Existentialism in Monty Python: Kafka, Camus, Nietzsche, and Sartre

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Unlike any comedy troupe, Monty Python presents its viewers with a bizarre, unpredictable, and seemingly meaningless world. If one were to try and locate a philosophical message in the shows, recordings, and movies of Monty Python, one might come to the conclusion that the world is incoherent or absurd, such that one can find no meaning or values in it. In their last movie, *The Meaning of Life,* this possibility is mentioned explicitly in the (infamous) "Live Organ Transplants" skit: reflecting on (Eric Idle's) song about the vastness of the universe, Mrs. Bloke (Terry Jones) comments, "Makes you feel so sort of insignificant, doesn't it?"1

One might wonder, since this movie is their final group effort, whether Mrs. Bloke's line represents the final judgment of Monty Python concerning the "meaning of life". Do they really believe that life is insignificant? In short, are the Pythons a band of nihilists (who believe in nothing), perhaps simply making a joke at the expense of the average, non-philosophical viewer (who believes that life does have a meaning)? Are they really, deep-down, a bunch of skeptical, left-leaning, intellectual agitators who enjoy undermining the common beliefs and values of ordinary, law-abiding citizens? Are they just a horde of snooty, namby-pamby, pinot noir sipping, Foucault-reading, moral anarchists?! A depraved pack of pseudo-intellectuals who would rather sit on their pampered posteriors while engaging in pretentious, limp-wristed, academically-questionable pursuits, taking time off only to hurl insults at decent hard-working folk?!

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1 *Monty Python's Meaning of Life* (London: Methuen, 1999).

Oh, excuse me! I got carried away there for a bit. Actually, though some of these last accusations might be true (at least the wine drinking, in John Cleese's case), Monty Python does, in fact, have a positive message about the meaning of life. Well, sort of: the message is existentialist. And, in order to better understand the existentialist content of the Monty Python, we will need to examine some of the major ideas of existentialist philosophy.

Although its origins can be traced to the nineteenth century, existentialism is principally a twentieth century philosophy. And, like the twentieth century itself, existentialist philosophy is a strange mix of diverse views, trends, and attitudes. One often finds, for instance, a dictionary definition of existentialism that simply groups a host of common themes: "the individual, the experience of choice, and the absence of rational understanding of the universe with a consequent dread or sense of absurdity in human life."2 Given such a broad description, the problem of relating Monty Python to existentialism is not the shortage of analogies or similarities between the two, but the exact opposite; what Monty Python skit does *not* bring up the individual, our experience of choice, and, in particular, the absurdity of human life?

So, in what follows, we will limit our investigation of existentialism in Monty Python to a few influential representatives of existentialist philosophy and literature. In the work of Nietzsche, Kafka, Camus, and Sartre, there are number of intriguing parallels and similarities with general themes in Monty Python, as well as potential criticisms or comments on the plausibility of their various philosophies. In fact, since existentialism was one of the most influential and important philosophies of the twentieth century, and

2 Simon Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 129).

is still enormously popular in the arts and general culture, it would be surprising if Monty Python did not have something existentialist to say.

<u>Kafka, Camus, and the "Absurd"</u>

It is important to keep the question of the presence of an existentialist philosophy in Monty Python separate from the question of the influence of existentialist *literature.* Since existentialism pervades much of the twentieth century literature, its presence in Monty Python should be substantial. And, indeed, if one were to look for existentialist literary influences, an obvious source would be the stories and unfinished novels of the greatest author of existentialist fiction, the German-Czech, Franz Kafka (1883-1924). The chaotic and nonsensical world portrayed in Kafka's writings bears an uncanny resemblance with much in Monty Python. The world of Kafka's work is often a sort of institutionalized or bureaucratic insanity: a world that puts up impossible, illogical barriers to the lives or progress of the main characters. A well-known parable by Kafka, entitled "Couriers", nicely demonstrates these qualities:

> They were offered the choice between becoming kings or the couriers of kings. The way children would, they all wanted to be couriers. Therefore there are only couriers who hurry about the world, shouting to each other—since there are no kings— messages that have become meaningless. They would like to put an end to this miserable life of theirs but they dare not because of their oaths of service.[3]

Often, the protagonists in Kafka's stories are ordinary people who strive to overcome these irrational barriers by using common-sense and reason. But, no matter how hard they try, the walls of their unfathomable maze inevitably close in upon them, leading to

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[3] F. Kafka, "Couriers", in *Existentialism,* second edition, edited by R. C. Solomon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 171. Other great works of twentieth century fiction and drama owe much to Kafka, such as the plays of Samuel Beckett (whose *Waiting for Godot,* is subtitled a "tragicomedy") or Joseph Heller's *Catch-22.*

gradual frustration and anxiety. Adding to their anxiety is the fact that the bureaucratic members who enforce these insane rules and regulations act as if their crazy systems are the very epitome of rational thought and justice!

