

Chapter 1

Beyond Good and Evil Facing Your Demons With Black Sabbath and Existentialism

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You know about the lost Black Sabbath album, right? They recorded it with Ozzy in 1999, but legal battles kept it from being released. It was supposed to be called *Beyond Good and Evil*. Here's the track list:

Side A

1. Fear and Trembling (instrumental) / The Plague
2. The Birth of Tragedy
3. The Devil and the Good Lord
4. Beyond Good and Evil

Side B

5. The Fall
6. Twilight of the Idols
7. The Antichrist
8. Roads to Freedom (instrumental) / No Exit

Of course, as a never-say-die Sabbath fan, you know there is no lost album. Still, this could easily be a list of Sabbath song titles. What it really is, though, is a list of book titles, books written by existentialist philosophers: Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Friedrich Nietzsche

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(1844–1900), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), and Albert Camus (1913–1960).¹ As the titles indicate, the existentialists, like Sabbath, play with dark, macabre, and blasphemous themes.

So what is existentialism? Like heavy metal, it's notoriously difficult to define, but here's a definition anyway: Existentialism is a philosophy that reacts to an absurd or meaningless world by urging individuals to overcome alienation, oppression, and despair through freedom and self-creation. Although existentialism is most closely identified with nineteenth- and twentieth-century European philosophers, it's actually a timeless and potentially universal worldview. So we should not be surprised to see it unwittingly expressed by a British heavy metal band. In fact, I'd say Sabbath is Britain's chief contribution to existentialism.

“Life Has No Meaning, and Death's His Only Friend”

Since I discovered them at age 13, Black Sabbath have always been about facing my demons, about rebellion in response to the absurdity of life. By “the absurd” existentialists mean the lack of fit between what humans desire and how life actually is. The desire for romantic love and the inability to find or maintain it is absurd. The desire for good people to be happy and prosper and for bad people to suffer and fail is absurd. The world does not work that way. The desire for everlasting life is absurd. One day we each will cease to exist; this is a primary concern for the existentialists, leading some to conclude that life is without objective meaning.

In the novel *Nausea*, Sartre's main character, Antoine Roquentin, realizes that “Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance.”² Likewise, in “Johnny Blade,” Sabbath sings: “Life has no meaning / And death's his only friend / Will fate surprise him?/Where will he meet his end? / He feels so bitter / Yes he's so full of hate / To die in the gutter / I guess that's Johnny's fate.” Sabbath depicts a disenchanted world in which all angels' wings have been clipped, a world in which happiness seems impossible and life seems meaningless. What is the point of living? It's a world in which “there's never been a winner / Try your hardest, just to be a loser / The world will still be turning when you're gone” (“Wheels of Confusion”).

Warbling, nasal, and uncertain, the voice of early Sabbath is tortured, haunted, alienated, and angry. The voice is not elegant, commanding, or masterful. Ozzy Osbourne is not Robert Plant, or Rob Halford, or Ronnie James Dio, or Bruce Dickinson. But to the budding existentialist, Ozzy is something better. Despite being utterly unique, Ozzy's voice has an everyman quality that made millions feel that someone else felt the way they did. Despite hitting high notes, he nonetheless sounded masculine and angry. Despite fame and adulation, Ozzy remained alienated and ill at ease. Despite being biologically old enough to be my father, he spoke to my adolescent angst, fueling my middle-class rebellion. And despite Geezer Butler writing most of the lyrics, Ozzy made them his own—they don't sound right with anyone else singing.

