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SEPTEMBER 11 AND EXISTENTIAL ANGST:  
SHAPING AUTHENTIC EDUCATIONAL RESPONSES

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Unlike any other incident in recent U.S. history, the tragic events of September 11, 2001, exposed the frailty of American social infrastructure to our collective consciousness in dramatic and terrifying fashion. Those unfortunate individuals who succumbed to the orchestrated acts of violence committed on that dreadful day were little different from millions of other Americans who pursue their lives with a tacit expectation of personal safety and national security. On this particular occasion, however, the comforting reassurance offered by this general expectation proved mournfully misguided as previously unassailable symbols of American commerce and military might were victimized by devastating terrorist attacks. The events of September 11, at least momentarily, shattered the illusion that U.S. citizens can be entirely insulated from the daily ravages confronted by far too many individuals on an ever-shrinking and increasingly impetuous planet.

In this article, I want to explore from an existential perspective how the events of September 11 might provide a valuable pedagogical opportunity to discuss authentically national and global issues related to terrorism. Although terrorist acts can never be excused or justified, it is credible to explore, for example, whether U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East might have contributed to a political climate that fuelled the anti-American sentiment precipitating these terrible acts of violence. I will not defend here the presuppositions supporting existentialism as a philosophy of human consciousness, but will simply draw upon its philosophical strategies and concepts, its literary fictions so to speak, to foster critical discussion about the possible causes and solutions to world terrorism. I believe that existentialism affords a critical vehicle to promote such dialogue in the classroom by challenging the prevailing political and religious texts that often employ simple moral binaries to explain the crisis. When utilized as a critical lens, existentialism encourages us to explore the authenticity<sup>1</sup> of our values and beliefs, and provides an ethic for action based on a fundamental respect for human dignity and freedom. The article addresses two central questions related to the events of September 11, and the continuing terrorist threat to American interests: 1) How can Americans make sense of these tragic events and their subsequent reaction to them; and 2) How might these events provide an opportunity for practitioners to address global politics with their students to promote world peace?

## EXISTENTIALISM: ASSUMPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Sartre's existentialism embraces an ontological analysis that views humans as identical to other entities to the extent the former are simply objects possessing *being* in the same manner as trees, mountains or flowers. However, unlike these other entities, humans also possess a consciousness that effectively separates them from the world of things. Sartre argues that consciousness perceives the world as an intelligible system of separate and interrelated entities because it projects this structure upon the world. In the absence of the order imposed by consciousness, he considers the world simply as *being-in-itself*, existing as an absolute plenum without any organization, purpose, or meaning.<sup>2</sup> Sartre's world as being-in-itself, then, reflects the ancient Greek Parmenides' view that reality is a singularity where being is one rather than many, and is indivisible, indestructible, eternal, and equally real in all directions.

Two major implications emerge from the supposed dynamic interaction between consciousness and the world of things. First, consciousness actually defines the various experiences it encounters by investing them with meaning. Second, since consciousness is abstracted from the other objects of experience, it enjoys the corresponding capacity to confer alternative interpretations on various events. This capacity to impose interpretations on experience suggests that humans are "condemned to be free" since they must also accept personal accountability for everything they choose. On Sartre's view, most individuals typically reject this freedom, and the personal responsibility it entails, until they are forced to confront the spontaneous nature, singular quality and mortal character of existence as part of their lived experience. The rejection of human immortality, in particular, is a central feature of both Sartre's existentialism and Heidegger's search for authenticity since they believe a retreat into religion is an attempt to escape the freedom lying at the core of authentic human experience.<sup>3</sup> Within a culture where immortality is often presupposed in the form of some religious conviction, cataclysmic or psychologically disturbing events, even extreme boredom, might be required to jolt consciousness into an authentic awareness.

In Sartre's novel *Nausea*, Roquentin, the protagonist, confronts the frightening singularity and mortality of being when he stares despairingly at the knotted roots of a Chestnut tree and observes that, "there's nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing."<sup>4</sup> At that particular moment, Sartre's character is forced to grapple with the pathological feeling many humans experience when they recognize the accidental, absurd, mortal and sometimes tragic nature of human existence:

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The roots [of the tree], the park railings, the bench, the sparse grass on the lawn, had all disappeared; the diversity, the individuality of things was a mere illusion, a veneer. The veneer had splintered, leaving monstrous flabby, disorganized masses; terrifyingly and obscenely naked.<sup>5</sup>

I want to suggest, then, that the September 11 tragedy may have impacted on our collective national consciousness in a manner similar to Roquentin's troubling recognition while sitting on the park bench. Both experiences afford pivotal points of existential revelation by forcing a personal confrontation with the primordial, accidental, and inevitably mortal nature of human existence. Not only is being vulnerable, or even expendable, within such a spontaneous and potentially terrifying world, existence itself seems a cosmic illogicality masquerading behind artificially instantiated or constructed truth.

