

Science Fiction is a Humanism: The “Open Universe” Ethics of Frank Herbert’s *Dune*

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Frank Herbert’s 1965 novel *Dune* today is often described as a classic in science fiction literature and as an “ecological” novel, even the first. Yet Herbert’s concept of ecology goes beyond what we normally put into the word, for he includes “such things as psychological ecology, religious ecology, economic ecology,” all interrelated and inseparable (“The Plowboy Interview”). It is noteworthy that this feature caused the novel to be successful in two directions: in bringing ecological concerns to a large science fiction audience, and in making science itself more reputable as a literary genre, for he explores controversial themes with a sensibility rooted in ancient and modern, Eastern and Western cultures.

Herbert’s novel offered a critical analysis of many of the troubles which were experienced during the twentieth century – such as the American Great Depression, the Second World War, and the turmoil of Korea and Vietnam – while also raising awareness of issues which have since grown into issues of worldwide concern. It is ironic, then, that there still exist groups of people who believe that science fiction is all about getting away from the world, a place to escape when we are troubled into imaginative misadventure, although perhaps we should attribute some of the decline in this view to works such as *Dune*. In much the same way, the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre responded to the antagonisms of the dark day of Fascism by providing an ontological basis for a secular type of humanism. His work became popular, especially in literary and political circles, but unfortunately was taken to be more of an attack on morality in general than a critical examination of its foundations, as he had intended. In response to this reception, Sartre delivered a lecture in 1945 called *L’existentialisme est un humanisme*, wherein he battled the claims that existentialism denies the weight of moral action, invites us to dwell in nihilism, and focuses on the dark side of human affairs. The first two are patently false of all brands of existentialism, secular and denominational, while the final point is no objection at all. Not only is it revealed as a man of straw once the first two objections are analyzed, but the

true dark side of humanity is found especially in those who do not think any change is possible, and this is nearly by definition the farthest thing possible from existentialism, which is most of all a call to action. These misconceptions are similar to those raised against science fiction, which has been accused of escapism and is often seen as some kind of lowbrow culture perhaps okay for the general public, maybe fun for the kids, but not quite the inheritance some hope to pass on to future generations. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate that because the genre shares this concern for the individual and society, science fiction, too, is a humanism.

Sartre sought to show that anyone who gives attention only to the negative aspects of his philosophy thereby typically fails to appreciate the intentions of the existential approach. To reproach or deny the theory for talking about touchy subjects would be something like wanting to be rid of the flashlight when it reveals an enemy crouched in the corner: to do so we would not only be hiding something from ourselves, we would also be putting ourselves in danger. As Sartre explains, what this amounts to is that “what people reproach us with is not, after all, our pessimism, but the sternness of our optimism” (*Humanism* 359).

In the same way, Frank Herbert’s *Dune* series serves as a stellar example that science fiction has at its root a persistently voiced concern for these future generations. Eco-minded science fiction authors/American-Pacific residents Kim Stanley Robinson and Ursula K. Le Guin are among the voices of this growing chorus, pushing the point that science fiction performs a vital and critical function because it doesn’t just speculate about the future, it first and foremost informs us about our own situation. Herbert takes this idea further by emphasizing that science fiction does this so well because it questions our situation by introducing new whys, wheres, and hows of living:

Much of our lives we’re breaking camp from one set of known surroundings and heading off into an unknown *Other Place* which we hope will become just as familiar as today’s surroundings. That’s the stuff of science fiction and it is, as well, the stuff of world crises...

Neither *Brave New World* nor *1984* will prevent our becoming a planet under Big Brother’s thumb, but they make it a bit less likely. We’ve been sensitized to the possibility, to the way such a dystopia could evolve. (*Science Fiction and a World in Crisis* 75, 71)

Navigating the seas of the sun is by no means the only way to explore the dark corners of our world. Just as Nietzsche impels us to send our ships into uncharted waters (*GS* § 238),

existentialism proclaims that the key to grasping the human situation fully lies in realizing not simply the way we currently live, but in exploring the possibilities in front of us and our dynamic reactions to them:

Existential psychoanalysis seeks to determine the *original choice*....It is this which decides the attitude of the person when confronted with logic and principles....It brings together in a pre-logical synthesis the totality of the existent, and as such it is the center or reference for an infinity of polyvalent meanings. (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 728)

Both authors stress the importance of putting us in a world where all kinds of trouble may await, for although this is an invitation to danger it also allows the possibility of self-determination.