People think the narrator of "Paranoid" is "insane" because he's "frowning all the time." But it's pretty hard not to frown in a world like ours, and people who are put off by a frown may be wearing false smiles to delude themselves. "Paranoid" expresses angst, despair, and hopelessness: "All day long I think of things/But nothing seems to satisfy / Think I'll lose my mind / If I don't find something to pacify." What makes life worthwhile is elusive: "I need someone to show me / The things in life that I can't find / I can't see the things that make true happiness / I must be blind/Make a joke and I will sigh / And you will laugh and I will cry / Happiness I cannot feel / And love to me is so unreal." Indeed, Camus says that the only truly serious philosophical problem is determining whether life is worth living. (By the way, the name is pronounced Cam-oo.) The song's narrator seems to have concluded that life is not worth living, at least for him, though he expresses hope that the listener will nonetheless be able to find meaning and happiness: "And so as you hear these words / Telling you now of my state / I tell you to enjoy life / I wish I could but it's too late." And "Paranoid" is not just an isolated moment of melancholy. Rather, the mood pervades Sabbath's catalog. As another example, consider "Lord of this World," in which the narrator describes being stuck in an existential morass: "You're searching for your mind don't know where to start / can't find the key to fit the lock on your heart / you think you know but you are never quite sure / your soul is ill but you will not find a cure."

The narrator of "Paranoid" looks to other people to show him the way to love and happiness, but, as Sartre tells us in *No Exit*, "Hell is

other people.”³ The narrator of “Paranoid” is thought crazy because of his constant frown. People don’t see inside us; they only see the surface, the smile or frown. And so they tend to alienate us, label us, oppress us, stigmatize us, and treat us like things. Consider the plight of Iron Man, who has saved the world, and yet, in his catatonic state, is looked at as a mindless thing rather than a suffering person: “Is he alive or dead? / Has he thoughts within his head? / We’ll just pass him there / Why should we even care?” Predictably, Iron Man reacts with anger to the uncaring, dehumanizing stare of other people: “Planning his vengeance / That he will soon unfurl.”

For me, nothing has brought about as much existential despair as failure with women, the failure to win love and the failure to maintain love. So it’s not surprising to find Sabbath’s lyrics juxtaposing existential despair and the loss of love in “Solitude.” At first, the song simply seems to be about overwhelming sadness: “My name it means nothing / My fortune is less / My future is shrouded in dark wilderness / Sunshine is far away, clouds linger on.” Then we get the clue that the sadness is triggered by loss: “Everything I possessed—now they are gone.” But in the end it becomes clear that “Solitude” is specifically about the loss of love: “The world is a lonely place—you’re on your own / Guess I will go home—sit down and moan. / Crying and thinking is all that I do / Memories I have remind me of you.” As Sabbath and the existentialists remind us, other people cannot generally be counted on to bring us happiness; they are more likely to make us miserable.

“I’ve Seen the Future and I’ve Left It Behind”

While Sabbath’s doomy riffs form the soundtrack for existentialist despair, the driving drums and guitar leads represent freedom and rebellion. Music is emotional and, unlike most traditional philosophy, existentialism recognizes the validity of emotions. Love, anger, jealousy, pity, and pride are not to be bridled by reason but given free rein to help us make sense of the world.

With its emotional rebellion, Sabbath, like existentialism, stands for an ethics of personal responsibility. Though they may bemoan the harsh nature of reality, they don’t count on anyone else to take care of them. They don’t make excuses; they accept reality and embrace freedom.

The Sabs are not whiney political rock stars, blaming government or society for their problems. Rather, as unwitting existentialists, they see the fundamentally absurd nature of life as calling for a response that demands that each individual make free choices and take responsibility for the person he is and will become.

Existentialism is not a philosophy of wallowing, but a call for overcoming. Consider “Tomorrow’s Dream,” in which Sabbath offers a depiction of existential despair and a need for escape to a better reality: “Yes I’m leaving the sorrow and heartache / Before it takes me away from my mind / . . . / When sadness fills my days / It’s time to turn away / And let tomorrow’s dreams / Become reality to me.”

To transcend a desperate situation, one must first face it. In this way, Nietzsche’s outrageous claim that “God is dead” is echoed in the blasphemy of Sabbath’s celebration of Satan in songs such as “N.I.B.” It is perfectly understandable why people take flight from reality and find comfort in religion, but Nietzsche finds Christianity to be a dangerous fiction that discourages people from living this life to the fullest. (By the way, “Nietzsche” rhymes with “pleased-ta-meetchya.”) As he says, “all things have been baptized in the well of eternity and are beyond good and evil; and good and evil themselves are but intervening shadows and damp depressions and drifting clouds.”⁴ In “Supernaut” we can hear existentialism’s rejection of religion and its ethic of rugged individualism and self-reliance: “Got no religion / Don’t need no friends / Got all I want / And I don’t need to pretend / Don’t try to reach me / ’cause I’ll tear up your mind / I’ve seen the future / And I’ve left it behind.”

