

In a World of Propaganda, Lies, and Self Deception: Reviving the Spirit of Existential Rebellion

by Edward Curtin

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*“Search for nothing anymore, nothing except truth.
Be very still and try to get at the truth.
And the first question to ask yourself is: How great a liar am I?”*
—D. H. Lawrence, Search For Truth

Like existential freedom, honesty and truth-seeking demand a perpetually renewed commitment. No one ever fully arrives, and all of us are blown off course on the journey. Even when we think we have reached our destination, we are often startled by the enigma of arrival, and must set sail again. We are all in the same boat. The search for truth is a process, an experiment, an essay – a trying without end.

Yet surely it is not an exaggeration to say that most people are liars and self-deceivers. Honesty, while touted as a virtue, is practiced far less than it is praised. There is almost nothing that people are less honest about than their attitudes toward honesty. Few think of themselves as dishonest, and even to hint that someone is so is received as a great insult that usually elicits an angry response. So most people follow the advice of the character Jean-Baptiste Clamence from **Albert Camus’** *The Fall*: “promise to tell the truth and then lie as best you can.” In that way you satisfy your own and others’ secret desires for deception and play-acting, and other people will love you for it.

However, it is widely accepted that political leaders and the mass media lie and dissemble regularly, which, of course, they do. That is their job in an oligarchy. Today we are subjected to almost total, unrelenting media and government propaganda. Depending on their political

leanings, people direct their anger toward politicians of parties they oppose and media they believe slant their coverage to favor the opposition.

Trump is a liar. No, Obama is a liar. And Hillary Clinton. No, Fox News. Ridiculous! – it's CNN or NBC. And so on and so forth in this theatre of the absurd that plays out within a megaplex of mainstream media (MSM) propaganda, where there are many shows but one producer, whose overall aim is to engineer the consent of all who enter while setting the different audiences against each other. It is a very successful charade that evokes name-calling from all quarters.

In other words, for many people their opponents lie, as do other people, but not them. This is as true in personal as well as public life. Here the personal and the political converge, despite protestations to the contrary.

Sartre and Bad Faith

Lying and dissembling are ubiquitous. Being lied to by the MSM is mirrored in people's personal lives. People lie and want to be deceived. They choose to play dumb, to avoid a confrontation with truth. They want to be nice (Latin, *nescire*, not to know, to be ignorant) and to be liked. They want to tuck themselves into a safe social and cultural framework where they imagine they will be safe. They choose to live in what **Jean Paul Sartre** called bad faith (*mauvaise foi*): He put it as follows:

In bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth. [But with this "lie" to myself,] the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which means that I must know in my capacity as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived. (*Being and Nothingness*)

Such bad faith allows people to fabricate a second act of bad faith: that they are not responsible for their ignorance of the truths behind the government's and corporate media's lies and propaganda, even as the shades of the prison house ominously close around us and the world edges toward global death that could arrive in an instant with nuclear war or limp along for years of increasing suffering.

Those of us who write about the U.S.-led demented wars and provocations around the world and the complementary death of democracy at home are constantly flabbergasted and discouraged by the willed ignorance of so many Americans. For while the mainstream media does the bidding of the power elite, there is ample alternative news and analyses available on the internet from fine journalists and writers committed to truth, not propaganda. There is actually far too much truth available, which poses another problem. But it doesn't take a genius to learn how to research important issues and to learn how to distinguish between bogus and genuine information. It takes

a bit of effort, and, more importantly, the desire to compare multiple, opposing viewpoints and untangle the webs the Web weaves. We are awash in information (and disinformation) and both good and bad reporting, but it is still available to the caring inquirer.

The problem is the will to know. But why, why the refusal to investigate and question; why the indifference? Stupidity? Okay, there is that. Ignorance? That too. Willful ignorance, ditto. Laziness, indeed. Careerism and ideology? For certain. Upton Sinclair put it mildly when he said, “It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on not understanding it.” Difficult? No, it’s almost impossible.

But then there are many very intelligent people who have nothing to lose and yet adamantly refuse to entertain alternative possibilities to the reigning orthodoxies that have them in their grip.

As do many others, I know many such people who will yes me to death and then never fully research issues. They will remain in limbo or else wink to themselves that what may be true couldn’t be true. They close down. This is a great dilemma and frustration faced by those who seek to convince people to take an active part in understanding what is really going on in the world today, especially as the United States wages war across the globe, threatens Russia and China, among others, as it [expands and modernizes its nuclear weapons capabilities](#).

