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Existentialism and Social Meaning: The Development of a Social Being

Abstract

Individuals are defined by their beliefs. A tension exists in the development of personhood between the concepts of individually chosen existential meaning, and societally imposed social meaning. The essay explores these concepts and how an individual is to navigate a world of meaning. Ultimately, the creation of art is examined as a means of creating new meaning individually and societally.

Keywords

existentialism, social meaning, social facts, Camus, Durkheim, Art and Philosophy

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Comments

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Existentialism and Social Meaning: The Development of a Social Being

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The Development of a Social Being

The role of philosophy, sociology, as well as any other field of academic study is to increase our understanding of the world around us. Given that our entire perspective of the world is experienced through the lease of our individual self, questions relating to personhood and self-actualization should be contemplated with the utmost regard. The first step in this process of examining the factors that influence the development of personhood is the conclusion that there is in fact a self that can be developed and changed over time. Although selfhood has been studied extensively and theories such as Descartes' famous "I think therefore I am," the Akan conception of Ubuntu (I am because we are), or the Buddhist conception of the causally connected non-self, have been posited, a definitive understanding of what it means to be a Person will never be fully reached. For the purpose of this essay the exact definition of self is of little importance insofar as it is agreed upon that individuals possess some form of personal identity. That the individual is to some extent capable of perceiving themselves and recognizing their existence within the world around them. The usage of the reflexive *I* denotes this level of perceptual existence, and although the self is changed with every successive experience and alteration of bodily composition, it is this *I* which maintains the continuity of personal identity. As the individual grows and develops so does their conception of self and their understanding of what gives their life meaning.

While the identity of an individual may develop without any conscious thought or action, there are a multitude of forces that are vying for influence over whom it is that the person might become. Even in utero, meaning and identity are imposed onto the individual through the expectations of social norms and beliefs. Consider, for example, the usage of femininely coded pinks or masculinely coded blue as the means of denoting the sex of a fetus during a gender reveal. By simply being present in society you are subjected to a litany of expectations which

seek to externally define who it is that you are. These expectations can include anything from gender roles, to hygienic norms, to modes of thinking (consider the support that individuality has been given in Western society).

In one sense, identity is something constructed externally and impressed onto your being. In another sense, however, individuals are radically tasked with defining themselves. Through the possession of free will and personal agency, the individual has some ability to pick, choose, and create what it is that gives their lives meaning. They are possessed with the capacity to refuse or accept societal phenomena and social meaning for themselves. This is the defining principle of the existentialist perspective. Antithetical to the presumption of societally imposed meaning is the idea that there is no inherent meaning in life, and that it is up to the individual to choose or create what it is that defines their self and provides their life with meaning. In life, a person, whether conscious of this fact or not, develops their identity while under a constant tension between the vectors of societal and existential meaning.

Social Influence

The beliefs, values, and norms of a society are immaterial entities that seek to define what constitutes a normative lifestyle for the individuals who live within the domain of the society. Although these entities are immaterial they possess within their purview, real world ramifications that tangibly affect their subject. Émile Durkheim adeptly consolidates these entities: social meanings, norms, and values into a single term which he coined 'social facts.'

A social fact is any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint; which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its material manifestations (Durkheim 59).

An aspect of Durkheim's definition of social facts is the understanding that social facts are variable and ever changing. Social facts are beliefs that the larger communal group validates as the norm, and that have an effect on the ways in which the individual conducts their self.

Although every individual within the society may not participate in the upholding of a social fact, the belief in the social fact can be considered the 'mean' that denotes the general consensus of appropriate behavior for individuals within the group. The ramifications of social facts on the development of an individual identity, and the method by which these facts are enforced will be touched on in the following paragraphs.