Significantly, Frank Herbert's interest in ecology magnifies this fundamental existential conflict – the tension experienced between the personal and the political – because it provides a contrast with the subjective approach of phenomenology. Sartre similarly strove to reconcile Marxist theories of political power with his own doctrine of individual responsibility. This is also a central topic of *Dune*. When Herbert states that it is “exactly right” to describe Paul's troubles as existential, one should be surprised, if at all, only that he uses the very word (Herbert, *Willis McNelly Interview*). The psychological significance of the crises Paul faces, then, is fittingly approached with the terms of Sartre outlines in *Being and Nothingness*. The comparative nature of his existential psychoanalysis invites us to look at the way Paul intentionally alters his *project* – his goals and motives – amid the new lessons and demands of his *situation* – his surroundings, the powers and the people around him.

My project here is to show how analysis of the specific situations Sartre describes in *Existentialism is a Humanism* – abandonment, anguish, and despair – can reveal a solid, critical basis for a more general modern secular humanism, one which is demonstrated in *Dune* and also discernible in a significant amount of contemporary media. Though these terms may seem to indicate a gray or dreary outlook, when given time to develop the existential approach in fact reveals quite a positive picture, by presenting the ideas of *authenticity*, *engagement*, and *acceptance* as ways of life which encourage us to continue and flourish in the face of adverse situations. Though the existential situation may seem gray or dreary at first glance, when given time to develop, it in fact reveals quite a positive picture.

At 15 years old, our hero Paul Atreides travels to the desert planet Arrakis when his father takes over mining responsibilities of the most valuable commodity in the Imperium, the life-extending awareness narcotic called spice. They are replacing their enemies the Harkonnens, but Paul's father suspects a trap, adding to the danger of a world of intense heat and storms, whose only seas are of sand. Suspicious of Harkonnen attack, the Atreides are well prepared for trouble. Paul has been trained throughout his life by his father's warmasters in combat, tactics, and weapons, and also by his mother, who has educated him the ways of political and social forces and trained him to amplify his awareness in the manner of the Bene Gesserit, a secretive female society. Yet despite their preparations, the House is struck from a blind spot not long after their arrival – betrayed by a trusted family advisor, the way is opened for a savage attack by the combined forces of the Harkonnens and the Emperor.

With his father dead and his House betrayed, Paul finds himself thrown into a world with no supreme authorities, where no *a priori* or pre-established laws are guiding his behavior; he is without any pointing hand to assign him some proper direction. Sartre's phenomenology is described existential because it is rooted in the belief "that *existence* comes before *essence*," which is to say the same thing as "that we must begin with the subjective" (*Humanism* 348). What is meant by this is that although each individual actively crafts his or her social- or self-identity in the world, these identities never precede the individual's existence. For Heidegger, the most important feature of man's existence, his being-there or *Dasein* is this quality. For Sartre, the existential struggle as formulated across national, political, temporal and religious boundaries also consists in this encounter between existence and essence: "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle" (*Humanism* 349). This is precisely analogous to Paul's position, for he is left without a home, without a place to return to. He must make a new name for himself in a new world.

Following Heidegger, Sartre calls this situation *abandonment*, which he states means only that without a supreme authority, "it is necessary to draw the consequences of [t]his absence right to the end" (*Humanism* 352). This is very much like the situation of a monotheist who experiences a lack of faith – in both cases the same basic predicament is symbolized in the loss of the Father. The existentialists hold that such an experience must be met with *authenticity* (Crowell). This idea simply states that one should strive to confront one's problems within one's

own understanding and without seeking to find some easy way out. Paul persists in this situation for some time. He is in a liminal place, uncertain of the road ahead, but caught up with bringing the lessons of his earlier teachers to bear upon the demands of surviving in unfamiliar territory. Despite having all grounds ripped out from under him, Paul uses his time wisely, relying upon his own training and natural prowess, applying his skills and knowledge in probe the nature of the political, economic, and religious forces at work on the planet, and seeking his own answers.