Jacques Ellul on Propaganda

The French sociologist, **Jacques Ellul**, has argued convincingly that modern propaganda in a technological mass society is more complicated than the state and media lying and deceiving the population. He argues that propaganda meets certain needs of modern people and therefore the process of deceit is reciprocal. The modern person feels lost, powerless, and empty. Ellul says, “He realizes that he depends on decisions over which he has no control, and that realization drives him to despair.” But he can’t live in despair; desires that life be meaningful; and wants to feel he lives in a world that makes sense. He wants to participate and have opinions that suggest he grasps the flow of events. He doesn’t so much want information, but value judgments and preconceived positions that provide him with a framework for living. Ellul wrote the following in 1965 in his classic book *Propaganda*:

The majority prefers expressing stupidities to not expressing any opinion: this gives them the feeling of participation. For they need simple thoughts, elementary explanations, a ‘key’ that will permit them to take a position, and even ready-made opinions.... The man who keeps himself informed needs a framework ... the more complicated the problems are, the more simple the explanations must be; the more fragmented the canvas, the simpler the pattern; the more difficult the question, the

more all-embracing the solution; the more menacing the reduction of his own worth, the greater the need for boosting his ego. All this propaganda—and only propaganda—can give him. (Vintage Books Edition, Feb 1973, pp. 140, 146)

Another way of saying this is that people want to be provided with myths to direct them to the “truth.” But such so-called truth has been preconceived within the overarching myth provided by propaganda, and while it satisfies people’s emotional need for coherence, it also allows them to think of themselves as free individuals arriving at their own conclusions, which is a basic function of good propaganda. In today’s mass technological society, it is essential that people be convinced that they are free-thinking individuals acting in good faith. Then they can feel good about themselves as they lie and act in bad faith.

The Spirit of Existential Rebellion

In the wake of World War II and the complete shattering of any illusion about the human capacity for evil, there arose in Western Europe, particularly in France and Germany a “philosophy” called existentialism. More an attitude towards life rather than a formal philosophy, and with its roots going back at least as far as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in the 19th century, existentialism emphasized individual freedom, authenticity, personal responsibility, and the need to confront the unimaginable horrors of World War II and the absurd situation in which human beings had created nuclear weapons that could obliterate the planet in a flash, as the United States had used to incinerate Hiroshima and Nagasaki. How to respond to the birth of global state nuclear terrorism became a task for the existential imagination.

The traditional belief that an all-powerful God could bring the world to an end had now been replaced by the idolatry of nuclear madmen who had hubristically violated the limits that the Greeks had long ago warned us not to exceed by making themselves into gods. Having unleashed the Furies, these false gods have created a world in which the droning sound of nuclear intercontinental missiles haunts the secret nightmares of the world. We have been living with this unspeakable and unspoken truth for more than seventy years.

Opposition to the nuclear standoff and its accompanying proxy wars has waxed and waned over the years. Dissident minorities and sometimes many millions across the globe have mobilized to oppose not only nuclear weapons but the war makers who have waged continuous wars of aggression throughout the world and have created the national-security warfare state, seemingly intent on world destruction.

However, today the sound of silence fills the empty streets, as passivity has overtaken those who oppose the growing nuclear threat and the ongoing U.S.-led wars throughout the world. The spirit of resistance has gone to sleep. The German writer Karl Kraus understood this in the days of

Hitler's rise during the 1930s when he said, "The real end of the world is the destruction of the spirit; the other kind depends on the insignificant attempt to see whether after such destruction the world can go on."

We need to somehow resurrect the spirit of resistance that will bring together millions of people across the world who oppose the death dealers. I think it is time to recall the power and possibility implicit in the spirit of existential thought.

The existential emphasis on individual responsibility and authentic truth telling in the works of various writers, including **Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Gabriel Marcel, and Albert Camus** (who didn't consider himself an existentialist but whose work emphasized many of the same themes), inspired large numbers of people in the late '50s into the mid-to-late '60s, including the international anti-nuclear movement and young American anti-war activists. Contrary to popular understanding, existentialism is not about navel gazing and hopelessness, but is about responding freely and authentically to the situations people find themselves in, which today, is the end-time that is a time when the fate of the world lies in the hands of nuclear madmen.



