



# Ideas Have Consequences

THE PHILOSOPHERS WHO  
HAVE SHAPED OUR CULTURE

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BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

WORD *on* FIRE.

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Transcript taken from a talk given by  
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In recent years, many people have asked me: “What’s going on in our culture?” There have been all kinds of analyses—political, economic, sociological—but to understand what is going on, we have to look at this question philosophically by stepping back a bit from it. I propose four thinkers—two Germans from the nineteenth century and two Frenchmen from the twentieth century—who have been extraordinarily influential on the way we think and the way we act today. Understanding these philosophers will help us understand what’s happening in our time. Now, the four I have in mind, chronologically, are Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Michel Foucault.

Karl Marx is undoubtedly the best known of these four figures. Many of us who lived through the events of the 1980s and 1990s, with the downfall of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Bloc and so on, might be forgiven for thinking that Marx was going to be placed on the ash heap of history. But Marx has been taught now for the past fifty years in most of the academies of the West. He is undergoing a sort of revival today, especially among the young.

Marx was born in Trier in the western part of Germany in the year 1818, descended on both sides

of his family from a long line of rabbis. And you will see something of the biblical prophet, I think, in Marx and something of a religious view of things. As a young man, he studied the fashionable Hegelianism of the time and very quickly drifted into radical politics, first in Germany and also in Belgium and France. Because of his agitations, he was expelled from those three countries and eventually found his way to a more tolerant England and settled in London, where he spent the rest of his life and where he wrote his major work, the famous *Das Kapital*. If you go to the British Museum today, they will show you the desk and the chair where Marx sat and wrote *Das Kapital*. He died in London in 1883 and is buried in Highgate Cemetery there. It isn't hard to see the extraordinary impact that Marx has had throughout the 20th century and up till today, politically speaking. The first theme in Marx I will look at is his atheism.

Now, the young Marx was a devotee of a man named Ludwig Feuerbach, and Feuerbach is quite rightly called the "Father of Modern Atheism." Most atheists you read today are echoing themes in Feuerbach. Feuerbach said that we human beings have a tendency to project outside of ourselves an idealized self-understanding. I'm intelligent, but I would like to be all intelligent. I'm loving, but I would like to be all loving. I've got *some* power; if I only had all power. We take this idealized self-understanding and we project it outward

and call it God. Then we spend our pathetic religious lives petitioning this fictional character to give back to us what we gave to him. So Feuerbach sees religion as a kind of alienation, a psychological problem. Young Karl Marx takes this in, and all his life long, he remains a devotee of Feuerbach. In fact, he said famously that everyone must be baptized in the Feuerbach, which in German means “the brook of fire.” But Marx asked a further question, namely, how come we human beings almost universally think of how universally applicable religion is around the world? Why do we do it? Why do we engage in this alienating move? Marx’s extremely influential answer is because we are already so unhappy and so alienated in our economic lives. Because we are so oppressed, we invent a fantasy world to live in. Hence his famous line, “Religion is the opium of the people.” It was actually in Marx’s time in places like London that opium dens were opening up. People would retreat from the world, take opium, and live in a fantasy world. They destroy their lives in the process. Marx said that that is most human beings. They take the opium of religion to dull their sensitivity to their suffering and to invent a fantasy world.

Such is Marx’s very influential view of what religion is and why we engage in it. This gives us a clue toward the second major idea: religion is part of what Marx calls the “superstructure.” Every society from ancient times to the present day, Marx thought, has

a “substructure” that is always economic, whether it is the slave economy of the ancient world, the feudal economy of the medieval world, a serf-based economy in Russia of the 18th century, or the capitalist economy of his own time. That is the core or the substructure of any society. But the substructure throws up around itself what he calls the “superstructure.” The superstructure has one purpose: to enhance and protect the substructure. What is the superstructure? Everything else in society. For example, what is the whole purpose of politics? To protect the economic substructure. What do most politicians talk about most of the time but economic matters? What are wars fought over? Always over economic matters according to Marx. What is entertainment’s purpose? To distract us from our suffering, which is why rich people often support forms of entertainment. There, it is a bit like religion, “the opium of the people.” How about the arts? The arts are part of the superstructure. The arts are, for the most part, subsidized by wealthy people and the arts over the centuries tend to glorify those in the power structure. The substructure is protected by this elaborate superstructure. Now, the point of the Marxist is to break through the superstructure, to expose it for what it is, to break its power over us so that we can get at the economic substructure and fight to revolutionize it. But we can’t foster the revolution until we break through the superstructure.

