted to the Good, as the source of the unique and eternal Truth. In particular, in Book VI, "Socrates" describes the philosopher as the man who aims at knowledge and not at opinion or belief, as ordinary people do.[19] While Book VII concerns the departure from the deceptive world of the senses and the arduous "ascent" toward the Good, the source of Truth, the eternal Light.[20]

And yet, a closer examination—both of the testimonies concerning Greek daily life[21] and of the corpus of Greek literature—suggests a different conclusion. Thucydides himself, as evidenced in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, appears not to believe in the gods, or at least not in any supernatural force. His analysis is profoundly non-metaphysical, marked by a nearly complete determinism. This perspective is particularly evident in the famous dialogue between the Melians and the Athenians in Book V. The Melians, besieged and facing annihilation, are given a grim choice: surrender and join the Athenian "alliance" or face destruction. Their appeal is to justice and morality, grounded in the religious framework of Greek thought: "*We know only too well how hard the struggle must be against your power, and against fortune, if she does not mean to be impartial. Nevertheless, we do not despair of fortune; for we hope to stand as high as you in the favor of heaven, because we are righteous, and you against whom we contend are unrighteous*." The Athenians' response brims with the cynicism and arrogance typical of conquerors in every age, entirely detached from the moral codes upheld by traditional religion: "*As for the Gods, we expect to have quite as much of their favour as you: for we are not doing or claiming anything which goes beyond common opinion about divine or men's desires about human things. For the Gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a law of their nature, wherever they can rule, they will. This law was not made by us, and we are not the first who have acted upon it; we did but inherit it, and shall bequeath it to all time, and we know that you*

[19] Plato, *The Republic*, edited by G. R. F. Ferrari, University of California, Berkeley, translated by Tom Griffith, Cambridge University Press, first published 2000, 3rd printing 2018, 486a- 511e.

[20] Ibid., 514a-541b. Cf. Tripoula, I., "The Status of Women in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Plato to Plotinus". *Dia-noesis* 17 (1), 2025, 191-214. https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41711.

[21] Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, translated by C.D. Yonge, London: Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden, 1854.

and all mankind, if you were as strong as we are, would do as we do."[22]

As for supernatural powers, the so-called "Sophists" likewise appear not to believe in the gods. The notion that religion—or the idea of God—emerged as a response to primal metaphysical anxieties, such as death or the search for meaning, is absent from their analyses. On the contrary, they tend to associate the birth of religion with the resolution of purely practical concerns, particularly the establishment of legal and social order. Critias, for example, asserts: "*Then when the laws prevented men from open deeds of violence, but they continued to commit them in secret, I believe that a man of shrewd and subtle mind invented for men the fear of the gods, so that there might be something to frighten the wicked even if they acted, spoke, or thought in secret. From this motive, he introduced the conception of divinity. There is, he said, a spirit enjoying endless life, hearing and seeing with his mind, exceedingly wise and all-observing, bearer of a divine nature. He will hear everything spoken among men and can see everything that is done. If you are silently plotting evil, it will not be hidden from the gods, so clever are they.*[23] The same line of thought is echoed by Diodorus.[24] and by Moschion[25].

Perhaps the most critical insight in the Sophists' analysis, however, is their denial of any single, objective truth—whether of divine or human origin. The one considered most important, Protagoras, famously claims in Plato's *Theaetetus*: "*Man is the measure of all things: of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not.*" (*Theaetetus* 152a). And again, in the same dialogue (*Theaetetus* 167c), he states: "*Whatever acts appear just and fine to a particular state are so for that state so long as it believes in them; but when in a particular case they are burdensome for the citizens, the wise man substitutes others that appear and are beneficial.*[26] Naturally, where there is no truth—no absolute and objective standard of right and wrong—

[22] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by B. Jowett, Oxford University Press, 1881, E, 104-105.

[23] Guthrie, W.K.C., *The sophists*, *A History of Greek Philosophy, Volume III*, Cambridge University Press 1971, p. 243.