To further understand the entities that are social facts, the elucidation of their generative process is of importance. The study of cultural developments in the communities of the African Diaspora, for example, can be especially fruitful in explaining the process by which social facts are generated. Following the Middle Passage and the violent exodus from Africa, Black individuals were thrust into a hostile and incredibly individualizing environment. Given that Africa is a continent comprised of countless different cultures, religions, and social systems, and that Western imperialism and slavery touched almost all parts of the continent, the communities of the African Diaspora were composed of an extremely heterogeneous bunch or "ragtag collective" (Smallwood, P. 120). Despite the substantial barriers that inhibited the development of community building, the individuals of the African Diaspora developed community against all odds. For the "Atlantic commodification meant not only the exclusion from that which was recognizable as community, but also immersion in a collective whose most distinguishing feature was its unnatural constitution: it brought strangers together in anomalous intimacy" (Smallwood, P. 101). Coupled with the fact that the enslaved populations were often extremely diverse in

terms of spoken language and cultural background, the act of building a community within the African Diaspora was a process undertaken via tremendous opposition. However, this

heterogeneity was not as thoroughgoing as commonly supposed. [It was for a long time supposed to be total]. Persons from the same group did on occasion find each other in the same locale, and many broad principles of traditional cultural orientation, principles underlay the culture-specific differences and were in fact conserved... [These most common beliefs formed a]—‘substratum’—towards the universe and toward each other that helped them in reestablishing common cultural ground” (Mintz and Trouillot, P. 127).

In order to define the most effective ways of living—the largest cultural denominators, the most shared behaviors, beliefs, and practices which afforded the individual the most safety and comfort within their environment, became those which most easily gained traction amongst the most members of the community. Thus, these most shared communal beliefs and attitudes towards the world became the social facts that were accepted by the larger collective group. These social facts, through their acceptance by the majority of the society, act as a means of dictating the normative behavior of the individuals within the community.

Methodologically, this phenomenon explains how social facts come into existence. The most commonly shared cultural values of any community are those that gain the most traction and become the social facts or governing norms that dictate the criterion of appropriate behavior for the individual. Although everyone may not share the same attitude towards the accepted status of their society's social facts, these facts are nonetheless collectively recognized, and pertain to all of the members of the community.

The Indoctrination of Social Facts

If social facts are to be obeyed, it must be supposed that the individuals within the society are to an extent, at some point in their life, aware of their existence. The process of education is

integral to indoctrinating socially learned meaning into the mental schemas of the formative individual.

If one views the facts as they are and indeed as they have always been, it is patently obvious that all education consists of a continual effort to impose upon the child ways of seeing, thinking and acting which he himself would not have arrived at spontaneously (Durkheim, P. 53).

In the formation of the individual, these ‘best practices’ are learned via a constant reinforcement by all imminent loci of power (the familial unit, teachers, media, etc.). Although the beginning of the integration of social facts into the mental schemas of the individual might be met by personal opposition (think of an adherence to gender norms or a child not wanting to go to bed by a certain hour), the prolonged reinforcement of the social values compels the individual to learn and internalize the social facts into their life on a subconscious level.

After being fully educated in the appropriate ways as to act in obligation to social facts, those appropriate ways of being supplant the original behaviors of the individual by taking form in their life as habituated behavior. These habits once integrated into the everyday behaviors of the individual cease to be noticed, and as is the hope of those with Powerⁱ, those social facts, when noticed, are believed to be derived from an inherent or natural meaning.

It is at this point that the pressures of social facts stray from visibility. However, this is not to say that social facts are no longer of any importance. For “the air does not cease to have weight, although we no longer feel the weight” (Durkheim, P. 53). Rather this is to emphasize their duplicitous nature. By disappearing from the immediate consciousness of the individual and through the supposition that the social facts are of inherent value, for the individual the act of opposing social facts is made difficult.

The Enforcement of Social Facts

The society as a whole, constituted by its governing institutions and individual actors, seeks to enforce social facts as a means of “optimising” the life of the populations (Foucault, P. 139). State violence is not solely executed and legitimated through juridical strategies but also through strategies that have, at the heart of them, a preoccupation with how the population lives and how life can be optimized (Anish Chibber, Foucault).

