

Block III Videos 16 and 17 (Life and Death)

Introduction: This very short block offers a smooth transition between (Christian) religion to more secular perspectives. **Video 16** discusses nihilism and existentialism, and is one of the more important videos of the series. I have already already mentioned it several times and I will continue to reference it. Being such an important element of the series, it is amazing how much was *not* included in the video. As I have said before, I appreciate the limitations a 10-minute video imposes, but that does not undo what is lost. I will address these omissions below, and then proceed to the videos themselves.

A) Omissions:

1) Nihilism: I spoke a bit on nihilism before (**Topics I.A.2** and **I.B.3**), but I want to add some more information here as it is so important to understand where Existentialism came from. The basic elements of nihilism go at least as far back as Siddhartha Gautama (aka the Buddha), but the word itself was used by Friedrich Jacobi in response to the extreme rationalism that was growing in popularity in his time. It held that empirical evidence was not necessary to know the truth. Jacobi pointed out that without a "real world" application of the truth, "value" would become meaningless. It was Jacobi's intent to show the horrible conclusions that such a philosophy must lead to, and he offered Jehovah as the alternative. But rather than call Jacobi wrong, rationalists (and atheists), such as Friedrich Nietzsche, embraced this idea of "no value." According to Nietzsche, the dismal outlook that nihilism must lead to was the price "enlightened" people must accept for knowing the truth.

There is an inherent contradiction in both nihilism and in existentialism. Nietzsche claimed that nihilism denied passion, but then admitted that to embrace nihilism was a passionate act. Existentialism denies any meaning in life, yet its proponents direct us to invent our own meaning. The fact that there is an apparent contradiction does not concern me, as Christianity itself is immersed in what G.K Chesterton called a "stereoscopic" view. It is not so much that an apparent contradiction exists, but the nature of the contradiction itself. When I look at the paradoxes of Christianity, what I see are two ideas of reality being unified, such as how an omnibenevolent Jehovah can allow us free will knowing we will do evil things. This is in contrast to how atheists seem to approach paradoxes, where I invariably see reality being blended with non-reality. To put it another way, the paradoxes of Christianity arrive by joining two separate ideas that are generally held as true. The contradictions in atheism frequently come by finding inconsistencies within a single idea.

2) Seeds for Abortion: While much is said in **video 16** that I will address, I want to point out right away what seems like only a minor change between Christian and atheistic thought, yet is extremely important. By taking the position that one's essence is determined by oneself instead of being inherent (min 2:16), the door to abortion has been opened. We will spend five of the six videos in **Block IV** discussing personhood and essence. If what makes a person a person is one's essence, and if one can choose their own essence, then one is not a person until the age of reason (which can vary from about 4 years postnatal to the age of military service). The reasons I say this will be better explained in **Block IV**, and one should keep this in mind when we get to Peter Singer in **Block VIII** (**video 45** in particular).

If one's essence is determined by the gods, then one becomes a person at the moment of conception. But even in the case of existentialism, the abortionists, I think, are still embarrassed. By allowing prenatal children to be killed but (so far) not postnatal ones, a favoritism is shown to those who have survived birthing. If the abortionists would leave it at that, then perhaps this argument could end. But in the final block of the series (**Block VIII**), we will talk about how any "privilege" is

unethical. Unless one pays close attention, the contradictions this series promotes are easy to miss.

3) Essence and Accidentals: Video 16 does a decent job introducing us to what essence means, although it is only an introduction. Several videos later we will return to it and talk about accidentals as well. Unfortunately, the two need to be talked about hand-in-hand. These two terms are essential for the rest of the series, yet they are really only used to ask the question of "What makes you, you?" in **Block IV**.

Catholics and other traditional Christians have no conflict with classical philosophers on this matter. Christians, however, have a more focused and complete vision of what these two terms mean when it comes to the essence of humans, therefore they can provide a more consistent philosophy.

4) Human Dignity: According to Christianity, by being made in the image of God, we are all given human dignity that makes us equal to each other in the eyes of Jehovah. We are all called to be His children in Heaven one day, although we have the choice to reject it (consider Ivan Karamazov from **video 13**). But being equal does not mean we are interchangeable; that's a socialist idea. Rather, we are diverse in our dignity. Just like a bishop is radically different than a knight in chess (diversity), they are considered to have equivalent value in organized chess (expressed as being worth 3 pawns each). As we progress through the series, the concept of human dignity will be developed more and more to suit each new application.