As Paul flees from the Harkonnens, a transformation begins to take place. The spice in the planet's food, empowered by the results of his special training, has begun to catalyze a reaction in his psyche. The spice drug affects Paul in such a way that, by bringing together a great many small pieces of knowledge and observations, he becomes aware of impending events in such a way that he seems to be able to "sample the winds of the future" (193). Even at this early stage of his transformation, he becomes aware of facts provided by no person or lesson. He sees that he and his mother will indeed find a place among the native Fremen. His abilities are not perfect however. He describes his sight as like that of man standing on a cloth fluttering in the wind – from any given point, he can at times catch glimpses of even the most distant, but often his sight is obscured as other events and individuals rise up like waves and block his view.

Soon Paul encounters Liet-Kynes, planetary ecologist and a leader of the native Fremen warriors, and Paul tells Kynes of his hopes to make Arrakis a planet fit for humans and believes this to be within his power. Siding with Paul's humanist concerns (a decision which eventually costs him his life), Kynes aids Paul with the use of a small aircraft. Pursued by a Harkonnen patrol, Paul's only chance to evade them and save himself and his mother is to fly the aircraft directly into a passing storm. Kynes explains if done properly one is able ride the proper currents within the deadly vortex and safely maneuver through what appears to be a dead-end.

Struggling through this vortex he did not foresee, Paul realizes that he had been depending upon his new faculty of prescience and in doing so neglecting his own powers of deduction and assessment. Paul understands that even though his visions do offer accurate glimpses, these represent only a small number of the possibilities which may yet unfold. This dilemma is becomes very important to Paul and is an important metaphor for anyone in a comparably dubious position. For Paul now sees that when he chooses to pursue some course of action which presents itself, he is at the same time turning away from other open paths, limiting

options, and cutting off unknown possibilities. To avoid this, he realizes that he cannot turn his decision-making over to a small number of known facts or sources of decision-making. Rather, he must persist through fear, often even move through and into it, in order to open up the possibility of the unseen:

The prescience, [Paul] realized, was an illumination that incorporated the limits of what it revealed – at once a source of accuracy and meaningful error. A kind of Heisenberg indeterminacy intervened: the expenditure of energy that revealed what he saw, changed what he saw.... And what he saw was a time nexus within this cave, a boiling of possibilities focused here, wherein the most minute action – the wink of an eye, a careless word, a misplaced grain of sand – moved a gigantic lever across the universe.... This vision made him want to freeze into immobility, but this, too, was action with its consequences. (296)

Only at this point, when he personally comes to grips with the complexity of his situation amid the many forces amassed in the universe, is Paul able to truly come to a sense of who he is and what roles he is able to fulfill, what project he hopes to undertake. This is what Sartre calls despair, for which I use the synonym acceptance, and both terms describe the awareness that one can only make true choices when one is knowledgeable of the realm of possibilities, which means being realistic but also not limiting oneself. Paul sees his position as a seed at the center of the competing forces all around him, and sees that the only possible path to overcoming the stagnant, weakening human Imperium he left behind lies in the strengths of the warrior religion of the Fremen. In order to move forward he must act authentically, engaging himself directly with the world he is in, with an eye to his true concerns, a clear knowledge of his hierarchy of values.

In order to survive, Paul and Jessica utilize Bene Gesserit techniques of manipulation to indoctrinate themselves into the Fremen religion, who expect a Messiah, a Mahdi who will lead them out of oppression. This unique combination of religious and scientific dreams left them with the prophecy of a holy man who will transform their world and lead them to a Paradise. Even the scientist Liet-Kynes, through critical of them, becomes convinced enough to send word shortly before his death to protect Paul from the Harkonnens. Yet as Paul and Jessica begin to be accepted by the Fremen, they are not welcomed by all and face a critical moral conflict. A man named Jamis contests their place among the Fremen, where a careless mistake made by one unfamiliar to this dangerous land can easily endanger a tribe. Jamis invokes a law allowing him

to face Paul in a combat to the death, to challenge Kynes' decision and the changes coming about in the wake of Paul's journey.