In this sense, the constraints of social facts are enforced doubly by the state and the individuals who live within the society as a means of making the population and the individuals within as economically prosperous as possible. For this reason, any abnormality or deviation from the norms decreed by social facts are met by opposition. This opposition can express itself in a variety of ways: by law and judicial punishment, by varieties of social ostracization, or by anything else in between. Whether conscious of this fact or not, to live outside of the social norms is to act antithetically to the aims of the societies governing principles.

Although social facts become hidden under the veil of habit following prolonged acceptance by the individual and the society at large, it takes only the introduction of an in-adherence or opposition to their accepted status for the compelling pressures of social facts to become felt.

If perhaps I abandon myself to them [social facts] I may not be conscious of the pressure that they are exerting upon me, but that pressure makes its presence felt immediately [if] I attempt to struggle against them. If an individual tries to pit himself against one of these collective manifestations, the sentiments that he is rejecting will be turned against him... Hence we are the victims of an illusion which leads us to believe we ourselves produced what has been imposed upon us externally (Durkheim, P. 53).

Any deviation, whether public or private, can be considered oppositional to the accepted status of social facts and will thus face consequence because social facts are perpetuated through the processes of benefit and detriment. By acting in accordance to social facts, the individual might

stand to gain social standing, or minimally—position themselves on an equal playing field where they should not see any immediate detriment by their behavior. On the other hand, if you were to oppose social facts, the results would be one of punishment and compulsion to return to the normative behavior prescribed by the social norms.

Contrary to the supposed moralizations of good and bad that social facts attach onto behaviors and verify via social outcome, no act in life is of any inherent moral status. For ‘transgressions’ resulting from deviations of the norm, in-adherences to the social facts like those which govern gender, orientation of sexuality, or race, are deemed bad only insofar as they elicit negative social consequences. For example, there is nothing wrong with being queer or behaving in a certain way as member of a racial minority, but as a result of deviating from the norms of society, pressures of conformity will be exerted upon the individual.

The External Enforcement of Social Facts

The pressures of conformity that are exerted upon the individual for transgressing social norms express themselves differently in public and private sectors. For example, suppose we look at the social construction of gender, and what happens if you publicly act in defiance of its norms. Gender is something that is assigned to the individual at birth and is reinforced by the individual and society through their joint actions of perpetuation. This is accomplished in part by “doing gender.”ⁱⁱⁱ In this sense gender is externally imposed on the individual by society, and additionally reinforced through individual behavioral acts which perpetuate gender identity (Examples: wearing heels for women, lifting weights for men, and the use of gendered pronouns by strangers).

Gender is an assignment that does not just happen once: it is ongoing. We are assigned a sex at birth and then a slew of expectations follow which continue to “assign” gender to us. The powers that do that are part of an apparatus of gender

that assigns and reassigns norms to bodies, organises them socially, but also animates them in directions contrary to those norms (Judith Butler, *We need to rethink the category of woman*).

Let's posit that a person assigned the male sex at birth one day decides to begin the transition process into becoming socially recognized as a woman. Throughout her day she performs gender in the same way that any woman would. Despite this, she is made the target of hate speech and is forced out a woman's space upon a stranger seeing her in a public women's bathroom. The result of the breaking the social norm that decrees women to be only those who were assigned the female sex at birth is consequential. By punishing the objector of the social norm a constraint is imposed onto that individual as a means of pressuring them into acting in conformity to the social fact. The behavior of this trans-woman is in no sense objectionable, but the behavior, due to its disregard for a social norm and the accompanying negative public reaction, is what deems the act socially bad.

The Internal Enforcement of Social Facts

The consequence of transgressing a social fact in private, on the other hand, expresses itself much differently. Whence the acting individual is the only witness to the transgression of a social fact, the results vary due to circumstance and personal disposition. If the individual is oblivious to the existence of the social fact, then the consequences would be null as they would be acting in whatever manner they would naturally—the behavior would likely go unnoticed without any further conscious reflection. However, if the individual is aware of the social fact's existence, acting in conscious opposition to it would elicit some variety of mental response. The emergent personal responses could range anywhere from feelings of liberation as in the

reclamation of a behavior which was for a time repressed, to feelings of guilt or wrongdoing depending on the individual's attitude and relationship to Power.