We all know the Wizard of Oz. There is a very Marxist way to read the Wizard of Oz, where the tin woodsman stands for industry that has no heart. The cowardly lion is the military that has no real courage. The scarecrow is the farmer that has no brains. The one I find really interesting in the Marxist reading of the Wizard of Oz is the man behind the curtain, this little figure who is pulling the levers and producing this grand delusion of the Wizard of Oz. Who is the wizard? To the Marxist, that is God and religion. But Toto, the little dog, pulls back the curtain and reveals this little figure behind the curtain. That is Marx's superstructure and substructure. The idea is to break through the protective shell, get to the core, and then get the revolution going. How? By stirring up an antagonism between oppressor and oppressed. At the heart of the Marxist theory is an oppressor-oppressed relationship, the capitalist oppressing the worker and thereby deriving profit. The Marxist revolutionary has to cut through all the superstructure and then foment the class struggle that will lead to the revolution. I think you can begin to hear overtones in the way people are speaking and acting today.

The second person is Friedrich Nietzsche. I have become convinced that this 19th-century philosopher is at least as influential in our time as Karl Marx. Nietzsche, like many other modern thinkers, and this in itself is kind of an interesting theme, was the son of the



parsonage—his father was a Lutheran pastor. He was born near Leipzig in 1844. Very early on he abandoned the Christian faith, which he would have inherited from his father, and he became a student of classical philology. So the study of language became his preoccupation. Jean-Paul Sartre, who I will look at next and who was deeply indebted to Nietzsche, was fascinated with the power of language as well. In fact, his autobiography is called *Les Mots*, “The Words.” Michel Foucault was also deeply influenced by Nietzsche because language is a central preoccupation of his.

Nietzsche held a university position for a time. In fact, he was one of the youngest professors in the German system. But his rather strange personality and bad health compromised his academic career. He did most of his writing in the 1880s when he was in his forties. In 1889, he endured a kind of collapse, both physical and mental. People speculate what it was—psychological, illness, syphilis, brain issues—we don’t really know. But for the last 10 years of his life, he lived basically in seclusion and in a kind of madness. He died in the year 1900.

I am in radical disagreement with Nietzsche, but I have to say he was one of the most fecund and creative thinkers in the Western tradition. He had an extraordinarily fertile mind. He wrote somewhat in the manner of Blaise Pascal, by which I mean he

wrote aphoristically, in short little declarations and sentences. It makes reading him interesting. It is not like plowing through a text.

The first idea from Nietzsche important for today, and he is probably best known for this, is the death of God. Here he is like Feuerbach and Marx. “God is dead and we killed him.” That is the famous line he puts in the mouth of one of the characters in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, maybe his most famous line. What I want to explore is the implication he draws from this. We saw what Marx did with the nonexistence of God. What does Nietzsche do? He draws the conclusion that the foundation for meaning, truth, and value, which held sway in the West really from biblical times and from ancient times until his time, was now giving way. For most of Western thought, God serves as the foundation for objective truth and objective moral value. God is the Logos, or the supreme reason. God is the *summum bonum*, the ultimate good. And in God, all the truths and goods that we intuit about the world are finally grounded and find their justification. So if there is no God, “God is dead and we have killed him.” If there is no God, then there is no foundation for the claim that there are objective truths and objective moral values. All of that gives way. What are we left with? Nietzsche calls it perspectivism: my perspective on it, your perspective on it, his perspective, her perspective, all these millions of perspectives. In our

language today, we might say, “Well, it’s my truth and you got your truth and she’s got her truth over there.”

But there is nothing like the truth to which we are all beholden. “Well, there’s my set of values. From my perspective, I see it this way. You’ve got your set of values.” But there is no such thing as the *valuable*, the good in itself. The death of God has led to a radical relativization of truth and moral value. What does Nietzsche recommend in light of this situation? He recommends that we face this world of no objective truth and no objective value with the power of the will. In the face of this bleak situation, I assert my will to power.