ALBERT CAMUS

But by the end of the 1960s this existential spirit of rebellion started to dissipate. Academic gibberish replaced this rebellious spirit with the introduction of ideas, such as post structuralism, leading eventually to postmodernist nonsense that not only refuted the need for personal responsibility, but eliminated the person altogether. By 1999 a leading exponent of postmodern rhetoric, Jean Baudrillard, was dismissing everything the existentialists emphasized. He said, "No one needs this kind of 'existential garb' any more. Who cares about freedom, bad faith, and authenticity today?"

If such words were just the ranting of an intellectual lost in a fantasy world of abstractions, that would be one thing. But they are a form of propaganda echoed throughout western societies, particularly the United States, through the repeated emphases over the decades that people are not free but are the products of biological brain processes, etc. Deterministic memes have become dominant in cultural mind control. Such postmodern abstractions have denied everything that makes possible the fight against nuclear annihilation and the warfare states' domination of western Europe and NATO, led by the United States.

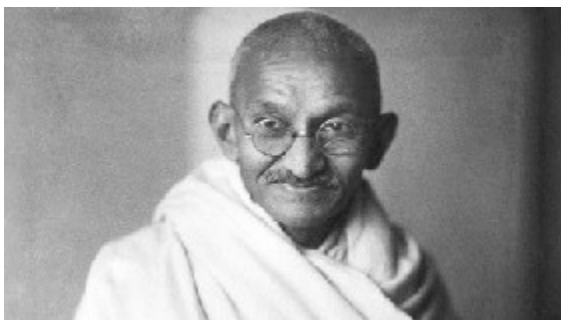
The self is an illusion. Freedom is an illusion. Responsibility is an illusion. Guilt is an illusion. Everything is an illusion. A kaleidoscopic mad world in which no one exists and nothing really matters. This deterministic and nihilistic message has become the main current in western cultural propaganda since the late 1960s and has reached a crescendo in the present day. It is responsible for the growth of passivity and denial that dominates contemporary public consciousness. It underlies the refusal of so many otherwise intelligent people to engage themselves in the search for truth that would lead to their joining forces with others to create a mass anti-war movement.

While many people think of existentialism as only an atheistic approach to existence, this is incorrect. There are atheist and agnostic existentialists, yes, but existentialism's core emphases have deep roots in the various religious traditions, such as Judaism and Christianity, etc. That is because freedom, authenticity, truth telling, and social responsibility, while often buried within the institutional structures of these faiths, lie at their core. So if we are going to resurrect the spirit of rebellion necessary to transform today's world, we need to renew the virtues that the existentialists emphasize.

The first step in this process is to ask with D. H. Lawrence the question, "How great a liar am I?"

Anti-war activist and author of the indispensable book *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters*, James Douglass, made an intriguing suggestion in another book, *Lightning East to West* (Sunburst, 1980), when he said:

The exact opposite of the H bomb's destructive purpose, but psychic equivalent of its energy, is the Kingdom of Reality which would be the final victory of Truth in history — a force of truth and love powerful enough to fuse billions of individual psyches into a global realization of essential oneness. There is no reason why the same psyche which, when turned outward, was able to create the condition for a self-acting force of over 100 million degrees of heat, thus realizing an inconceivable thermonuclear fusion, cannot someday turn sufficiently inward to create the condition for an equally inconceivable (but nature balancing) fusion in its own psychic or spiritual reality. An end-time can also be a beginning.



Gandhi said:

When the practice of the law becomes universal, God will reign on the earth as God does in heaven. Earth and heaven are in us. We know the earth, and we are strangers to the heaven within us.

While Gandhi's words are couched in religious language, their meaning can resonate with secular-minded people as well. These words speak to the power implicit in the human spirit as a whole. That power begins and builds when people of all persuasions are convinced that they must freely pursue the truth at all costs. As the poet Theodore Roethke wrote, "In a dark time, the eye begins to see."

In these very dark times—these end-times created by nuclear weapons—seeing the truth is dependent on the will to truth, and the will to truth only arises when people believe they are free to alter the circumstances in which they find themselves. This belief in freedom is at the core of all existential thought and is why we need to resurrect it today.

Edward Curtin is a writer whose work has appeared widely. He teaches sociology at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. His website is <edwardcurtin.com>.