In both instances, the individual has fallen victim to an expression of Power. Social facts, through the constant reinforcement of invisible habitualized reproduction, force the individual into a state of self-policing best described by Foucault's use of Bentham's concept of the 'panopticon.' Picture a cylindrical prison rimmed with open cells and a central opaque guard tower. Given that the prisoners are incapable of seeing the guard, and that the guard could at any point see whatever it is that the prisoners are doing, the prisoners are forced into the self-regulation of their every action.

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection (Foucault, P. 202-203).

In this manner, the constraints of social facts are imposed internally upon the individual. So, too, is the individual not just pressured into a self-regulation of their every action but of every thought as well. In the individual's contest for freedom, any deviation away from the constraints of social facts are not only opposed by the will of external societal forces but by the actor themselves. Despite the conscious or unconscious internalized moralization that their defiant disregard for a social fact is deemed bad or unjust, the individual actor possesses within them the power to triumph over this mistruth and act in accordance to their will through personal agency.

Existentialism and Personal Agency

Existentialism is the ideal that all meaning in life is subjective. It is the guiding belief that all meaning posited by the social and physical realms are not of an inherent value. For this

reason, meaning is something that each individual must create on their own and actively choose to accept for their self.

Within this context, the search for meaning and will to live becomes the guiding question that every individual is infernally tasked with conquering. Upon living in a secular world where meaning is no longer derived from a higher power, Friedrich Nietzsche's words: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him, (P. 181)" defines our existence. If meaning, unlike in centuries past, is no longer tied to the testaments of a higher authority, what then is the divinating locus of significance?

For the existentialist, God has been replaced by external sources of meaning. The laws of the land, the Capitalistic urge to acquire wealth, or the drive to possess whatever it is that your society deems to be a signifier of success, etc. are such entities. However, so often does the individual place their faith, and derive their lives meaning from these sources without conscious thought or reflection. In bad faith,³ they unconsciously devote their lives and attribute the significance of their being into the reproduction of entities which bears them no internal satisfaction. Ultimately, placing faith into these entities is not bad, however it is the role of the individual to consciously choose what it is that gives their life meaning.

The Existential Task

Upon the realizing that the world is devoid of inherent meaning, the individual becomes tasked with overcoming an absurd feat. How might someone find the will to live prosperously if every aspect of worldly meaning is of a subjective nature? Albert Camus' allegorical retelling of *The Myth of Sisyphus* positions itself as an answer to this 'original question' of whether or not life is worth living in the face of an existential understanding of the world.

In the myth, Sisyphus, having cheated death twice, is condemned for eternity to the futile task of pushing a rock up a mountain only for it to fall back down whence it has neared the top of the precipice. Symbolically, this represents us all in life. The rock that the hero Sisyphus pushes forward is symbolically the strain that we all face in life—the fight to create a meaningful existence out of our meaningless world. As Sisyphus struggles up the mountain, and as we create our life’s meaning our burdens become something greater than their weight. We become our rocks. As you create meaning, that meaning becomes you in the sense that it has formed who you are as a person, and becomes an evidence to your absurd ability to push onward ever more. It is in this process that we become greater than our struggles and find reason to live.

We act in such a way, despite the absurdity of the whole ordeal. Unlike Sisyphus, we as humans are doomed to inevitably die. Regardless, we possess the ability to struggle and consciously earn our meaningful existences. For the inevitability of the outcome should carry no weight towards invalidating the accomplishments of the present and past. Camus validates this claim by concluding, despite the futility of Sisyphus’s struggle, that “one must imagine him happy” (Camus, P. 78). “For it is the moments of reflective lucidity whence the rock falls back down the face of the mountain that Sisyphus finds his “hour of consciousness” (Camus, P. 76). It is then, while he is standing atop his summit he is made most capable of recognizing the meaning that exists within his futile accomplishment. It is this moment when he finds himself capable of contemplating his own existence. Through this moment of conscious reflection, he rediscovers his life as something worthwhile. In that recognition, he endows himself with the ability to overcome the meaninglessness of his fate and make meaningful his impossible task.