[24] Ibid., p. 81.

[25] Ibid., p. 82.

[26] Ibid., p. 137.

there can be not only no religion, but not even the very idea of it. As W.K.C. Guthrie observes: "*Rhetorical teaching was not confined to form and style, but dealt also with the substance of what was said. How could it fail to inculcate the belief that all truth was relative, and no one knew anything for certain? Truth was individual and temporary, not universal and lasting, for the truth for any man was simply what he could be persuaded of, and it was possible to persuade anyone that black was white. There can be belief, but never knowledge*".[27]

What is truly astonishing is how, in Greek thought, we encounter—often within the very same historical period—the most radically opposing views concerning theology, political order, and moral philosophy. Yet the intellectual journey does not end with the ancients. On the contrary, the thought of later centuries—especially modern and contemporary philosophy—has much to contribute to this vast and continuing exploration. Following the *Middle Ages*, first the *Enlightenment* and then the philosophical movements of the 20th century rekindled the debate on truth, authority, and the meaning of existence. From the Jesuit command *"believe and do not search"* to the modern imperative *"doubt everything,"* the intellectual distance is, in truth, but a single breath—for who could ever articulate the one without having conceived—or even dared—the other?

Yet, for our analysis of the film, it is time to turn to a central figure of 20th-century philosophy: Jean-Paul Sartre**.** Let us briefly recall the fundamental principles of the French thinker's philosophy. From the Second World War onwards, Sartre emerged as the foremost representative of atheistic existentialism—the most influential philosophical current of the century. These principles, as we shall soon see, are crucial for understanding the moral, psychological, and metaphysical dilemmas explored in the film:

- *"... let us begin by saying that what we mean by "existentialism" is a doctrine that makes human life possible and also affirms that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity. [...] What existentialists have in common is simply their belief that existence precedes essence; or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be our point of departure. [...] Eighteenth-century atheistic philosophers rejected the idea of God, but not, for*

[27] Ibid., p..51.

all that, the idea that essence precedes existence. Diderot, Voltaire, and even Kant all agreed that man possesses a human nature. This "human nature"—the concept of what it means to be human—is found in all men, which means that each man is simply a particular example of a universal concept: man."[28] What Sartre means here, of course, is that there is no God, no human nature; there is nothing beyond Nature and man himself.

- Since there is no God, man is free. He has no one to whom he must answer for his thoughts and actions. This also means he has no guide, no counselor, no spiritual or moral shepherd.[29]
- *"Existence precedes essence".* This means that man gives meaning to himself. He assigns to himself whatever purpose he desires. After all, he is accountable to no one. As the creator of himself, man is also wholly responsible for himself. He is responsible for his actions in the fullest sense of the word, since there is no higher being to whom that responsibility can be transferred. Contrary to Dostoyevsky's dictum, "*If God does not exist, everything is permissible*," Sartre responds—agreeing with Nietzsche—that, in the absence of a guide, nothing is permissible to man until he himself decides upon his acts.[30]

All this leads to Sartre's central ethical imperative: existential and moral autonomy. This is the fundamental element of what, in "*Existentialism Is a Humanism"*, he calls "*good faith*." It is the consciousness that determines itself, that knows it determines itself, that is aware of the immense responsibility it assumes—and dares to rise to it. Opposed to this good faith stands bad faith. "*We may also judge a man when we assert that he is acting in bad faith. If we define man's situation as one of free choice, in which he has no recourse to excuses or outside aid, then any man who takes refuge behind his passions—any man who fabricates some deterministic theory—is operating in bad faith. [...] On the same*

[28] Sartre, Jean- Paul, *L'Existentialisme estun humanism, Existentialism Is a Humanism*, translated by Carol Macomber, Yale University Press/ New Haven & London, 2007, pp. 18-22.