Hence, Nietzsche became a harsh critic of the morality coming up out of the Christian tradition. Our morality puts a stress on pity, compassion, love, forgiveness, nonviolence. What is that in Nietzsche’s terms but a *slave morality*. It is a resentful morality. Those who have not effectively asserted their will to power, those who have been put down are now kind of urging the powerful people to be nice to us. Rather, Nietzsche says, assert your will to power. Now this does lead to a kind of Hobbesian world of clashing wills. I got mine, you got yours, and there is no really objective measure by which we can determine which of us is more right or more justified. And so you have a clash of powerful wills leading to the *Übermensch*, a

very influential idea of Nietzsche's, often translated as the "Superman" or "Overman." This is Nietzsche's hero and it is reflected, he thinks, in some of the best of the Greek and Roman myths. The great heroic figure who stands up and asserts himself and the primacy of will in the howling winds of this world of no objective truth and value. That issue of the primacy of will over reason is visible on the streets of our cities today.

So the first two philosophers are Germans from the 19th century, and the next two are Frenchmen from the 20th century. The first of the Frenchmen is probably the most famous philosopher of the 20th century. Probably most of us who took Philosophy 101 would have had some exposure to Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre was born in Paris in 1905. He studied at the *École normale supérieure*, the "Superior Normal School," which is about 10 minutes from the house that I lived in when I was a doctoral student in Paris. It is the cream of the crop of the French intellectual system. The best and brightest figures in the 20th century tended to be students at the *École normale*, what they call *normalien*. Sartre studied there then entered into the French educational system. So the graduates are typically then sent out to lycées, high schools, and then they move up through the system. Sartre did that for a time, but then eventually left it behind and became, by the 1940s and 1950s and onward, perhaps the paradigmatic public intellectual.

More than a philosopher, Sartre is also a playwright and a novelist, a social commentator, and a man of social action. His greatest work undoubtedly is *Being and Nothingness*, “L’Être et le Néant” in the French. He was involved famously in the resistance to the Nazis during World War II. Sartre died in Paris in 1980.

To understand his thought, a really good place to go is a little book he wrote in 1946 called *Existentialism is a Humanism*, based on a lecture he gave right after the war. Here the central idea of his existentialist philosophy is clearly articulated. By existentialism I mean the view that existence precedes essence. It sounds desperately abstract, but it is actually a pretty straightforward idea. By essence, Sartre means that whole system of ideas and patterns and ideals and forms by which an individual and a society typically would be governed. So what does it mean to be human? There is an essential pattern that has been presented by philosophers and theologians and the state. What does it mean to lead a good life? Listen to all these representatives of these essential forms and they will tell you what that looks like. What is the drama of life? To bring existence, my individual self, my freedom, into line with essence. Imagine a little kid trying to learn to be a responsible adult. All kinds of people will tell her, “Here’s what that looks like. Here’s the essential form of being human. Now bring your freedom, your individuality, your existence into line with essence.”

So in the classical reading, essence precedes existence, both chronologically and ontologically, meaning there is a kind of superiority to essence over existence. My life is to accept in a humility of spirit the objectivity of these essential principles. To this Sartre says, My philosophy is a Copernican revolution. My philosophy is going to turn that upside down because I say existence precedes essence. A plague on your essential forms, a plague on your idea of what the good life is. What comes first is existence, my individuality, my freedom. On the base of that freedom, I determine who I will be. I determine the form or pattern of my life. You don't tell me how to live. No institution, no society, no church tells me how to live. I will decide how to live.

In light of Sartre's little book, we can understand more clearly his big book, *Being and Nothingness*. Some may think, "Okay, nothingness. Is he a nihilist?" Well, he is a Nietzschean in the sense that he is indeed denying the objectivity of truth and moral values. But Sartre understands *le néant*, nonbeing, nothing, not as something oppressive and negative but kind of like a blank canvas. There is no objective truth or value, so I can invent it. I can paint my own beautiful picture according to my lights on the blank canvas of *le néant*. Just as, in Nietzsche, this death of God opens up this space into which the will to power can assert itself, so now, in Sartre, it opens up the space for existence, for my self-assertive freedom to say, "Here's who I am,

here's what I'm about.”

Here there are all kinds of overtones for the way an awful lot of people think today. I have said for years that what was once whispered in the cafes of Paris, this idea, is now the default position of most young people today. “Don't tell me who I am. Don't tell me what to believe. Don't tell me how to behave. I decide the assertion of my liberty, my existence, which precedes essence.” Here is a final connection: Marx was an atheist. Nietzsche was an atheist. Sartre, too, is aggressively atheist. How come? He puts it in a very pithy formula in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*: If God exists, I cannot be free. But I am free. Therefore, God does not exist.