Similar situations constantly arise in Monty Python. Many of the famous skits from the TV show involve an ordinary, or somewhat silly, customer who cannot overcome the ridiculous barriers set up by a shop owner who doesn't see the insanity in his rules or regulations. For example, the "Cheese Shop"[4] depicts a sustained, but ultimately fruitless (or cheeseless), search for cheese in a cheese shop. The "Dead Parrot" sketch (I, 104) involves a customer's equally futile attempt to convince the shopkeeper of a pet store that his recently purchased parrot is dead. As with Monty Python, furthermore, one of the strangely entertaining aspects of Kafka's stories is their "black humor." The cruel predicament that the main characters experience is, to some extent, comic: one often finds oneself both laughing and wincing at the same time in both Kafka and Monty Python. In Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," for example, when the anxious salesman, Gregor Samsa, awakes one morning to find himself transformed into a giant insect, he seems more horrified about having missed his train to work! In a genuinely Pythonesque moment, he reasons that he *might* still be able to catch the seven o'clock train, but "to catch that he would need to hurry like mad and his sample weren't even packed up, and he himself wasn't feeling particularly fresh and active."[5]

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[4] G. Chapman et al, "Cheese Shop" in *The Complete Monty Pythons Flying Circus,* vol. II (New York: Pantheon, 1989), 141. References to this work will henceforth be followed by the volume and page number.
[5] Franz Kafka, "The Metamorphosis", translated by W. Muir and E. Muir, in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 91.

Among the writers who have been influenced by Kafka, one of the most important is the French existentialist, Albert Camus (1913-1960). Not only did Camus write influential existentialist literature (most notably, the novel, *The Stranger*), but he also wrote a number of essays on the meaning of life that seem directly inspired by Kafka's vision of a meaningless world. Camus famously defined the "absurd" as the confrontation between a rational person and an indifferent universe, and his use of the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus has become a famous metaphor for this confrontation: "The gods have condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight."[6] The punishment, as Camus goes on to describe, is a "futile and hopeless labor", a pointless task that never can be completed. As soon as the rock reaches the top, it rolls down again, and Sisyphus must start the whole process once more, without any hope of completing his ultimate task of placing the rock on the mountain peak.

For Camus, Sisyphus' fate reveals the long-term or overall meaning of our own lives. Like Sisyphus, we are "condemned" to a life of tasks and projects that seemingly don't amount to any real, lasting worth or value: we go to work each day, raise our families, and eventually die. And the whole process starts over again with the next generation, an endless cycle that apparently has no ultimate goal or point. This is the problem of the meaning of life as understood by the existentialists.

There are no direct references to Camus' views or the myth of Sisyphus, but the often repetitive triviality of life is nicely captured in several reoccurring characters or stereotypes in Monty Python. My favorite examples include the tedium of an office

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[6] A. Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus", in *Existentialism,* second edition, edited by R. C. Solomon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 197.

worker's existence, depicted in the aptly named "Dull Life of a City Stockbroker" sketch (I, 73), where the joke is that adventure actually occurs all around the stockbroker without his noticing, or the chartered accountant who desires to become a lion-tamer ("Vocational Guidance Counsellor"; I, 124). These characters share Sisyphus' fate, although without Sisyphus' defiance or heroism. The boring monotony of their occupations mirrors the boring monotony of their lives (which were, apparently, of interest to Michael Palin, who plays nearly all of them). The philosophically-inclined viewer may forever after view chartered accountancy as symbolic of the ultimate lack of significance of a person's life, especially for individuals within our modern, regimented, industrial societies.

The Individual and the Meaning of Life.

One might be tempted to counter Camus' interpretation of life by inviting religion, society, or some great philosophical theory to rescue some meaning from our seemingly meaningless lives. For instance, someone might declare that God, or our Nation, provides an overall meaning for our day-to-day existence, since our lives gain a meaning by being part of a divine plan or a larger process.