B) Video Block III (Life and Death):

1) Video 16 (Existentialism): Before one watches this video, one should go back and review **Topics I.A.2** and **I.B.3**. I believe one can see how the extreme rationalistic view is accepted here, and how nihilism has given birth to existentialism in defiance of Jehovah. In this video, religion of any type is treated as a mere distraction from meaninglessness, no better and no worse than any other distraction one might come up with. This is a subtle but terrible misconception, at least for Christians. Christianity, and to a lesser extent paganism, is not a *choice* in life, but a *guide* to life.

I also want to remind the gentle reader of what was said in **video 14**, where any irrational belief was held to be "dangerous" by W.K. Clifford. Here, Existentialists are telling us that no life choice is rational, which puts all of them in the same category as religion as far as Clifford would be concerned.

i) Meaning of Life: The problem of finding meaning in one's life is indeed a problem we all face. And many Christians fail to do this, while many non-Christians of all types succeed. In this context, existentialism is both a religious and a secular matter. Despite the claims of the video, existentialism has existed as long as philosophy itself. "Why am I here and what is my place in life?" is the bedrock of all philosophical discussion. The Christian view of existentialism is about discovering what Jehovah's plan for one really is, while the secular view (which is what is presented in the video) is about deciding for oneself what one's meaning is.

The two views can be reconciled if we realize that what gives us a true and lasting peace is evidence that we have discovered Jehovah's plan for us. Note that this does not necessarily require knowledge of Jehovah, nor am I suggesting that peace and happiness are synonymous. I realize that a "true and lasting peace" is rather open-ended (as it should be, as Christianity teaches that we are all unique), but a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. But if we *reject* Jehovah (as opposed to simply being *ignorant* of Jehovah), we run into many problems this video simply ignores.

By excluding Jehovah from the conversation, the best we can say about any meaning we give to our lives is that it is only temporary. Even if we find a true and lasting peace in our lives without Jehovah, it will still end at death. Secular existentialism is a temporary answer to an eternal question. There is nothing one can do in this world that the world can't also tear apart: spouse can abandon spouse, children can forsake parents, jobs can be lost, poor health can end dreams, etc. Also, consider the physically helpless but mentally alert in nursing homes, or the slaves throughout history. If life's meaning is based on something as fragile as what the world is willing to offer us, then we are setting ourselves up for failure.

Camus, however, denies that the miseries of the world should keep us from being happy, as we will see in **video 46**. Note the difference between the Christian solution of "peace" and Camus's solution of "happiness." Christianity treats even terminal ills such as painful cancer the same way it treats mundane ills such as a baby cutting teeth: a growing pain necessary for something better. Peace is found when we humble ourselves to the eternal truth that transcends temporary suffering. Existentialists like Camus embrace life's ills with a defiant sneer, which I consider to be a special type of madness.

ii) Blank Slate: Soren Kierkegaard's views are not entirely in line with traditional Christian views, and this problem is further compounded by a serious misrepresentation of his views in this video. Kierkegaard did buy into the "blank slate" theory (**video 6**), but still advocated intense Bible study, self-reflection and prayer to find meaning. This seems to be a compromise solution between Christianity and atheism. As such, he represents neither the traditional Christian view nor the Fathers of Atheism's view.

iii) Contemporary Existentialism: The idea that one's purpose in life was not an essential element of one's being was a defiant response to classical materialism being discredited by quantum mechanics. The socialist experiments were proving, quite conclusively, that morality was not evolutionary, as I talked about in **Topic I.B.3**. Rather than admit that science and social experimentation demonstrated the need for Jehovah, the existentialists claim our problems come from man placing himself in the role of a god, which is not possible because god cannot exist. *This* is the real meaning of the absurd as meant by Sartre, not the one given in the video. At the same time, Sartre also gave the world a beautiful, if unintentional, description of the Christian idea of pride: man seeking to become a god.