For many Americans, then, the facade that masks the mortality of their existence was momentarily torn asunder on September 11, 2001. Similar to Roquentin's troubling realization while staring at the Chestnut tree, the structures insulating consciousness from the nature of human existence temporarily collapsed right along with the World Trade Center Towers. It seemed as if the entire country initially suffered acute anxiety and then slipped into a deep emotional despair. I recall entering the classroom and observing my own students staring blankly, in almost catatonic fashion, at the television news reports, many obviously experiencing a moment of profound existential angst. In our subsequent discussions about the tragedy, for example, many students indicated that their own vulnerability and inevitable mortality was made more immediate by these events, and some remarked on the accidental nature of life and death.

The nature of the affective state associated with existential angst generates an overwhelming sensitivity to one's surroundings, and creates the ability to see the world without the benefit of mediating preconceptions. It momentarily interferes with an individual's capacity to view the world in ways characteristic of some personal preoccupation. Indeed, as Sartre argues, when the structure consciousness imposes on reality collapses, we are forced, however reluctantly and evanescently, to stare into the frightening abyss of unpredictability, mortality and dizzying freedom consistent with authentic human experience. From the existential perspective, then, the momentary collapse of structure that occurred on September 11, 2001, may provide the initial impetus for personal freedom, responsibility and authenticity rather than a recipe for incorrigible despair.

As tragic and troubling as these events understandably are to all Americans, I believe they also afford a valuable opportunity for personal and national exploration. On Sartre's view, humans can respond to the existential angst generated by catastrophic events by choosing either to live in continued *bad faith* (*mauvaise foi*) or in *good faith*. A decision to live in bad faith typically

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entails a rapid return to sweeping self-deception where individuals stubbornly refuse to accept personal responsibility for the values and beliefs shaping their lives. Perhaps the key quality characterizing bad faith is that an individual subconsciously recognizes she is living a lie, but nevertheless chooses to do so. Sartre explains:

The one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth. Bad faith then has in appearance the structure of falsehood. Only what changes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth. There must be an original intention and a project of bad faith. It follows first that the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which means I must know in my capacity as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived.<sup>6</sup>

In the face of the existential angst experienced by Americans on September 11, 2001, the predictable reaction of those choosing to live in bad faith would be to impose traditional structure and meaning on their lived experience as quickly as possible. Individuals choosing to live in continued bad faith, for example, might claim that Americans were simply victims of evil or jealousy to deflect personal and national responsibility for the events, or they might cling to artifices of symbolic meaning such as flags, religion and patriotic slogans. The pedagogical danger is that such responses may preclude critical investigation into other causes of this tragedy by embracing simplistic distinctions between “good and evil.” The political and practical danger is that the conditions breeding terrorism remain potentially unnoticed and unchanged.

Individuals living in bad faith are driven by existential angst to drown themselves in the trivial, the social, the religious, and any other available ingredient that restores previous beliefs and undermines authentic analyses. In spite of its psychologically comforting capacity, bad faith is an avoidance mechanism to escape personal, and in this case perhaps national, complicity in the choices and events that shape our lives. Those who live in bad faith seek refuge in the belief that they can insulate themselves from their circumstances by denying, distorting or reconstructing experience to comport with some pre-existing self or national concept. To live in bad faith is to deny our existential freedom, and the responsibility to ourselves and others such freedom entails.

Unfortunately, many Americans responded to September 11, 2001, by returning to the plethora of instruments, beliefs and symbols that perpetuate living in bad faith. Americans sought solace in flag-waving, anthem singing, patriotic slogans, re-energized religious faith or through advocating a vigorous military response to eradicate international “evil and terror.” Consistent with this culture’s commodity fetish, an entire growth industry sprung to life in the

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wake of the tragedy, eager to capitalize on an escalating demand for flags, patriotic songs, and other symbols of American nationalism. By fleeing from existential angst into traditional consumer practices and other cultural distractions, most Americans sought to repress the exposed truth about their vulnerability as quickly and completely as possible, and hence adopted an inauthentic response to the event.