These two men are not mortal enemies, they are members of the same tribe, yet they are divided in their ideas and must make a choice. Here Paul begins to experience the existential situation called anguish. As he is moved to kill for the first time, for the sake of his new life and values, Paul is forced to reevaluate his old concerns, for his actions affect the future of both himself and his newfound comrades. Sartre writes that when individuals make decisions regarding their own subjectivity they at the same time make a decision regarding all individuals, for each individual occupies a unique world situation which cannot be taken away and the decisions made there expand out in all directions and affect everyone. This experience, the heaviness of a leader's every decision, is weighted further by Sartre's claim that, due to the proscriptive quality of decision-making (I choose what is good), each individual is in the moment of decision "at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind" (*Humanism* 351). Now, Sartre's move here from the particular to the universal is problematic, (What is it that in this system founded on subjectivity could entail an objective moral injunction?), and in fact raises the issue of how a Sartrean ethic can exist at all (Lopez). Yet Paul's experience accords with its most full expression, for he is torn between not only all of his own personal feelings of duty, morality, or justice, but also his new socio-political roles, which are beginning to place him at odds with his personal fears and desires.

Paul reluctantly kills Jamis in battle and even sheds tears for him at the funeral service, a sacred act on a dry planet which solidifies his own position among the Fremen. At this ritual, the belongings of the dead are dispersed among the tribe and the body's water is reclaimed and stored. In this way, the ritual forges social bonds by honoring the way each and every Fremen forms a part of the whole (the combat-test fulfills a similar role, allowing the individual the opportunity to directly contest what seems to be harmful to the tribe). As the wealth of Jamis trickles back into the tribe, the tribe is supported by the individual and in return confirms and validates the individual.

Sartre also emphasizes this point, repeatedly stating that an individual can live a fully human existence only by encountering and interacting with others. Quoting Hegel's *Propodeutik*, he writes in 1943:

The *cogito* itself . . . can be born only in consequence of my appearance for myself as an individual, and this appearance is conditioned by the recognition of the Other . . .

The Other penetrates me to the heart. I can not doubt him without doubting myself since “self-consciousness is real only in so far as it recognizes its echo (and its reflection) in another” (*Being and Nothingness* 320, 321).

Following the existential principle of proceeding from the subjective, it becomes clear that to do anything but to affirm each and every human subjectivity is in fact a mockery of individualism itself.

This also illustrates a fundamental foundation upon which the Fremen society stands. This affirmation takes existentialism beyond a concern only for the individual by showing that it also demands a concern for human societies. Like the traditions of Zen Buddhism and Druze Islam on which Herbert based them, the common wisdom of the Fremen tells us that an individual is composed of more than simply the mind, more even than the body, for the individual exists irreducibly as part of a living world full of surprises. One might say that an individual can be conceived of as a melody found amid the very hum of the universe, not to be separated but rather enhanced by how it interacts, mixes, and changes with others. Sartre means the same thing when he states, in less poetic terminology, that an individual cannot be accurately grasped or understood outside of comparisons of situation and project. Paul admits that he cannot hate the parasitic Spacing Guild, the Emperor, or even the Harkonnens. All of us, he realizes, are caught up in the same race. To quote the late comedian and social critic George Carlin:

People think nature is outside of them. They don't take in to them the idea that *we're part of it*. Nature's *in here*. And if you're in tune with it, like the Indians, the Hopis especially, the balance of life, the harmony of nature, if you understand that, you don't overbuild. You don't do all this moron stuff. It's a symphony. Everybody is in the band. It's not just one group. (*The View*)

This concept demands an ear with which one can comprehend, as Frank Herbert writes, that the highest function of ecology is understanding consequences (Herbert, *Dune*, 272, 498). Paul can no longer make decisions based only upon the value of the immediate action, he cannot afford this, for he must also take into account the effects his actions will have across the board and down the road.

Paul sees that several (by no means all) of the economic, political, religious institutions of his world have created a situation which not only holds back individuals but also prevents large-

scale social change. For this reason, Paul, after three years of struggle, at last decides to take command of the Fremen armies and lead them against the Harkonnens and the Empire. However, Paul is faced with a great final obstacle. He knows that his warriors are primed to fight, yet he sees that unleashing them will cause years of bloody crusades. Seeing no way around this crisis, Paul risks his life to ingest a heavy, dangerous concentration of the spice-drug, the awareness-narcotic, once again facing his fear and passing through it in order to open up a new universe of possibility.