iv) Absurdity: The word "absurd," as described here, only exists in the atheistic mindset. Even the pagans thought humans had a meaning in life. For them, the meaning of human life was to serve the gods (**Topic II.B.4**). Sartre recognized that meaning could only exist if Jehovah existed (in agreement with Jacobi and Nietzsche), but could not bring himself to believe in Jehovah. His logic was this: what one *is* (in grammar terms, the subject) must, by definition, be separate from what one *does* or *wants to be* (the predicate nominative). He could not accept that the two terms could be synonymous, the subject and predicate nominative could not be the same thing at the same time. His argument, found in *Being and Nothingness*, is perhaps the most complicated philosophical argument made in the 4,000+ years of philosophy, so I must greatly simplify what I say here. But, as an aside, the concept of the Triune God answers this apparent dilemma fairly easily.

But while the argument itself is complex, the demonstration of it is rather easy. For Sartre, it is absurd for a man to call himself a waiter because the essence of a man is not the essence of a waiter. For a man to claim to be a waiter was an example of bad faith because one was believing in an impossibility. However, it is proper to say a man acts like a waiter or performs the duties of a waiter.

Sartre would likewise describe someone who called themselves a Christian as being in bad faith, but no such criticism would be made against one who says they believe in the Christian mythology, or for those who say they act on Christian morals. And I will give credit where credit is due: Sartre was consistent in calling many atheists out as acting in bad faith as well. One cannot *be* an atheist anymore than one can *be* a Christian, one can only act as such. But while atheists clearly do not follow the rituals normally associated with some type of theism, the overwhelming majority of them practice ethics based on Christian morals, as opposed to morals and ethics based on nature (as I described in **Topic II.D** and **video 13**). For those who read C.S. Lewis's book *The Last Battle* (the final book in the Narnia series), please recall the famous dialogue between Aslan and Emeth at the end, as it illustrates this point quite well. It is this observation that led many atheists to think that Sartre was really a Christian in disguise. And lest anyone think I am overstating the impact of Sartre's observation here, I have a very dear friend who converted from atheism to Christianity because of this revelation of Sartre, and this friend is very fond of recounting that scene between Aslan and Emeth to explain his conversion. For a more famous example, Dr. Jordan Peterson recently accepted Christianity (at least in the spiritual sense, so far he has not declared a Church). His declaration of faith was largely based on the realization that he could not, in good faith, act like a Christian while at the same time denying Christianity.

v) Yearning for Meaning: I just want to point out that no recognized philosopher, theist or atheist, denies that man has a yearning for finding meaning. Yet those who deny Jehovah fail to take into consideration that, if they are right, then this is the one and only yearning known in nature that cannot be satisfied. If one is hungry, nature provides food. If one is thirsty, nature provides water. If one desires knowledge, one can rely on reason. But for contemporary existentialists, satisfying the desire for Jehovah is not possible. Sartre believed mankind's misery came from not having anything to satisfy this need.

vi) Freedom: The problem of "freedom" is entirely correct, although Christians look at it in terms of disordered appetites. A predictable pathology can be seen regardless of what one calls it: people naturally embrace anything that gives them pleasure and seek more of it. But as time goes on, it becomes harder and harder to achieve this pleasure. Furthermore, the pleasure experienced becomes less and less intense. CS Lewis called this phenomenon an addiction, as the symptoms are essentially the same for any overindulgence. Christian teachings, far from limiting us, are designed to keep us from falling into this addictive trap. Self-examination, forgiveness, humility, sacrifice, fasting, and other Christian teachings seek to control the "appetite." To a Christian, true freedom means to be able to control one's body and temper, as opposed to having one's body and temper control the person.

Note that Sartre also tells us that we have an obligation to limit ourselves. Christians believe we are all ultimately responsible for our own decisions, so in that respect there is no conflict. But Sartre clearly takes this idea too far: "...but all the authorities you can think of are fake." (min 5:11) We see here how he is being both contradictory (if he expects us to listen to his advice, then he is telling us he is a fake) and, by his outlook on life, absurd (he suggests he can give us an answer to this answerless world).