Although binary explanations dramatically oversimplify complex causal relationships in moral situations, some Americans, even those who knew better, eagerly accepted President Bush's pseudo-analysis of the terrorist attacks as simply a matter of "good vs. evil" or "freedom vs. tyranny." The President urged Americans to take their children to Disney World as if the entire tragedy was little more than a bad dream whose impact must be quickly erased from our national consciousness. Some of my own colleagues, ignoring obvious student distress, continued virtually unabated with their planned classes during the week of September 11 with some even failing to address the matter with their deeply troubled and understandably confused students. In spite of the opportunity for critical reflection it provided, the general American reaction to September 11, 2001, was to return to the beliefs, symbols and values that enable living in bad faith. Those choosing to live in bad faith may enjoy a temporary repose from the trauma suffered on that terrible day, but this comfort will not transform the circumstances precipitating the attack. For this reason, then, I maintain that it is crucial for educators to respond authentically to the existential angst precipitated by this experience.

To live in good faith, on Sartre's view, initially requires accepting the glaring and fundamentally troubling nature of the human condition by acknowledging that we are thrust into a potentially meaningless, purposeless and mortal existence. Whereas bad faith involves viewing ourselves as fixed, stable, settled, and morally upright, living in good faith often means breaking away from the herd of social opinion and consensus, and exploring alternative possibilities and explanations.<sup>7</sup> According to Heidegger,<sup>8</sup> authentic decision-making reflects a stark realization about the relationship between humans and the world of things. On his account, authenticity requires accepting the nothingness that connects us to the singularity of being. He argues that only such a recognition ensures we are authentically responsive to the phenomena that present themselves to us in everyday life. One must be constantly alert to the unfortunate tendency of projecting interpretations on events based on previous assumptions, rather than experiencing these events phenomenologically. For Americans, then, this might require jettisoning preconceived notions of national self-righteousness and moral rectitude to explore all causal possibilities connected to terrorism.

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The authentic individual lives beyond simple moral dualisms, including those imposed by disingenuous distinctions between good and evil. She understands that each person is unique and, rather than simply mimicking the positions adopted by others, focuses on fulfilling both personal and universal human potential. When individuals are absorbed by the judgments and evaluations of others, they necessarily live an inauthentic existence because succumbing to the gaze of another is the death knell of individual difference and possibility. Indeed, the compelling ideological forces promoting inauthentic choices are numerous and pervasive within contemporary American culture. Noam Chomsky, for example, expresses grave concern with the mass manipulation of public sentiment in modern industrialized democratic societies. He contends that these societies employ a privatized system of propaganda controlling the communication media, and professional and popular journals of opinion “to design, propagate and create a system of doctrines and beliefs which undermine independent thought and prevent understanding and analysis of institutional structures and their function.”<sup>9</sup>

Chomsky employs the perception that America is the international keeper of democratic ideals as one example of misguided public belief communicated through the popular media. The historical record, of course, reveals instead a persistent pattern of American subversion and overthrow of regimes such as Nicaragua, Cuba and Chile, nations that have actually encouraged increased political participation of the general populace. While America claims to pursue a liberal foreign policy based on principles of freedom, democracy and justice, it frequently pursues an agenda focused solely on protecting its political and economic interests. One classic example of this contradiction is another September 11 tragedy that occurred in 1973 when 3197 people were slaughtered during a CIA backed coup that assassinated Chilean Prime Minister Salvador Allende and replaced him with Augustine Pinochet. Under Pinochet’s leadership, the military allegedly slaughtered 30,000 Chileans for political and ideological reasons.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this is the type of foreign intervention that quite conceivably cultivates the widespread international anti-American sentiment prompting many terrorist acts.