Yet the existentialists were for the most part very skeptical of the use of any higher "being" or universal plan to find meaning. The great German existentialist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) famously declared that "God is dead", by which he meant that the modern scientific world had made belief in God no longer acceptable to the rational person, and so our purpose in life couldn't come from a supernatural source. But the problem can also be stated more generally: What provides the meaning of these

larger entities, like God or the State? If the answer is that God or the State provide their own meaning, such that nothing else is required to give them meaning, then why couldn't our individual lives be just as meaningful all by themselves (and thus nothing else, like God or the State, would be required to give our own lives meaning, too)? All told, one of the most important themes in existentialism is the fate of the individual in acquiring his or her *own* answer to the meaning to life. Camus called this quest, "living without appeal." It can be understood as a rejection of the quick and easy answers that our societies, religions, and philosophies often use to resolve our existential worries. The celebrated French philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) made the same point when he declared that our "existence precedes our essence": we are not born with a pre-established essence (a definition, purpose, or goal) provided by some higher power or institution; rather, we must provide our own, freely-chosen purpose to life. We exist first, and we must *then* determine our meaning or essence.

This individual-centered component of existentialism is strongly endorsed by Monty Python, particularly in a well-known scene from *The Life of Brian.* In an attempt to dissuade a horde of would-be disciples, Brian argues:

> Look . . . you've got it all wrong. You don't need to follow me. You don't need to follow anybody. You've got to think for yourselves. You're all individuals.[7]

The importance of this scene cannot be overemphasized in attempting to locate an existential message—or indeed any philosophical message—in Monty Python. It is without a doubt one of their rare moments of open and direct expression of a philosophical idea, although it fits naturally into the plot and scene. The Monty Python members have repeatedly stated that *The Life of Brian* is one of their finest achievements

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[7] *Monty Python's The Life of Brian* (London: Methuen, 2001), 72.

due to its consistent theme—and the theme, of course, is the (existentialist) plea for a

little "critical thinking" on the part of the individual. In various interviews, they have

made the following comments on the film's message:

> JOHN CLEESE: One of the themes of the film is, "Do make up your own mind about things and don't do what people tell you." And I find it slightly funny that there are now [1979] religious organizations saying, "Do not go and see this film that tells you *not* to do what you are told."[8]

> MICHAEL PALIN: There's a real feeling that we'd moved up a notch with *Life of Brian.* It was taking on something that could be difficult and controversial, but essentially dealt with all sorts of things that were right at the basis of what Python comedy was all about, which is really resisting people telling you how to behave and how not to behave. It was the freedom of the individual, a very sixties thing, the independence which was part of the way Python had been formed . . . .[9]

> Nietzsche too warned of the negative effects of most (if not all) social institutions,

traditions, and customs, on the development and freedom of the individual. With respect

to morality, he argued:

> The free human being is [judged] immoral because in all things he is *determined* to depend upon himself and not upon a [moral] tradition . . . . [I]f an action is performed *not* because tradition commands it but for other motives (because of its usefulness to the individual, for example), even indeed for precisely the motives which once founded the tradition, it is called immoral and it is felt to be so by him who performed it . . . .[10]

Nietzsche's analysis of moral traditions even helps to explain why *The Life of Brian*

aroused so much anger among certain religious groups, Christians especially. At some

point in the development of the traditions of many religious societies, it became

unacceptable to philosophically investigate (or make a comedy about) religion—even

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[8] John Cleese et al, *Monty Python Speaks!* (New York: Avon Books, 1999), 249.
[9] John Cleese et al, *The Pythons* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2003), 306.
[10] F. Nietzsche, *Daybreak,* 9, translated by R.J. Hollingdale in *A Nietzsche Reader* (London: Penguin, 1977), 87.

though one of Jesus' main goals was to get people to re-think their religious commitments and values.

Moreover, the Pythons have repeatedly claimed that they were not poking fun at Jesus in *The Life of Brian*, but rather at the social movements that were, and still are, formed to interpret Jesus' teachings. As Terry Jones put it later:

> [*Life of Brian* is] very critical of the Church, and I think that's what the joke of it is, really: to say, here is Christ saying all of these wonderful things about people living together in peace and love, and then for the next two thousand years people are putting each other to death in His name because they can't agree on *how* He said it, or in what order He said it. The whole thing about "The sandal" [i.e., the followers of the Gourd or the Shoe] . . . is like a history of the Church in three minutes.[11]

Religious groups and movements, like all social groups, have all too often become dogmatic and rigid, inhibiting the individual's exploration of the religion (quite aside from the obvious fact, mentioned above, that these religious groups constantly inhibit each other by way of verbal and physical attack). Nietzsche made many similar criticisms of Christianity. While he admired much of the teachings of Jesus (since Jesus approached morality in a thoughtful and individual way), Nietzsche was very critical of the many followers, most notably Paul, who converted the parables and sayings of Jesus into a "religion," with all of the "dos" and "don'ts" common to religions.