I agree with Sartre that we often do go to certain people to reinforce an idea we already have, but I think this is overly simplistic. We can't know for certain what any given person will say, especially those who happen to be intelligent (the reason why intelligent people often appear intimidating is because they can be unpredictable in how they interpret any given situation). And sometimes we don't really want advice; we just want a "sanity check." In the end, one certainly is responsible for one's own actions, but this does not imply that outside advice is not useful. While

family, friends and teachers may not have the right to choose how we live our lives, they still have legitimate right (and even duty) to instruct and influence our lives.

Sartre actually seems confused himself. Consider the comment: "...people who figured out for themselves how to live." (min 5:21). Did these "people" really work out how to live (in which case, why is it irrational to ask them advice?) or not (in which case this is an unnecessary addition to his philosophy). The whole argument of living "authentically" and not in "bad faith" (min 5:28) is just a redundancy. For me to believe Sartre is right is a form of bad faith by his own logic.

vii) World War II: I don't know why Hank decided to detour into World War II, but I have some comments about how he presented it. World War II did indeed cause many to question the existence of God, but mainly in Britain. Spain, Germany and Russia already had governments in place that were not only officially atheistic, but were aggressively and systematically attempting to destroy religion. Catholic Italy was initially spared this because Mussolini was not aggressive this way, but they eventually fell under the boot of Nazi Germany before the war was over. France is the home of the socialist movement [Sartre and Camus were both French, as was Voltaire (perhaps the greatest Father of Atheism not mentioned in the series)], and was therefore already a stronghold of anti-theistic thought. The smaller European countries were pretty much victims of German and Russian aggression. The rest of the world suffered no such loss of faith at this time. Instead, the lack of Faith in the rest of the world we see today came from a slow, cancer-like infection from Europe as opposed to a single catastrophic event like World War II. As you watch the videos, note how most philosophers are European. Only from the last decade or so, long after World War II ended, will we see any American, Canadian or Australian philosophers mentioned in the series.

viii) Pain and Suffering Revisited: We actually find in this video a better discussion on the matter than the video that was supposed to address it (**video 13**). So, why did Jehovah allow such misery to take place in Europe? Let us consider Hank's words: "When Nazis became possible, meaning became harder to find." (min 4:34, and don't forget that Nazi is a contraction of National *Socialist*). I appreciate Hank's need to simplify things, but I want to remind the gentle reader how many 19th century atheist philosophers we have seen in this series that were influential in Europe. Atheism had taken root in Europe almost a century and a half before Hitler came to power. Lenin and Stalin in Russia predated Hitler by over a decade, and Franco in Spain came only a few years after Hitler. A more historically accurate statement from Hank would have been "When atheistic views on life became the foundation of national governments, meaning became harder to find." The Biblical answer to why God allowed these horrors is that Jehovah respects our free will (which is discussed in **Block V**), and left Europe when He was no longer wanted there. But, unlike the Biblical Jews, instead of owning up to this reality, people blamed Jehovah for not coming to their rescue despite their kicking Him out. Until such self-examinations are made, and the people accept the collective guilt they bear by rejecting Jehovah, Jehovah will honor their free will and not interfere in Europe. Interestingly enough, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban said in November of 2021 that he was encouraging Christianity as the solution to the "wokeism" invading his country from the U.S..

But atheism has not been completely successful either. While many people did indeed leave churches after World War II, this did not mean they flocked to atheism. Instead, vague spirituality and disinterested agnosticism became very common. Fear of being "wrong" in one's beliefs seems to be the driving force in the decline of Christianity, not rational arguments against it. And same fear that is eroding Christianity is likewise creating many "false flag" atheists. In **Topic II.F.6.iii**, I discussed how Christopher Hitchens would rather attack the beliefs of others than claim any belief for his own. Today, the "agnostic-atheist" continues this argument made by Hitchens.

ix) Camus's View: In the final minute or so of the main video, Camus succinctly states what modern existentialism means: our only purpose is to live until we die. Hank's closing comments about having children, a lucrative job, etc., is a smokescreen. Those things are accidentals to the essential meaning of our lives, not the meaning of life itself. Hank ends with pretty optimistic views of justice, morality and such (**Topics VII.A and VII.B**), but as we get to them we will see just how poorly atheistic philosophies really deal with them.

x) Parting Shot: To suggest that one can define value on a global scale while at the same time claiming it can only come from the individual is simply ridiculous. What is valuable to one might actually be in conflict with that of another. Indeed, to suggest meaning is whatever one wants it to be is endorsing selfishness, as well as an implication that the means to achieve these ends are not important. The main reason I coined the term patriarcism to describe man made morality (**Topic II.D.6**) is because of the fractured moral systems such attitudes create. The only reason disparate patriarchic moralities can currently coexist is because none of them are in power. Yet we are living in a time when patriarcists are cooperating to bring down the only theistic moral system that allows them to coexist in peace. Time will tell who wins in the end.