Similar, too, is the plight of the individual and the labourer. The proletariat who works every day of the week in order to meet only the most basic needs of his own subsistence feels a

similar pain... but he can, too, arrive at a similar triumph. When the day has ended and his hours of toil are completed, his time to reflect is found and he is provided with a blissful moment.

Though sometimes experienced with dismay and at other times in joy, there is a bliss to be found in this conscious hour regardless. In these moments when you recognize your life for what it is, by accepting the reality of your life and through understanding how you have become one with your struggles, a profound feeling of contentedness can be found. It is in these moments where you become freed to contemplate what you might become that you possess the ability to transcend your fate. For

if the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy. Again I fancy Sisyphus returning towards his rock, and the sorrow [that] was in the beginning. When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy arises in man's heart: this is the rock's victory, this is the rock itself (Camus, P. 77).

It is the victory of having the struggle that will be overcome—the victory of extracting meaning and a will to live out of an inherently meaningless world. This is the process by which meaning is extracted and made your own.

Following this momentary, but eternal, triumph is the descent back towards the base of the mountain and the start of a new day. One can unsurely hope for a better day that may never come, but one may always find their hour of consciousness where they recognize the imminence and importance of their own life. Although your life will eventually reach its conclusion and the rock will return to the Earth in its penultimate descent, the inevitability of this outcome is of little significance. For

crushing truths perish from being acknowledged. Thus, Oedipus at the outset obeys fate without knowing it. But from the moment he knows, his tragedy begins. Yet at the same moment, blind and desperate, he realizes that the only bond linking him to the world is the cool hand of a girl. Then a tremendous remark rings out: 'Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well (Camus, P. 77).

Despite the inevitability of death, there is a solace to be found in the chosen meanings that we cling to in life. In just the same way as how human connection and worldly pleasantries tethered Sisyphus to life, so too does the chosen meaning in our own lives stand paramountly opposed to the futility of our lives given our indissoluble linkage to death. If death cannot be escaped then it is pointless to live in fear of it, rather the transcendence of your life's finitude can only be accomplished by facing your fate head-on. For "there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn" (Camus, P. 77). Hence, this scorn, defined by a will to derive significance and meaning out of the originally random and meaningless moments which together construct our experiences, is the power by which we must all live by if we are to grow and exist as individuals.

The Tension Between Social and Existential Meaning

The purpose of this essay is not to position social facts or existentialism in some variety of moral hierarchical order in which one is decreed better than the other. In fact, every individual is endowed with the right to place personal meaning and significance in whatever entities that they so choose. Whether that meaning is derived from social facts or chosen via an existential understanding of the world, whatever meaning is integrated into the belief systems of the individual matters not. Rather the great aim of this essay is to emphasize the inconsolable tension that exists between social facts and existentialism during the individuals process of actualizing their selfhood.

Someone may follow the existential ideal of choosing personal meaning without issues only insofar as they act and choose meaning that resides within the constraints of social fact. It takes only for the individual to accept meaning and to behave outside of the prescribed social norms for this tension to become relevant. Given that social facts:

1. Tangibly affect the beliefs and actions of the individual.
2. Posit their presence and associated societal meanings as inherent.
3. Coerce individuals into accepting their constraints through the compulsory pressures of benefit and detriment.

How could someone be truly free to existentially choose the meaning by which they define their lives when they exist under the suffocating influence of social facts? Although no individual is capable of existing outside the influence of either social facts or the existential ideal, it is the goal of the following sections to describe how the experiences of such ideologically polar individuals would appear. The hope is that through a synthesis of these two ideals a concept describing the preferred mean of conscious existence might be established.