When Paul awakens from the three-week trance induced by the drug, he is as if one back from the dead, and his hero's journey and his transformation are complete. Emerging from this trance, Paul describes his new awareness, stating that one cannot give without taking, cannot take without giving, for they are two sides of the same coin. Paul sees that though the crisis of the Fremen jihad will be terribly costly, it is the only remaining method for producing change, for producing new, healthy forms of life out of a humanity which has long grown weak and stagnant. This is the end result of the novel's many "ecological" analyses: the message is not that violence is good, but rather that persisting in a decadent system for the sake of safety is very, very dangerous, for it leads "ever down into stagnation" (Herbert, *Dune*, 218). Even the worst path of alternatives is preferable to one without.

Paul's triumph can be seen as an overcoming of the Bene Gesserit, the Emperor, the Harkonnens, the Spacing Guild, and even the Fremen. Paul, like Orestes of the Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, brings a new law to his people. Herbert explains this in terms of moral and ethical law, which corresponds to Paul's existential conflict: "the way the character of Paul was constructed... was the conflict between absolutes [ethical law] and the necessity of the moment [moral law]" (Herbert, *Willis McNelly Interview*). The failure of the Bene Gesserit, the Harkonnens, and the Empire can be summed up as a disregard for human life. Before the final conflict, the Empire raises the flag of profit rather than that of House Atreides, whose allegiance he broke. The Harkonnens and the Bene Gesserit, for their part, both express an exclusive elitism which keeps their concerns limited only to the welfare of their own societies. Paul reveals his overcoming of this position when he encounters the last of the Harkonnens, whom Gurney, repeating the same mistake, calls "a beast, an animal". Paul responds, bringing to mind Martin Buber: "But this being has human shape, Gurney, and deserves human doubt" (Herbert, *Dune*,

481). The failure of the Spacing Guild is, of course, upon their spice dependence. While Paul sees their error, it is significant that he continues to consume the spice, for this represents the insatiable human need for making order out of a chaotic universe:

*Nature constantly evolves, trying out its new arrangements, its new kinds of life, its differences, its interesting times, its crises. Against such movement, we attempt our balancing acts, our small sallies at equilibrium. In the dynamic interrelationships of the universe around us, we look for models upon which to pattern our lives. But that universe greets us with complexities everywhere we turn. (Herbert, *Science Fiction and a World in Crisis* 77)*

Finally, Paul illustrates for us the problem of the Fremen, whose messianic impulse has catapulted Paul to center stage. The way the Fremen have become locked into their religion has caused them to lose control over their decision making processes, becoming locked into certain ways of relating to their environment, stuck in “moral law” with no “ethical law”. Herbert sees that powerful figures like Paul (he mentions Kennedy as well) have a tendency to create large power structures which take power away from individuals. For Paul, to surpass this is to surpass his own acquired identity, and this is the struggle of *Dune Messiah*. Heroes may get the ball rolling on occasion, but in doing so events can easily get out of control. We can’t be waiting around for heroes. Whenever we do so, whenever we expect something outside of ourselves to come along and solve our problem, we disown our own power and limit our ability to respond quickly and capably to new crises.

At the novel’s end, we have the consummation of two central metaphors: the wedding, and poison. Paul at last secures his bid for power by manipulating the Emperor into giving up his daughter’s hand in marriage. It is made clear that the Emperor’s daughter is only a political marriage, and that Paul’s true chosen mate is the Fremen daughter of Liet, Chani. In this way the marriage is used to represent the bringing together of two complementary systems into a more powerful synthesis. This metaphor recurs throughout all six of Herbert’s *Dune* novels. It is significant that the metaphor of poison, also a metaphor of bringing together two systems, leads up to this. The poison is different however, for it too involves the incorporation of an alien substance, but also indicates a taking-over or a going-beyond of what is harmful in it, leaving behind only its benefits.