2) Video 17 (Perspectives on Death): This is really well placed after existentialism. I hope the gentle reader noticed that we went from finding ways to distract us in our meaningless lives to telling us to not bother thinking about what happens when our meaningless lives end. And we don't hear too much more about death again for the rest of the series. Death is, of course, what makes our lives meaningless without theism. Any meaning we might find without a god goes away when we die. A few select people might have memorials built to them, but does that mean lives are meaningless unless we do something that warrants such a thing? Even if we do, the rampant iconicide in 2021 shows us just how fragile they really are. Existentialism might provide one with empty hope, but death is the despair that eventually brings one back to nihilism. And Hank's attempt to make existentialism more palatable by saying the Christian idea of death is a "final exam" (min 0:47) only serves to remind us how flawed this series is in its treatment of Christianity. For the Christian, death is not a final exam; it is graduation.

i) Philosophical Views of Death: The ancient philosophies of Socrates and Zhuangzi are very similar to what Christians believe, while Epicurus' idea is very rational if one does not believe in an afterlife. In this video, we see a rare example of a contemporary philosopher (Thomas Nagel) also having some ideas similar to Christianity (Christian funerals are a celebration of another soul on its way to sainthood), although I find it frightening for him to suggest the value of life can be measured by what superficial experiences one has. But Nagel is an agnostic (see below), so that may be why, at least in this video, he was not so "over the top" in his ideas.

That being said, Aristotle's views were made in bad faith (at least as explained in the video) once he got past death either being a permanent sleep or a gateway to the afterlife. No explanation is given as to why he might have thought the afterlife was the way it was.

ii) Fear of Death: The various ideas presented on whether it is right or wrong to fear death (either one's own or that of others) make valid points and observations, but they ignore the emotional realities. While our lives should indeed be led by reason, that does not mean emotions are worthless or not real. Ignoring one's own emotional needs is just as unhealthy as ignoring physical needs. While a Christian funeral is a celebration of the faithful departed going to Heaven, it is also recognized as an essential part of the healing process for the bereaved. The funeral does not neglect the

dignity of the mourners while celebrating the deceased, but rather blends the two together.

iii) Nagel: I do find it interesting that Nagel is actually not the atheist he wants to be, but is instead an agnostic. In his book *The Last Word*, he says "I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that." This seems to me to be, philosophically, the atheist equivalent of what Bertrand Russell was ridiculing with his teapot at the end of **video 15**.

iv) Thought Bubble: This Thought Bubble was an exception to the norm, as it was reasonable and on topic. I do want to point out that by claiming that "you" and "death" cannot exist at the same moment, we are given another definition of personhood: consciousness. This is not otherwise discussed in the series, but if it were it would do a lot to discourage abortion.

v) Personal Perspective: In **video 22**, we will see a good Thought Bubble based on the case of "What Mary Doesn't Know," another important concept for the series as a whole. But this video is an example of why it is important to have empirical evidence to support rational thought, even if all the facts and conclusions of such thought are correct.

The overall attitude from this video is rather trite concerning death. Besides showing no empathy for survivors, it also seems to be a bit smug concerning one's own fate. It is one thing to talk about death (as most people have a false, and irrational, sense of immortality), quite another to face it. After all, there is one major difference between dying and merely leaving for college: the permanence of it. A child going to college may come back a little different than when they left, but they still come back. Those who die don't. Other than Socrates, all the philosophers mentioned in this video don't so much give meaning to death as to admit the inevitability of it. So, if I may be forgiven for being so bold, I will try to present a more realistic look at death from some personal experiences.