More emotional than intellectual, Sabbath’s existentialism has a rebel-without-a-cause mentality. Think of Brando in *The Wild One* when he replies to the question “What are you rebelling against?” with “Whaddya got?” Rebellion often at first involves destruction without creation to replace what is destroyed. So while despair is acknowledged, it is not yet overcome. When the comforts of religion are rejected, drugs and alcohol can become the real opium of the people. And so it isn’t surprising to find Sabbath celebrating an escape to alternate reality in “Snowblind” and “Fairies Wear Boots.” No song, though, captures the love and promise in the refuge of getting high better than “Sweet Leaf”: “My life was empty forever on a down / Until you took me, showed me around / My life is free now, my life is clear / I love you sweet leaf—though you can’t hear.”

Sabbath's battles with substance abuse are well-known. Clearly, the answer to overcoming existential despair could not be found in a bottle, pipe, line, needle, or pill. To a great extent, though, the answer could be found in making music. As Nietzsche says, "what is good and evil no one knows yet, unless it be he who creates. He, however, creates man's goal and gives the earth its meaning and its future. That anything at all is good and evil—that is his creation."⁵ In line with this Nietzschean insight, a note of tempered optimism from "Children of the Grave" tells us that a better world can be made: "So you children of the world, listen to what I say / If you want a better place to live in spread the word today / Show the world that love is still alive you must be brave / Or you children of today are children of the grave." As Sabbath's sonic output testifies, Nietzsche is right: Creativity, especially artistic creativity, is the proper response to pain and difficulty in life.⁶

"I Just Believe in Myself, 'Cause No One Else Is True"

While creating music is a great way to respond to life's trials and tribulations, existentialism is ultimately about creating your self. As Sartre says, "Man is nothing but that which he makes of himself,"⁷ and we are "condemned to be free."⁸ This means we are free to make ourselves or free to abdicate choice and become what society makes of us. Someone who is free of self-deception and truly faces up to his choices and their consequences is authentic, a genuine person. The authentic individual is not obliged to make one decision rather than another, for example to join the army or protest the war, but he is required to fully realize that the choice he has made was a free one and is his own responsibility.

The existentialist opposes conformity for the sake of conformity. By going along with the crowd in their choice of values, one loses sight of oneself as a free individual. Though existential despair is not a good thing, many people avoid it only by not being genuine individuals. Instead they simply live, act, choose, and decide in the way the rest of the crowd does. These are the kind of people "Never Say Die" expresses disapproval of, people who are led by societal norms, "People going nowhere / Taken for a ride." Likewise, "Under the Sun/ Every Day Comes and Goes," a title that alludes to the book of

Ecclesiastes, also presents an image of people around us living inauthentic lives in “bad faith,” a kind of self-deception and denial of the freedom to choose one’s individual identity: “People hiding their real face / Keep on running their rat race / Behind each flower grows a weed / In their world of make-believe.”

Of course, there is a temptation to feel superior to the masses of people who live like anonymous members of the herd, but ultimately the focus must be on oneself, leaving others to lead their superficial lives. “Cornucopia” nicely captures the way people live in bad faith, deceiving themselves: “Too much near the truth they say / Keep it ’til another day / Let them have their little game / Delusion helps to keep them sane / Let them have their little toys / Matchbox cars and mortgaged joys / Exciting in their plastic ways / Frozen food in a concrete maze.” After all, there is a price to be paid by those who will face reality and make meaningful works of art of their very lives. An artist must suffer for his art, and this is no less true of the person who sculpts himself into an authentic individual. “Cornucopia” captures this creative struggle with the lines, “I don’t know what’s happening / My head’s all torn inside / People say I’m heavy / They don’t know what I hide.” And the narrator of “Under the Sun/Every Day Comes and Goes,” leaves us with this existential advice: “Just believe in yourself—you know you really shouldn’t have to pretend / Don’t let those empty people try to interfere with your mind / Just live your life and leave them all behind.”