The Existential Person

With an understanding that there is no inherent meaning in life, the existential person is totally freed to choose what it is that gives their life purpose. The moral code and behavior which they choose to participate in would be totally their own. They might live in such a way that they believe that nobody, themselves included, is owed anything except for what they and others are willing to personally give. If so chosen, they might express their self as an epitome of selfishness or righteousness. In either case the choice is exclusively their own. The existential existence has the ability to be entirely individualizing or collectivized. Albert Camus' *The Stranger* attempts to express how an individual who exists in total disregard to social meaning might appear through his depiction of the character Meursault.

Meursault is by no contemporary understanding of social meaning considered to be a 'good' guy. He befriends a wife beating pimp, and he callously murders a man because his "eyes were blinded behind a curtain of tears and salt," and "all [he] could feel were the cymbals of sunlight crashing on [his] forehead" (Camus, P. 59). His chosen meaning in life can be described

as an open “indifference of the world” and a preference for maintaining his homeostasis (Camus, P. 122). Meursault’s response to Marie asking “if he wanted to marry her” is an example of this.

I said it didn’t make any difference to me and that we could if she wanted to. Then she wanted to know if I loved her. I answered the same way I had last time, that it didn’t mean anything but that I probably didn’t love her. “So why marry me, then?” she said. I explained to her that it didn’t really matter and that if she wanted to, we could get married... She just wanted to know if I would have accepted the same proposal from another woman, with whom I was involved in the same way. I said, “Sure.” (Camus, P. 41-42)

To Meursault marriage would have simply been a title without meaning. The concept of marriage, having no bearing on how much he cared for Marie, was thus deemed unnecessary to Meursault. Despite this, Meursault understood that marriage carried meaning within the heart of Marie, and was thus willing to go along with the proposal. Due to the subjective understanding of a social concept (marriage) an incongruence in understanding between the two individuals arose. The same would occur constantly in a world occupied exclusively by existentialists

In the second part of *The Stranger*, Meursault is tried for murder and imprisoned. During that time Meursault is subjected to the constraints of his existential worldview. Beyond his imprisonment, Marie is only allowed to visit him once as the result of an arbitrary law which prohibited unmarried women from visiting prisoners. This instance emphasizes how societal structures, despite their irrationality, have a tangible impact on the world. This is seen further during his trial with each of the witnesses to Meursault’s character. In each instance of his disregard for an arbitrary norm of society: smoking next to his dead mother, befriending a pimp, and putting his mother into a retirement home, his life was further jeopardized despite the rational but non-normative reasoning behind his behaviors.

Although the existentialist might find freedom and a worthwhile life within their radical view of the world, if taken to the extreme, they risk condemnation and the early termination of

their life. If the goal of existentialism is freedom, then to act in such a way as to needlessly risk the life of yourself or others should be avoided within an existentialism framework. The goal of the existentialist should be to question the social facts and norms of society and to create meaning for themselves. They should accomplish this task while navigating the social world within which they live—in such a way as to mitigate harm done onto themselves and others to whatever extent that they feel comfortable doing so.

The Social Person

The social person would exist as a reflection of the society within which they live. Without conscious reflection this is the system by which someone is inclined to form their identity. In America they would express themselves as the epitome of the Capitalist ideal, and the embodiment of their race, gender, socio-economic class, as well as any other labels that are socially recognized as pertaining to identity. Though they would still possess personal agency within the framework of society, their will would be directed only onto whatever aims society deems important. Their moral understanding of the world would be justified via religious doctrine or the laws and codes of the American judicial system. Their goals—the achievement of the American dream.