In Afghanistan, I was in a place that came under rocket attack quite often. Fortunately, the enemy was very inaccurate. But I was able to go into the camp's headquarters where they had a large map of the camp showing where all the rocket attacks landed. The enemy had our range, but not the proper angle. As the days and weeks went by, they would adjust fire a little bit at a time, forming a nice straight line of dots on the map. My sleep tent was clearly in this line of fire. With each attack, the enemy got closer to where I would be sleeping. This was information I could not share with my tent mates. What would telling them do, other than to have them worry about something they have no control over? I had no authority to request another sleeping space for us, and even if I did, all that would do was doom whoever came in behind us. Do I have the right to switch places with an innocent person just to save my own? Fortunately, when the rockets finally did get the right angle and placed rockets in our compound, one came to the left and one came to the right and missed all the sleep tents. No one was hurt.

But that wasn't the only brush I had with death, and it wasn't even the closest I came to being killed there. While there, I never thought much about the dangers I faced. I had a job to do and so did everyone else. We just did them. We helped each other so none of us felt alone. We joked a lot, and laughed at things most people probably wouldn't find funny in safer times. I never really thought too much of the danger I was in until one of my fellow officers, who previously had never left the safety of our home base, showed up that night when the enemy finally did place rockets in our camp. He was obviously scared and nervous, frantically asking what was going on and what he should do. We

answered calmly and made sure he did what he was supposed to do. Once safe in the bunker, he quieted down a little but was still obviously shaken. He asked several times how we could all be so calm and even jovial during this experience. I only say all this because I think some important lessons about facing death can be learned here. After all, he had pretty much the same training that I and all the others had, yet he acted so differently.

I believe the fear of death is a misnomer. It is really the fear of many things. This video seems to ignore this possibility.

First of all, when my group arrived in Afghanistan, most of us were put in dangerous places rather quickly, while he stayed in a safe spot that was never attacked the whole time we were there. Simply coming to Afghanistan made us face our mortality, but while we were never given a chance to forget it, the nine months of relative safety he enjoyed before coming to see us caused him to. Furthermore, I had spent my whole life mentally preparing for what I thought would be even more dangerous experiences than what I actually did face. I always have been, and probably always will be, amazed at how much people take life for granted (the years 2020-2022+, need I say more?). He became afraid, in part, because his delusion of immortality was suddenly ripped away.

Secondly, I had time to bond with the other soldiers; he only arrived earlier that day. Being with those you know and trust is important. Being alone is a source of fear. Our comradeship was deep set. His was shallow and proved insufficient to avoid feeling alone.

Thirdly, we were all well-experienced in being attacked, and knew how to perform our humble part (basically sitting still in the bunker until the crisis was over). He was ignorant, at least in the manner that Frank Jackson claimed with his What Mary Doesn't Know concept in **video 22**. Not knowing what to do is a source of fear (also known as the "fear of the unknown").

Finally, we were there long-term and had a sense of ownership in the mission of the camp. We had a sense that whatever sacrifice we made would contribute to the "big picture." His death, if it happened, not only would *not* serve the camp, but would actually prevent him from doing what his idea of a "big picture" was. This, however, is not a source of fear, but quite the opposite. Being able to transcend one's personal needs with the needs of something greater actually provides a source of peace. If one's faith in the "big picture" is strong enough, then peace can be found no matter how much fear is experienced.

As my testimony above shows, one does not need to be a Christian to find this peace, as nothing noted was religious at all. I believe that if you think of the story of Socrates, his story parallels this as well: 1) no delusion of his immortality as he ultimately drank the poison at the time of his choosing, 2) bonding with his friends just prior to his death, 3) an assumed familiarity with death based on his strong opinions of death, and 4) recognizing a power higher than himself (the society he lived in, even though it decided that he was too dangerous to live in it).

But, for one who embraces the Christian faith properly, we also see all four of these features as well: 1) Our worship is centered on one who died for us and our calling is to die in Him as well, 2) through the Eucharist, all Christians (in Earth, Purgatory and Heaven) are united into one body, 3) we are told what awaits the faithful after death, and 4) Heaven is the ultimate "big picture."

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video 16 link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaDvRdLMkHs>
video 17 link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjQwedC1WzI>