[29] Sartre Jean–Paul, *L'Âge de raison, The age of Reason*, "*He could do what he liked, no one had the right to advise him, there would be for him no Good nor Evil unless he brought them into being... He was alone, enveloped in this monstrous silence, free and alone, without assistance and without excuse, condemned to decide without support from any quarter, condemned for ever to be free.*", translated by Eric Sutton, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1950, p. 290.

[30] Sartre, Jean- Paul, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, p. 28.

grounds, I would say that I am also acting in bad faith if I declare that I am also bound to uphold certain values, because it is a contradiction to embrace these values while at the same time affirming that I am bound by them. If someone were to ask me, "What if I want to be in bad faith?" I would reply: "There is no reason why you should not be, but I declare that you are—and that a strictly consistent attitude alone demonstrates good faith."[31]

This bad faith is, in essence, what we would call *heteronomy*—a consciousness that prefers to shift responsibility rather than assume it, that repudiates—through an act of deep indignity—man's creative, instituting nature. It is what Castoriadis, in "*The Imaginary Institution of Society*", will later name *alienation*.[32]

A little further on, Sartre writes: "*If, however, existence truly does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is. [...] And when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men. [...] When we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, but also that, in choosing himself, he is choosing for all men. [...] Choosing to be this or that is, at the same time, to affirm the value of what we choose—because we can never knowingly choose evil. [...] Our responsibility is thus much greater than we might have supposed, because it concerns all of mankind.*"[33]

Sartre does not perceive this fact—the absolute solitude of man—as anything pleasant. On the contrary, he finds the nonexistence of God profoundly disturbing. As a consequence of this absence of any transcendent principle, man is deprived of eternal and immutable values and truths, just as he is deprived of any possibility of justification. His mistakes—mistakes that may have catastrophic consequences—are entirely his own. No one else bears responsibility for a faulty judgment or a failed outcome... "*If it is true that existence precedes essence, then we can never explain our actions by appealing to a given and immutable human nature. In other words, there is no determinism—man is free; man* is *freedom. And if God does not exist, we will encounter no values or*

[31] Ibid., pp. 47-48.

[32] Castoriadis, Cornelious, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société, The imaginary Institution of Society*, translated by Kathleen Blarney, Copyright © this English translation Polity Press, 1987.

[33] Sartre, Jean- Paul, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, pp. 23-24.

orders that can legitimize our conduct.[34] *Thus, we have neither behind us nor before us... any source of justification or excuse. We are left alone—and without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself; nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. [...] man is therefore without any support or help, condemned at all times to invent man.*[35] *[...] Does that mean I must resort to quietism? No. First, I must commit myself—and then act, according to the adage: "No hope is necessary to undertake anything." I have no idea (whether it will succeed). All I know is that I will do everything in my power to make it happen. Beyond that, I cannot count on anything. [...] Man is nothing other than his own project*".[36]

Let us now turn to our film to uncover its elective affinities with the theories of the Sophists, Sartre, and Gauchet. As we have already suggested, the world of "*Life of Brian"* is a medieval one—a world immersed in disease and deprivation, searching for the prophet, the Savior, the Truth, the only Knowledge—ultimately, salvation. What do the ingenious Monty Python do? They cast into this world—a world so distant from our own—a post-modern man. In fact, a man of postwar existentialism, a man who fully understands that, with no assistance to expect from anywhere, he is obliged to fend for himself. And not only that, but also that any "authority" is not merely deceptive, but potentially dangerous.

Moreover, the fact that Brian Cohen (Graham Chapman) originates from another world is made evident by the otherwise incomprehensible appearance of a UFO in the film, which saves him from certain death. Indeed, Brian himself is a kind of UFO in the world of the film, for no one truly understands his words or actions. Monty Python, then, cast him into this bizarrely religious, superstitious, and obscurantist world simply to observe how he

[34] Athanasiadis, Tasos, *The Throne room*, edited by Bookstore of ESTIA, 1999. "*I admire the boldness of the atheist; his morality is born of pure selflessness*".