To some degree the political structure represents essence. It tells you who you should be, how you should behave. To some degree, the family and culture represent essence to us. What is the ultimate representative, the ultimate avatar of essence? God. God, the ground of objective truth and moral value, proposes to us this essential form of life that we ought to conform to. Therefore, if God exists, Sartre says, I can't really be free. God is the ultimate limit to my freedom. Therefore, as I discover the primacy of my freedom, of my existence, I realize God does not exist. God is the ultimate threat to the Sartrean program.

And that leads me to the final of these four players, Michel Foucault. He is perhaps the least known of the four, but he is, I would argue, perhaps the most directly influential on the present-day conversation and proxies. In some ways, he represents the summing up of the three figures I have already looked at. He was born in Poitiers in 1926, closer to our own time. Like Sartre, he was a normalien, so he studied at the *École normale* and was at the very height of the French educational system. He taught for some years in that system afterward and also taught at the University of Uppsala in Sweden in the sixties.

During the sixties and seventies, Michel Foucault produced a series of books that were sensations in France, even though they were extremely complicated. Some became best sellers, and then they became very well known around the Western world. His famous studies of sexuality, madness, and incarceration were very widely read. He died in 1984 at the young age of 57.

I came to France in 1989 to begin my doctoral studies. In Paris every block has a restaurant and a bookstore. They want to feed your body and they want to feed your mind. When I first went there, practically every bookstore that I would go to was the owlish visage of Michel Foucault. He had this striking face, a bald head and little glasses and an intense expression.



His writing is dense and his thought is notoriously complicated, but the main lines of his philosophy can be articulated fairly simply. In the books that I just described, he engages in what he himself called an “archeology of knowledge.” Think of an archeological dig. You begin on the surface, what is there today, but as you dig down in the same location, you come to an earlier version of that place, and then you dig down more to an even earlier version of that city. And you go through various layers in the same spot, but yet different incarnations of that same place.

Here is the way it typically works in Foucault. Take something like sexuality. You begin on the surface and say, “What does our society today say about sexual behavior? What is acceptable? What is unacceptable?” Then dig down below that to earlier expressions of what we thought was right, wrong, acceptable, unacceptable. Go all the way down to ancient times, and what you will find, Foucault typically would say, is an extraordinary variety. What we say now is good and right and appropriate sexually was not true in ancient times. Their sexual mores were certainly not the same as ours. Apply the same thing with something like incarceration. Foucault was fascinated by that. Why do we punish certain people? What crimes are punishable? Why do we, for example, punish certain things with capital punishment? And why do we incarcerate for certain periods of time? Start today with the way we

think about those issues and then keep digging. Go back in time, go back to the 19th century, go back to the 17th century, go back to the Middle Ages, go back to ancient times. You come to all kinds of different ways of understanding it. Issue after issue, that is what Foucault typically does. Two observations. First, it is to some degree in service of the Nietzschean idea that there really is nothing like objectively true and good states of affairs. To the attitude that “this is the right way to think about sexuality” or “this is the right way to think about incarceration,” he says, “Look, we thought about them differently all throughout our history.”

So it is in service to a kind of Nietzschean perspectivism. But here is the second thing, Foucault isn't satisfied with that. He asks the follow-up question: How do you account for these differences? How come one society thinks about it this way, the next society, another way, and our society a third way? How do you explain that? His basic answer, repeated over and over again in his writings and now a master idea on the scene today, is that it is a function of power. Those who are in power will arrange things, states of affairs, and, even more importantly, will organize language in such a way as to keep themselves in power. Now I say language, but his preferred phrase is “modes of discourse.” In other words, there is a way of talking about things, whether it is sexuality, insanity, incarceration, or any other issues that is not reflective of some objective state of affairs,

some objectively right or wrong, but rather functions of the drive to power. One class of people that finds itself in power will do all they can to maintain themselves in power. They will indeed manipulate circumstances, but more importantly, they will manipulate language so as to maintain themselves in power. Foucault thinks that heterosexuals will tend to demonize homosexuals and condemn homosexuality. Why? Foucault would say, in order to maintain their own societal dominance. Males will characterize females as misbegotten or incomplete versions of males so that they, the males, might remain in charge. Whites stigmatized Blacks first as slaves and then maybe less dramatically as social inferiors in order to maintain white supremacy.