Although the odds state that they are unlikely to ever transcend their socio-economic status, they would struggle constantly, striving ever to achieve the goal of “making it big.” Whenever they might fall short of their ideals, as often they will,⁴ their dismay will not be pointed outwardly as a critique of a system whose goals are destined never to be achieved. Rather, their shortcomings will be turned inwardly as an expression of personal failure. Although they will exist in such a way that their behavior is of no immediate detriment to their social standing or ability to succeed, they will never recognize why it is that they choose to strive for

the ideals of which they aim. They might find happiness and personal gratification in this struggle—as is the goal of society. Though equally likely is the possibility of the shallow existence of an unfulfilled life. For even in success, there is a burden of null-gratification if the achievements are of things which they care not. Without an existential understanding of the world and an ability to choose meaning for yourself, a more free and fulfilling life experience is less likely to be reached.

Synthesis and the Role of Art

Neither a total existential understanding of the world nor a purely social existence is of any salient value. In order to live well, a synthesis between the two ideals must be reached. One must possess the ability to live within society and be aware of social meaning if they are to accurately understand and interact with others. One must also be capable of creating and choosing meaning for themselves, if they are to optimize their personally preferred existence.

For the individual who exists in a world devoid of inherent meaning but filled with social facts and social meaning, to live and to create is an act of freedom. It is through creation that they might find themselves capable of deriving their life's meaning and the extraction of a will to live from a prior meaninglessness.

Thus, creation is an act of unparalleled importance. Although all varieties of creation are valid, for the purpose of this essay, the creation of art is given particular focus. It is through creation and self-expression that one finds the ability to transcend social meaning—to interpret social meaning as their own and, if they so choose, to forsake it altogether. In the creation of art, new meanings are formed, expressed, and made visible to others. Through language and deliberation, we are made capable of explaining our mental processes and phenomenological experiences. This translation of meaning from one individual to another, however, is never total.

Due to the original objectivity of social meaning and the added subjectivity of internalizing that meaning as understanding for yourself, and then transferring that understanding of meaning to another with their subjective internalization of it, some variety of incongruence in joint understanding will always be elicited.

That art, when viewed, must be interpreted, a scenario in which meaning is forced to be understood as subjective is manufactured. Through this exhibition, an existential understanding of the world and meaning is elicited. By having every viewer of the art understand that the expressed meaning is subjective, they are forced to choose for themselves what it is that the work means. In deliberation with others regarding the meaning of the art, they are exposed to others' subjective understandings of its meaning. In this social deliberation of meaning, the possibility of the creation of new social facts and meaning is facilitated. Thus, in the understanding of art—in its personal and group interpretations—the ability to change society is made possible.

Furthermore, art, in its creation, is an expression of the existential ideal. Given that an individual has the ability to create anything, whatever it is that they so choose to make, exists as an expression of creating and choosing meaning. Through this method of creation, the individual has the ability to accept, alter, or decline social meaning in a way that has the ability to transcend their mere individuality. By expressing oneself in a physically tangible way you effectively impose your own meaning upon the world. By making art, the individual actively extracts meaning out of a formerly meaningless world. They create the ability to choose meaning for themselves and to moderate the existence of social facts, thus positioning themselves within a synthesis between the existential and social world.

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#:~:text=Achieving%20biopower%20allows%20the%20state,shaped%20to%20the%20state%27s%20desired

¹ Power is influence directed at an individual as a means of pressuring them into behaving in a certain variety of way. Foucault coined this phrase in his book titled *Discipline and Punish*.

² Doing Gender is a phrase coined by Candace West and Don Zimmerman in a 1987 essay. The phrase describes the behavior of an individual which acts to reinforce their gender identity.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre coined the phrase “bad faith” as a means of describing the act of uncritically accepting meaning in life. This can be seen in an individual's blind acceptance in the values of religious doctrine or a country's legal codes.

⁴The ideals of American society, depicted as norms, are standards which are nearly impossible to achieve. Examples: The ability to become wealthy if you have not started from a place of wealth is extremely unlikely. The ideals of gender as seen by an extremely muscular action hero or a supermodel set norms which the average individual will be incapable of achieving. Despite this, the individual is expected to live up to these societal expectations.