[35] Barth, John, *The End of the Road*, Avon Books, A division of The Hearst Corporation 959 Eighth Avenue New York. "*In my ethics the most a man can ever do is be right from his point of view; there's no general reason why he should even bother to defend it, much less expect anybody else to accept it... He's got to expect conflict with people or institutions who are also right from their points of view, but whose points of view are different from his*".

[36] Sartre, Jean- Paul, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, pp. 32-37.

would function. If it is true that a stable human nature exists—a nature that renders man the same, or roughly the same, regardless of time and place, as genetic psychologists, psychoanalysts, rationalists, and many philosophers claim—then surely he will very quickly find some point of contact with those around him. If not, we must advance many centuries forward, until we encounter a Sartre or a Foucault, who, in their work, claim that the idea of a stable human nature is deceptive.[37]

Returning to our film, we find ourselves at the moment when the Romans once again attempt to arrest Brian, who has managed to write, one hundred times on the walls of the palace in Caesar's square, the slogan: "*Romani ite domum"*, thereby striking a blow to the prestige of the Roman Empire. Fleeing through the narrow streets of Jerusalem in an attempt to escape capture, Brian reaches the hideout of "*The People's Front of Judea"*, an organization he had joined just the day before, based solely on his deep hatred of the Romans. The house is situated directly above what appears to be the square of orators and prophets.

Brian enters the hideout hastily, disguised with a false beard. When the members inside see him, they are frightened and quickly send him out to a small wooden balcony at the back of the house, hoping the Romans will not search that far. Immediately afterward, the door bangs open, and a detachment of Roman soldiers confronts the member who has just answered it. The Romans demand to search the house, harboring well-founded suspicions that Brian is hiding within. Yet, despite their "efforts," they fail to locate him. Unfortunately, the wooden balcony cannot bear Brian's

[37] Foucault, Michel, *L'ordre du discours, The Order of Discourse*, edited by Robert Young, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Boston, London and Henley, 1981. *"The idea of universal mediation is yet another way, I believe, of eliding the reality of discourse, and despite appearances to the contrary. For it would seem at first glance that by rediscovering everywhere the movement of a logos which elevates particularities to the status of concepts and allows immediate consciousness to unfurl in the end the whole rationality of the world, one puts discourse itself at the center of one's speculation. But this logos, in fact, is only a discourse that has already been held, or rather it is things themselves into discourse as they unfold the secret of their own essence. Thus, discourse is little more than the gleaming of a truth in the process of being born to its own gaze; and when everything finally can take the form of discourse, when everything can be said and when discourse can be spoken about everything, it is because all things, having manifested and exchanged thein meaning, can go back into the silent interiority of their consciousness of self".* p.p. 65-66.

weight and collapses. He falls—quite literally—into the square below, landing on the head of one of the self-declared prophets. This dramatic entrance, as if from the heavens, instantly captures the attention of the crowd. Even more amusingly, as Brian's fall knocks the prophet into a nearby jar, the small crowd bursts into applause—more out of relief than reverence. In any case, still pursued and with no way of escape, Brian is forced to play the part and begins to address his accidental "audience." He does not utter anything particularly profound. He begins with a vague moral truism: *"Don't you, eh, pass judgment on other people, or you might get judged yourself."* What follows is a strange and meandering dialogue with those below, lacking any real substance, yet already distinguishing him from the neighboring orators. It quickly becomes evident that Brian is not interested in delivering the usual tiresome, moralizing monologue.

Failing to hold their attention, he attempts to stall by launching into a story vaguely resembling a parable: "*Ohh. Look. There was this man, and he had two servants..."* But even this falter as the crowd immediately demands more information—what were the servants called? Where did they live? Seeing his audience grow restless and begin to disperse, while Roman soldiers approach the square once more, he makes a final desperate effort. He begins to invent his own version of the beatitudes: "*Blessed are they... who convert their neighbor's ox, for they shall inhibit their girth... and to them only shall be given—to them only... shall... be... given...*"