Given the numerous ideological threats to authenticity, then, how can teachers wishing to encourage good faith choices among their students make sense of September 11? How can they approach the subject in a manner that encourages an authentic evaluation of these events? Contrary to the President’s suggestion, they should not attempt to erase these tragic events from consciousness simply by taking a holiday. Although a trip to Disney World may provide a momentary distraction, it fails to engage the critical question of why Americans are at this particular place in their history. Simply adopting dualistic moral reasoning by dismissing these events as acts of “evil,” seeking to apportion punishment to those individuals such as the American Taliban only loosely

connected with them, or attempting to restore the veneer of security through military action, religious faith and renewed patriotism provides no long term solution to the continued terrorist threat. Rather, educators must demonstrate the political courage and leadership to confront the actual causes of these events, and to examine long term solutions with students in an authentic and ideologically uninhibited fashion.

I believe that an existential ethic may help foster student understanding on the possible causes behind the September 11 attack, and perhaps offer a mechanism to reduce the chance that such attacks will be repeated. An existentialist ethic could influence our relationship with individuals from other countries by encouraging Americans to treat all humans in precisely the same manner that they wish to be treated:

Existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him. And when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.<sup>11</sup>

According to Sartre, when an individual chooses, she does so because she believes that choice is good for her. By adopting this belief about her choice, she simultaneously implies that the choice is equally desirable for all humankind for as she defines herself she also defines others. Whatever an individual chooses, she symbolically chooses for everyone since the very notion of choice entails the idea of "good," and hence "good" means universally good. Sartre contends that when we make a choice, then, we in fact confirm a positive value on that choice, and it cannot be good for us unless it is good for all humankind.

How might this existential ethic for authentic decision-making and action influence in-class discussion on the subject of September 11, or, even more importantly, help address more effectively issues related to global terrorism? Whatever we may think of the possible incoherence in asserting an ethical principle given the apparent subjectivity emerging from Sartre's analysis of consciousness,<sup>12</sup> this decidedly Kantian<sup>13</sup> turn may offer a valuable pedagogical tool to discuss September 11, 2001, with students. It requires no stretch of imagination to appreciate that those individuals who hold a realistic hope of living a free and satisfying life are less likely to commit orchestrated acts of violence against others. If Americans are to ensure that many people around the world, and not just themselves, will succeed in living satisfying lives, the political institutions that represent U.S. interests must reflect some sensitivity to the freedom and hopes of others. Alternatively, if in the interest of furthering U.S. goals, Americans continue to treat other persons as objects, denying and abusing their existential freedom, and creating groups of desperate and hopeless

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individuals in the process, while furthering their own advantages, then the anti-American sentiment prompting terrorism will almost certainly worsen.

Following the attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and the crash of the commercial airliner in rural Pennsylvania many of my own students, to their intellectual credit, wanted to talk at length about the events. Unlike some of my colleagues who dismissed the tragedy simply as an act of terror and/or evil, a number of my students, reflecting their refreshingly youthful wisdom and inquiring minds, repeatedly posed the question “why?” With tears in her eyes, one particular student poignantly asked the most authentic question in this entire matter, “Why do they hate us so much?” From an existential perspective, this question embodies infinite importance since it initiates an honest confrontation with these events and therefore provides an authentic tool to explore September 11. Indeed, what **is** the source of the anger and hatred that fueled such violence against Americans? Do we as Americans treat citizens of other nations, including Islamic countries, in a manner that we ourselves expect to be treated? Are Americans treating their fellow humans with the same dignity, respect and freedom that they desire? If not, then how might we transform our relationship with these nations to alleviate the hostility of those bent on our destruction? These are all questions that a classroom focused on an authentic investigation of September 11 might employ to initiate a critical examination of the event.

The current alienation of many Islamic individuals appears at least partially predicated on the hegemonic role the U.S. plays within the Middle Eastern political and economic arenas. This role includes the military and economic devastation of Iraq, administering and dominating the region’s oil resources, the unwavering and continuing support of Israel in spite of its objectionable military, economic and social practices against the Palestinians, and the building of U.S. military bases in Saudi Arabia, Islam’s most sacred land. Following an existentialist ethic, how would Americans respond if Saudi Arabia, or any other country for that matter, was building military bases on their soil? In the wake of these policies and behaviors, an entire generation of Islamic dissidents has been created who actively resist American interests in the region. Often in the name of the Koran, the antagonism of the Islamic Fundamentalist networks against the U.S. and its supporters has intensified with increased terrorism being its ultimate manifestation.<sup>14</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Subsequent to September 11, there has been an ever-widening polarization between American beliefs and attitudes, and those held elsewhere in the world. In this simplistic political and moral milieu where you are, in President Bush’s words, “either with us or with the terrorists,” any authentic attempt to discuss the motivation of those perpetrating these acts or to explore the reasons for their

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hatred of the U.S. may be met with considerable political resistance. An authentic evaluation of this situation is typically buried under a wave of patriotic jingoism incited by ideologues, politicians and a mass media bent on perpetuating bad faith choices among Americans. The road to an authentic evaluation of September 11 and the present situation in the Middle East is not apt to be a smooth one, but for all our sakes it is a journey we would be well advised to travel.