And it's not just religion. The existentialists and Monty Python both refer, frequently, to the negative effects of most (if not all) other social institutions on the development of the individual. Whether it is politics, the military, science (especially medicine), or the arts and the media, Monty Python has produced a body of work that is unmatched in its savage, and hilarious, send-ups of the illogic and stupidity that underlies so many of our social institutions.

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[11] *Monty Python Speaks!, ibid.,* 247.

<u>Sartre, Bad Faith, and Freedom.</u>

If the existentialists place the burden of life's meaning on the individual, they are under no illusions that most individuals are not up to the task. Rather than honestly confront the situation, many people attempt to deny their freedom to make this choice—and the *freedom* of the individual is one of the key concepts of existentialism. Sartre calls this denial of personal freedom or choice "bad faith"; a simple example would be a person who accepts that he is a "sinner", or an "alcoholic", and therefore believes that he is not free to change his actions (for he is determined, and therefore cannot stop being a sinner or alcoholic). A more subtle example is presented when they take on the identity of a stereotype or "role", such as a doctor, policeman, scientist, etc., and let the stereotypical manners and behavior of the role determine how they should behave and think as individuals. Sartre gives the example of a waiter in a café who displays all the mannerisms of the waiters one sees in movies or reads in books. He has an overly kind or slightly condescending attitude, voice, and use of words ("How are we this evening, sir?"), a stiff, automaton walk and quick bodily movements. On Sartre's view, this person is denying his freedom to be a person who just happens to have the job of a waiter. One can be a waiter without having to follow a stereotyped code of behavior.[12]

Monty Python, of course, loves to present stereotyped characters and, indeed, these characters have become some of most recognizable and beloved components of Python. From the aggressive policemen who break into skits intent on arresting anyone and everyone (with their cries of "What's all this then?!"), to the dull office workers obsessed

[12] J-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* translated by H. E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), chapters 4-6.

with petty details and paperwork, to the old house-wives ("pepperpots") whose lives seem to revolve around complaining (in high-pitched voices) and shopping, Monty Python challenges us to re-think our lives by satirizing or parodying the many ways that people fail to achieve an independence of thought, and thus a freedom to choose. Like Sartre's waiter, these stereotyped characters seem unable or unwilling to recognize their freedom to pick a course of action independent of their typecast jobs, social class, etc. Perhaps these stereotyped people have allowed some social, religious, or other grand concept to determine their proper conduct and behavior, and thereby to decide their life's meaning for them. Perhaps they are like Brian's followers, who, after Brian tells them that, "You've all got to work it out for yourselves", shout back in unison, "Yes, yes!! We've all got to work it out for ourselves," which is predictably followed by, "Tell us more!" (*ibid.,* 72).

According to Sartre, another way that people can manifest bad faith is when they fail to acknowledge that their past choices, taken as a whole, represent or define their character. Since there is no pre-established meaning to life, our meaning can only come from our *actual* choices, and so if my choices display a certain pattern (such as heroism, cowardice, dishonesty, etc.), then that is the type of person that I have freely chosen to become. Many people attempt to deny these basic facts about themselves. They might declare, "I am really a hero, but I was never in the right circumstances to display my heroism", an excuse that supposedly explains away their many past flights from any potential danger (this example comes from Sartre's famous play, *No Exit*).[13] But, Sartre tells us, there is no deep-down, internal property (essence) of "heroism" that makes a

13 J-P. Sartre, *No Exit and The Flies,* translated by S. Gilbert (New York: Random House, 1975).

person heroic. Rather, we are what we do, and our actual choices are the *only* means of determining our character, and consequently the meaning we have given to our lives. Of course, we are always free to become a *new* person if we so choose to act in the future.

Instances of this type of person (who are, as they say, "in denial") abound in Monty Python. In the "Fish License" sketch, Mr. Praline declares "I am not a loony!", even though he is pestering a post office clerk for a (non-existent) fish license for Eric, his pet halibut. "I chose him [Eric the halibut] out of thousands. I didn't like the others. They were all too flat," he tells the clerk (I, 316). Sartre would accuse Mr. Praline of bad faith: he is definitely a loony!