As the Roman soldiers pass directly beneath the platform and leave without noticing him, Brian abruptly stops. He descends from the rocky elevation and slips away, leaving behind a crowd now gripped by suspense, desperate to know what was to be given to the blessed. "*Hey! What were you going to say*?" echoes across the square, passing eagerly from mouth to mouth. Brian's refusal to answer, combined with his urgency to disappear, only deepens the curiosity of those present. "*What won't he tell? Is it a secret?" "Must be. Otherwise, he'd tell us.*"

Brian moves away from the square, slipping into the narrow streets in a vain attempt to extinguish the fire that threatens to ignite. "*Leave me alone*," he almost pleads, but his efforts are in vain. Questions come from all directions: "*What is this secret?" "Is it THE SECRET OF ETERNAL LIFE?" "Tell us, MASTER. We were here first."* Though Brian insists, "*Go away*," his words go

unheard. In this moment, the fundamental existential anxiety is laid bare, alongside the instinctive recognition of authority in one who is presumed to hold the secret. Yet Brian, modest and grounded, has no desire to assume this role, despite the obvious advantages it might bring.

The gourd he carries throughout this ordeal—finally handed to one of his followers to rid himself of the crowd—becomes a potent symbol of his omnipresence. "*Master? Master*?" they call out, searching. "*He's gone! He's been taken up*!" declares one. Then, just as Brian passes the city's exit gate, someone spots him, and the chase begins. Here, the psychology of the crowd asserts itself powerfully: seeing a mass of people running in one direction, more and more follow. The fire of fanaticism spreads uncontrollably. And how could it be quenched when it is fuelled by such a primal, fundamental wound?

Before long, we witness the birth of a new religion. The sandal that falls from Brian's foot during the pursuit becomes the second sign—a symbol of his omnipresence, a stand-in for the ANSWER, and a promise that one day, the Master will provide the longed-for solution. "*The shoe is the sign. Let us follow His example*!" proclaims the first man who finds and picks up the sandal. "*Let us, like Him, hold up one shoe and let the other be upon our foot, for this is His sign, that all who follow Him shall do likewise*," a second man agrees, and the others, already gathered as a group, prepare to follow. Not for long, however, as the first man offers a different interpretation: "*The shoe is a sign that we must gather shoes together in abundance*." This disagreement over what to do is finally settled by a woman who had been present on the platform during Brian's original speech: "*Cast off… the shoes! Follow the Gourd*!" she insists. "*No*!" objects the man who first found the sandal. "*Let us gather shoes together! It is a sign that, like Him, we must think not of the things of the body, but of the face and head*!"

Ultimately, the assembled crowd manages to find a way to follow the Master, yet within it lies the seed of dissent—and therefore division—since they have failed to agree on whether the sandal or the gourd should be the true symbol to follow. Though newly formed, the crowd is already heterogeneous and uneven, with all that implies for the future. A farcical episode follows, during which Brian is officially recognized by the crowd as the Messiah. At the

conclusion of this episode, he encounters Judith, the beautiful young woman who is also a member of *The People's Front of Judea*.

The next morning, we find Brian in his house, gradually waking beside Judith, his beloved. What he does not know is that beneath his window, on a sloped patch of ground, a crowd of his "followers" has already gathered, eagerly awaiting even a nod, a few words—anything that might bring them closer to the Truth. Unaware and relaxed, totally naked, Brian throws open the double window to take in some fresh air. "*Look! There he is! The Chosen One has woken*!" the crowd exclaims as one upon seeing him. Startled, Brian quickly shuts the window, struggling to comprehend the scene before him. He calls for his mother, but she, having already seen the gathered crowd outside, approaches with wild indignation. "*What are all those people doing out there*?!" she demands, furious. Brian's defense is taken up by Judith, who, naked too, steps out of the room. Notably, her protective stance has nothing to do with the faith the crowd places in Brian. As a child of the revolutionary latter half of the nineteenth century and the dawning years of the twentieth—chronologically just before Brian's world—she rejects the notions of *Master, Redeemer*, or *Messiah*. Where the religiously obsessed crowd sees a potential *Savior,* Judith, as a true revolutionary, sees a *leader* who might guide the people toward a better future. "*Let me explain, Mrs. Cohen! Your son is a born leader. Those people out there are following him because they believe in him, Mrs. Cohen. They believe he can give them hope—hope of a new life, a new world, a better future*!" she states decisively, leaving Brian's mother dumbfounded.