To capitalize on the existential angst generated by September 11, 2001, encourage good faith responses and promote an existentialist ethic that offers some realistic hope of preventing future attacks, I suggest asking students some general questions to initiate classroom discussion on the matter: 1) Generally speaking, are Americans authentically asking why the September 11 massacre occurred? 2) In light of an existential ethic, are Americans, or the American government, responding in a way that is morally different from, or superior to, the actions of those who perpetrated the attacks on Washington and New York? 3) Will the current U.S. response to September 11, 2001, make future acts of terrorism more or less likely? 4) What political and economic actions might be pursued to encourage an enduring peace between Islamic citizens, Americans and others?

These questions certainly do not exhaust the possible framework existentialist teachers might employ to encourage an authentic evaluation of September 11, but they do offer an initial starting point for promoting a broader discussion of the subject. I would submit that ignoring the possibility that September 11 was provoked, at least in part, by U.S. foreign policy is to refrain from asking authentic questions about the tragedy altogether. Terrorism, in all its terrible and all too frequent manifestations, does not occur for the simple reason that there is good and evil in the world. Rather, it is the accumulated effect of multifarious complex forces that produce individuals frustrated and desperate enough to commit cowardly acts of violence against others. America's occasional refusal to consider interests other than its own has conceivably contributed to the present circumstances confronted by this nation. Ultimately, it is only through an authentic appraisal of September 11, 2001, and promoting universal human hope and freedom, that we can even begin to pay homage to the thousands of Americans who lost their lives on that tragic day etched in our collective national memory.

#### ENDNOTES

1. There are many relevant critiques of authenticity. It is important to note that postmodernists such as Baudrillard, for example, emphatically repudiate the possibility of an uncoerced, independently constructed, and authentic subject. Given the range of ideological mechanisms within contemporary society,
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Baudrillard suggests that it is practically impossible to remain subjectively detached from the material forces influencing the formation of beliefs, and the subsequent choices based on those beliefs. On his account, individuals are so bombarded with media stereotypes, political rhetoric and advertising images, that there is no reasonable possibility of separating authentic choices from forced and manipulated ones. Jean Baudrillard, *Selected writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

2. Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Philosophy: History and Problems* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1989), 507-509.

3. There are, of course, counter existentialist perspectives that authentic decision-making necessarily entails the rejection of religious discourse. The authentic self for Kierkegaard, for example, is one whose self-reflective activity creates a “knight of faith who has looked profoundly into the world of men and seen that at the deepest level we are alone, an aloneness which constitutes a kind of divine madness for Kierkegaard’s hero is alone with his god.” Donald Palmer, *Looking at Philosophy* (Mayfield: Mayfield Publishing, 1988), 262.

4. Jean Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. L Alexander (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1962), 171.

5. *Ibid.*, 171.

6. Jean Paul Sartre, *Bad Faith*, In *Existential Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953), 157-58.

7. *Ibid.*, 205-10.

8. Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1949), 68-87.

9. Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1989), 5.

10. Paul Foot, “The Other September 11th,” *The Guardian*, 18/09/02, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/september11/oneyearon/story/0,12361,794184,00.html>

11. Jean Paul Sartre, *An Existentialist Ethic*, In Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Philosophy: History and Problems* (New York: McGraw Hill), 726.

12. As I have indicated, I do not wish to defend Sartre’s arguments in this article from the numerous available criticisms challenging their philosophical coherence. It is important, however, to acknowledge these criticisms. See, for example, Mary Warnock, *Existentialism* (London: Oxford University, 1970), 123-25.

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13. The Kantian version of this argument is of course found in the basic formulation of the Categorical Imperative: “Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” Immanuel Kant, *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. trans. J. W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1981), 44.

14. George Caffentzis, “Sept. 11 massacre rooted in Middle East crisis, globalization,” *The CCPA Monitor*, December 2001 - January 2002, 6-7.

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