In a world that defies our desires, a world populated by plastic people, it’s easy to fall prey to righteous indignation. We’re told that Johnny Blade is “a victim of modern frustration / That’s the reason he’s so ready to fight.” We’re also told “He’s the one that should be afraid,” when the narrator wonders, “What will happen to you, Johnny Blade?” As Camus sees it, we want to make sense of a world that does not make sense. It’s the same impulse that has us looking for shapes and figures in the clouds. There are no shapes or figures there objectively speaking, but if we look hard enough we may think we see them. Through habits and illusions we can come to see things in the world that are not objectively there, but if those habits and illusions are stripped away, then our world will come undone. The point is to overcome the sense that life on this planet is hostile and absurd and instead to just accept “the gentle indifference of the world,” as Camus calls it. One must come to realize that the universe itself is not

absurd; only our relationship with it is absurd. The world is not unfair or irrational; it's just that our demands make it seem that way.

The mythological character Sisyphus is emblematic of "modern frustration." He is condemned by the gods to roll a rock to the top of a hill every day only to have the rock roll back down again. In retelling the myth, Camus famously says, "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."⁹ This means we don't need a higher purpose. We're not even as lucky as Sisyphus to have the gods so interested in our lives as to punish us. Our very existence is without pre-given meaning, yet that's OK. We don't need a pre-given purpose, and we can deal with a universe that is indifferent to us, a world that allows our rocks to roll down hills. The struggle to live in the face of all of this is enough to fill our hearts and make us happy. We are free to choose how we will live our lives; nothing necessarily compels us to do one thing or another. In making our free choices we define who we are. Along these lines, "Under the Sun/Every Day Comes and Goes" presents an existentialist's declaration of independence: "Well I don't want no preacher / Telling me about the god in the sky / No I don't want no one to tell me / Where I'm gonna go when I die / I wanna live my life with no people telling me what to do / I just believe in myself, 'cause no one else is true."

Unfinished Symphonies

As we know from the history of Black Sabbath, progress in overcoming alienation, oppression, and despair through freedom and self-creation is not always straightforward. There are existential slips back into the comforts of drugs, religion, and bad faith. We don't often get Hollywood happy endings in Black Sabbath songs or existentialist novels, but we do get hope. And we do get the symptom of the universe, a love that never dies. Even though other people often oppress us, stigmatize us, and disappoint us, we can't live without them. We need to love both romantically and otherwise in order to have hope.

As self-made works of art, the Sabs are works in progress, unfinished symphonies. In facing their demons, they help us face our own. What more could we ask?¹⁰

Notes

1. Other Sabbathesque titles by existentialists include: *Dirty Hands*, *The Rebel*, *The Stranger*, *The Fall*, *The Just Assassins*, *Reflections on the Guillotine*, *A Happy Death*, *The Sickness unto Death*, *The Concept of Dread*, *A Very Easy Death*, and *Who Shall Die?*
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1964), 133.
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 45. Strictly speaking, it is the character Garcin who says this, but the view fits pretty well with Sartre's view of interpersonal relationships.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New York: Penguin, 1966), 165–166.
5. *Ibid.*, 196.
6. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York: Vintage, 1967). See also Chapter 10 in this book by Dennis Knepp, "Gods, Drugs, and Ghosts: Finding Dionysus and Apollo in Black Sabbath and the Birth of Heavy Metal."
7. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian, 1956), 291.
8. *Ibid.*, 295.
9. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 123.
10. Many thanks to the following folks for helpful feedback on this chapter: James Bondarchuk, Joseph Bongiorno, Joanna Corwin, Jason Eberl, Søren R. Frimodt-Møller, Kyle Johnson, Dennis Knepp, Greg Littman, Megan Lloyd, J.R. Lombardo, Eileen Sweeney, and Mark White.