Friedrich Nietzsche writes that, in both social and personal efforts, we make the best cultural discoveries about ourselves when we encounter the intersection of two different

governing principles in one place and seek to bring the two together into a single meaningful relationship (*HTH* § 276). This is the meaning of the true name of spice – *mélange*, which comes from the French verb meaning ‘to mix’. The symbol of the wedding highlights a recurring theme of the *Dune* works, namely, the importance of numerous its synthetic or syncretic themes. An examination of the various religious philosophies presented in *Dune* will show this some of this, but Herbert brings a number of dualities together in powerful unions: Man/Woman, which embodies both the marital theme and the Jungian idea of the anima or *mystica unia*, for the end result of Paul’s spice trance is that he has bridged the gap between the mental capabilities of the sexes; Harkonnen/Atreides, when Paul discovers that he is the child of the union of the embodied forces of dark and light; noble/savage, in Paul’s transition to the “wild” Fremen; man/machine Mentats and thinking machines, and conscious/unconscious, for Paul is the one who continually brings the unconscious, even unavowed assumptions of his culture to light.

Philosopher Walter Kaufmann writes, “The existentialist has taken up the passionate concern with questions that arise from life, the moral pathos, and the firm belief that, to be serious, a philosophy has to be lived. . . . The existentialists have no desire simply to divert us. The story is the story of a protest and a challenge” (51, 50). Paul does more than live his philosophy. In fact, in order for him to become what Joseph Campbell calls a true hero, it is necessary that he brings his boon back to the people, and when he does so, his philosophy takes on a life through him. Once as a seed, and now as *shah* and *naib*, he sits at the center of the universe.

To repeat Sartre’s optimism, it is a great credit to human existence that we are able to confront our dilemmas and paradoxes, and even more so that in doing so we pave the way both for new problems and new people to follow us. When Nietzsche writes that he who fights monsters should take care not to himself become a monster (*BGE* § 146), we should remember that taming monsters is precisely the work of philosophy, and that this quality of daring represents a strength of the theory, not a weakness, for what here frightens the pessimist into retreat spurs the optimist – the existentialist – forward. After all, Herbert writes, “the aim of that force which impels us to live may be to produce as many different forms as possible” (*Science Fiction and a World in Crisis* 94). The starting point of these dangerous doctrines *does* send us off into the wilderness of the psyche; it *does* send us drifting in a sea of morals. But truly, not all who wander are lost, for much more is gained than lost - we are able to see new sights when we

head out into the unknown, indeed at any time when we are able turn our heads away, if even for a moment, from the patterns, the grammars and ideologies, which normally enclose our thinking.

Frank Herbert wrote:

The best science fiction and pure science assume an infinite universe where we can look up at the blue sky. That's our playing field. Eton is too confining. That sense of infinity (anything can happen) gives us the proper elbow room. But an infinite universe is a place where crimes of passion can occur where any dream can be dreamed *and* realized. The reward of investigating such a universe in fiction or in fact is not so much reducing the unknown but increasing it, opening the way to new dangers, new crises. (*Science Fiction and a World in Crisis* 80)

This message is so central to *Dune* that it is again pronounced at the conclusion of Frank's last *Dune* novel as its protagonist speeds off into "an unidentifiable universe" (*Chapterhouse: Dune* 427). Frank Herbert wanted to warn us against any kind of giving up of individuality, whether to social forces, the constraints of technology, or to the decisions of a charismatic leader. We have to make the choices that keep us looking up at this open universe, not down some narrow path, and we have to make these decisions ourselves. The specific link between science fiction and existentialism is found in the way that both approaches emphasize the fact that our greatest human creations are born of the unknown. Of course, this is only one of many ways of voicing the idea that the power of the individual to conduct the universe is inalienably rooted in the human experience itself, and can only be hidden but not taken away. Nietzsche writes that each individual is the inheritor of "the whole single line of humanity up to himself" (*TI* § 33). Of the many scientists and mystics who express the idea of such a universal unity, few have put the point so succinctly: What we do concerns not only us and those around us, but all those whom we have followed, and all who will follow us. Overcoming the anguish of life-and-death decisions by facing fear, overcoming abandonment with the institution of new, authentic laws, and accepting our crises with open hands, we all, like Paul Atreides, hold in us the seed of that humanist morality whose concerns are rooted in the affirmation of individual subjectivity that it may radiate outward into the heart of the entire human universe. And that, I think, is an inheritance we shall certainly take with us to the stars.

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