After all this, Brian steps onto the balcony to speak words that seem drawn from the finest texts of existentialism, if not postmodernism. Naturally, the joke here is that we already know his words stand no chance of meaningful reception—not because the people below are foolish, but because they are not intellectually prepared to understand them, much less to act upon them. These are words from another era—two thousand years ahead—another world, another kind of human. We grasp this immediately from the shout that rises from below before Brian even reopens the window. We also understand it from the fact that, from this point until the end of the scene, the "faithful" respond as one, behaving in exactly the

opposite manner of what Brian proposes: **Crowd:** "*Brian! Brian! Brian!*" and "*A blessing! A blessing! A blessing*!" Far from feeling flattered, Brian is uncomfortable from the outset. He raises his hands in a gesture of both refusal and renunciation of the role being thrust upon him.

Let us recall this comical yet profoundly reflective, deeply human, deeply moving dialogue, as if a twentieth-century man attempts to counsel a medieval man, perhaps an entire medieval world—fully aware, of course, of all the brutality that will follow messianism, obscurantism, and blind faith—not to yield to the allure of intellectual alienation, but instead to defend the ideal of humanity, courageously accepting the solitary destiny that this commitment entails. **Brian:** "*No. No, please! Please! Please listen. I've got one or two things to say*". **Crowd:** "*Yes! Tell us. Tell us both of them*". **Brian:** "*Look. You've got it all wrong. YOU DON'T NEED TO FOLLOW ME. YOU DON'T NEED TO FOLLOW ANYBODY! YOU HAVE TO THINK FOR YOURSELVES. YOU ARE ALL INDIVIDUALS!*" **Crowd:** "*Yes, we're—all—individuals!*" **Brian:** "*YOU ARE ALL DIFFERENT!*" **Crowd:** "*Yes, we—are—all—different!*" **Brian:** "*YOU'VE ALL GOT TO WORK IT OUT FOR YOURSELVES!*" **Crowd:** "*Yes! We've got to work it out for ourselves!*"

Amid the hysteria of trauma's healing, amid the frenzy of the search for meaning, Brian responds with severity, yet with absolute honesty: he calls upon his 'faithful' to find the solution on their own, invoking the uniqueness of each individual. He values truth over mere humanity, the painful cure over fleeting consolation. A Henry Miller, succumbing to the (comfortable) dictates of humanity, would have acted otherwise: "*It's better... to receive men silently and to enfold them, for there is no answer to make them while they are still frantically rushing to turn the corner.*"[38] Not Brian. Treating them with seriousness and responsibility, he urges them to think. Yet they cannot. In truth, they understand not a word of what they hear. They merely mimic. This is not meant as an insult. Tragically, they possess no aid from any quarter to evade the inexorable trajectory of their fate: no intellectual foundation, no inner fortitude, no capacity for resistance. At its heart, as we

[38] Miller Henry, *Tropic of Capricorn*, First published in Great Britain by John Calder (Publishers) Limited 1964.

have already noted, this is a dramatic dialogue between modern man and the weight of his tragic past. Yet the chasm of temporal and existential distance renders communication impossible. Brian's words fall into the void, like all exhortations to moderation uttered across the centuries, whether spoken aloud or inscribed in writing. Humanity, it seems, has already resolved—following a path set in motion since Plato—to pursue fanaticism as if compelled to probe the very limits of its own capacity for brutality: from the slaughter of fifteen thousand insurgents in the Hippodrome of Thessaloniki by Emperor Theodosius, to the thirty thousand insurgents in the Hippodrome of Constantinople by Emperor Justinian; from the massacre of three thousand Protestants on St. Bartholomew's Night, to the Inquisition, the Soviet gulags, the atrocities of the Nazis, the endless wars in the Middle East... And this grim record continues, inexorably, a testament to the human propensity for destruction. As the poet reminds us:

"*For hours within the ravaged crowd,*
a nameless horror amassed itself.
The perpetrator armed his victims and
vanished, certain of what lay ahead.
Do not let your mind wander to bloodshed.
There are far worse things."[39]

Epilogue

We have attempted to examine "*Life of Brian"* through the lens of intellectual evolution—from the Platonic absolute, to Sophistic relativism, to medieval obscurantism, and from there to the post-war existentialism of the twentieth century. This entire trajectory, of course, was neither small nor easy; otherwise, it would not have spanned so many centuries.

The truth is that much suffering had to occur; much reflection had to be endured—provoked largely by the unfolding of historical events—before humanity could reach the full theoretical of course- acknowledgment of the impossibility of healing trauma. For instance, the rupture with heteronomy, with Authority, did

[39] Liontakis, Christoforos, *The encounter, Anthology of Modern Greek Poetry*, published by Bookstore of ESTIA, fourth edition, Athens, 1989, p. 363.

not transpire in the age of the *Aufklärung*, as Kant suggests.[40] The emergence from the Middle Ages brought with it the recognition of another kind of meaning—non-religious, yet meaningful nonetheless. The cultivation of the individual through one's own faculties became the new significance: the meaning of the *Enlightenment*, the meaning of *modernism*. As Camus observes: "*The Social Contract marks the birth of a new mystique—the will of the people being substituted for God Himself. "Each of us," says Rousseau, "places his person and his entire capabilities under the supreme guidance of the will of the people, and we receive each member into the body as an indivisible part of the whole*."[41]

It would take the advent of Sartrean existentialism and the postmodernism of Jean-François Lyotard for humanity to confront the full measure of truth—albeit accompanied by a lingering question which Theodoros Georgiou underscores in the preface to the Greek edition of Lyotard's "*The Postmodern Condition"*, a question that continues to hover over our understanding: "*If we accept that the death of the modern is an undeniable reality, then does this death signify the end of a collective madness, the liberation of man from the terrorizing whole, or does it rather lead to the loss of the last support available to man, to the disappearance of instrumental Reason*?"[42]

[40] Kant, Immanuel, *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?,* 1784. *An answer to the question What is Enlightment*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013

[41] Camus, Albert, *L' Homme Révolté, The Rebel, an Essay on Man in Revolt*, New York Vintage Books, 1956, p. 115.

[42] Lyotard, Jean-François, *La Condition postmoderne, The Postmodern Condition,* translated in Greek by Kostis Papagiorgis, published by Bookstore of ESTIA, p. 11.

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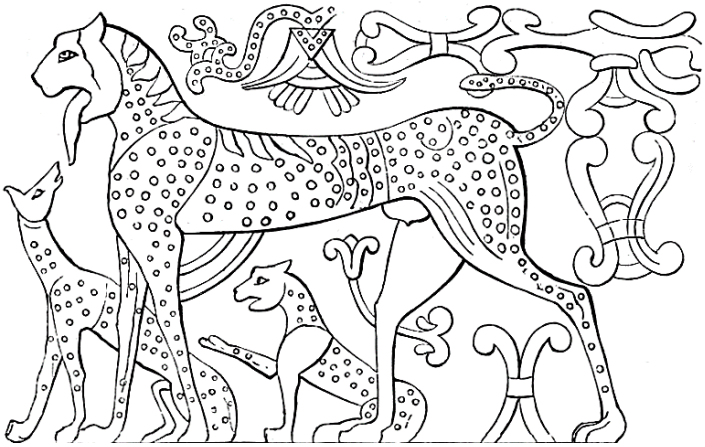

ANCIENT GREEK DEMOCRACY AND AMERICAN REPUBLICANISM

Prometheus in Political Theory

Michail Theodosiadis