One of the criticisms commonly raised against Sartre's concept of freedom is that he fails to take into account the influence, or limitations, of our genetics (nature) and up-bringing (nurture). Is the alcoholic really "free" to stop drinking, or the homosexual to "choose" heterosexuality? Most would say they are not. And this limited scope of individual choice plays a role in several Monty Python sketches. The timid, subservient, Arthur Pewtey has decided he won't be "pushed around" anymore, but when he tries to stop his wife's seduction (by the marriage counselor, no less), and is told to "go away", he instinctively backs down with a meek, "Right. Right." ("Marriage Guidance Counsellor"; I, 21) Is Arthur Pewtey really free to change himself into a confident, aggressive person? Similarly, limitations of a more basic physiological sort persistently thwart Ron Obvious' ambitious stunts, such as jumping the English Channel, or eating Chichester Cathedral ("The First man to Jump the Channel"; I, 127). The point? Monty Python contains much that is existentialist, but it holds the seeds of some powerful objections to existentialism as well.

A Nietzschean Conclusion.

I've tried to show that Monty Python has some positive, existentialist advice on life. It's not simply a sarcastic send-up of humanity and the search for meaning. But, Monty Python just wouldn't be Monty Python if it didn't also make fun of philosophers and their theories of life! And, indeed, a sketch from the TV show involves two pepperpots who go in search of Sartre in order to settle an argument ("Mrs. Premise and Mrs. Conclusion visit Jean-Paul Sartre"). Along the way, conversation reveals details about Sartre, especially as they talk with his wife (Betty Muriel-Sartre). Sartre can be a bit moody, for example: "'the bourgeoisie this is the bourgeoisie that'—he's like a little child sometimes," his wife tells us. And he isn't much fun on holiday: "He didn't join in the fun much. Just sat there thinking. Still, Mr. Rotter caught him a few times with the whoopee cushion" (II, 55-57). The satirical target of this skit is the pompous and self-important philosopher, and the moral, possibly, is that philosophers should not take themselves so seriously. Even they can be caught by a whoopee cushion. If this last interpretation of the Sartre sketch is in anyway correct, then it once again reveals a latent philosophical message in Monty Python. The ability to step back and take an honest look at ourselves, or to laugh at our own pretensions, is a virtue that Nietzsche emphasized: "I will not deceive, not even myself".[14]

For Nietzsche, the cultivation of personal virtues, such as honesty, is part of the process by which an individual can form a meaningful, authentic life. Nietzsche describes this process on occasion using "artistic" metaphors, as "'giving style' to one's character"

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[14] *The Gay Science,* 344, translated by Richard Polt (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995).

(*ibid.,* 290). This suggests that the creation of a meaningful life is much like the creation of a beautiful, significant art work. The concept of the "will to power" is important in this context: "every living thing does everything it can not to preserve itself but to become *more".*15 Consequently, by conjoining the striving of individuals to grow or flourish with the creative act of fashioning a unique, virtuous character, we may begin to understand what Nietzsche considered a meaningful life. And, interestingly, there is a sense in which Monty Python itself fits Nietzsche's theory. That is, the history or "life" of Monty Python is marked by a continuous internal development and striving to become more, all under the guidance of a well-conceived, if dynamic, artistic plan. As *Monty Python's Flying Circus* progressed, the idea of a fluid, "stream-of-consciousness" method of writing sketches and comedic material gradually evolved. Skits with normal beginnings and endings, and with final punch lines, were replaced by an inventive, constantly developing series of bizarre leaps to new material, and yet the material was often cleverly interconnected on many levels.16 With the transition to movies, the plots became more unified and presented a more consistent theme, and the content became more daring. Yet, the members of the group were not content with simply repeating the same strategy of sketch writing that had succeeded in the past. When the episodes began to merely repeat themselves, such that the show was no longer evolving ("becoming more"), the cast members gradually began to leave the group for new projects. Like the ideal Nietzschean individual, Monty Python was not content with just existing. It strived to grow, to "overcome" its present condition and obtain new accomplishments, all under the control

15 *The Will to Power,* 688, translated by W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1968).
16 A nice discussion of the development of the show occurs in, G. Perry, *Life of Python* (London: Pavilion, 1983).

of a critical, artistic vision. For many Monty Python fans, it is this unmatched legacy in

the annals of comedy writing that continues to resonate over the years.