Most of this Foucault thinks is done unconsciously rather than consciously. It is like the way that we inherit a language long before we begin to speak it in any distinctive or creative way. I am writing in English now, but I inherited English with all of its rules and all of its presuppositions. So in a similar way, Foucault thought people in a given society will inherit modes of discourse. So a large part of his program is to see the play between oppressor and oppressed, to uncover these dynamics and to see how the modes of discourse we use are enforcing or propagating these forms of oppression. You might call it Nietzsche's will to power but with a greater stress placed on the injustice of the power relationship.

So how are all these figures influencing the present conversation and some of the present activity that we see? As a student and teacher of philosophy for many years, I have always resented the claim that philosophy is all these abstract ideas and has nothing to do with the real world. If there is one thing that history has proven, it is that ideas have consequences. It might take time, but the ideas I have been describing here, this farrago of ideas from these four figures, have definitely found their way into the academies of the West, and the academies have now indeed influenced several generations of people. What we see on the scene in many ways today are these ideas incarnating themselves.

What do we see from Karl Marx? I think we see perhaps above all an antagonistic social theory. For Marx, the only way profit can be derived is through some kind of oppression. The capitalist oppressing the worker. The revolution is all about calling attention to this oppressive relationship and leading, finally, to a violent revolution of the oppressed against their oppressor. The role of the Marxist intellectual is to break through the superstructure to reveal these dynamics and foster revolution. Violence for a Marxist is not a regrettable side effect. In a way, violence is the point. You want to foment the class struggle and these antagonisms.

The second major theme is the substructure and superstructure. Marx has been called a “master of suspicion.” The idea there is, “I know things look this way, but what’s really going on is something more fundamental and usually more nefarious.” So things look nice on the surface, the arts and politics and religion and so on, but what is really going on is this grubby substructure. You can hear this rhetoric and see the process that flows from it today. We need to smash through elements of the superstructure to get at the substructure.

How about from Friedrich Nietzsche? We find, clearly today at least in the minds of some, the rejection of God and the related calling into question of the objectivity of truth and moral value. Once these have been cleared out, what is left is a play of powerful forces, a clash of wills. I do a lot of work on the Internet where I try to engage in argument, appealing to something like a common set of norms and values. How difficult it is in the social media world to get a real argument going, because people have denied the objectivity of truth and value. All that is left is a play of wills.

The movies are a strong indicator of where popular culture is going. And one thing I find is that in almost every movie, the climax is the hero or heroine finding his or her own voice. There is never a question of whether it is the right voice but just, “I found who I am.” That

is the Nietzschean space. There is no objective truth or value, but there is the heroic assertion of the will.

How about for Jean-Paul Sartre? What I have often termed the “culture of self-invention,” which is rampant today, is an entirely Sartrean idea. If essence has disappeared, and existence precedes essence, my freedom, my will determines who I am. Everything from sexuality to gender, human nature, moral systems is finally just a social construct. They are the invention of people’s wills so they can be overturned by the heroic self-assertive freedom.

There was an interviewer that went to a university campus some years ago. The guy was a young man, six feet tall, maybe 30 years old. And he was asking people on campus, “If I said that I’m a woman, would you be okay with that?” And they answered, “Oh yeah, sure, as long as that’s what you claim to be.” And then he said, “Now what if I said, I’m an Asian woman, would you agree with that?” And they said, “Well, if that’s the identity that you claim, sure.” Then the last question, which did give them some pause, was, “What if I claim that I was a six foot five, Asian woman?” And they hesitated a little bit, but at the end of the day, most of them said, “Yeah, if that’s what you claim to be, that’s who you are.” That is Sartrean existentialism run amuck, the victory of existence over essence. That is on the scene today.

Finally, what can we learn from Michel Foucault, who sums up the three previous figures? I think this viewpoint today gets its deep preoccupation with language and the policing thereof. In a way, Foucault combines the antagonistic social theory of Marx with Nietzsche's great stress on power. So he sees the play of wills, of the play of oppressor and oppressed, with the oppressor using language as a prime weapon. And there is an extraordinary interest today in the way we talk and how groups perceived to be powerful use language to keep other people at bay or under control. All the talk about microaggressions and triggers and disguised sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, most of it carried by language, is right out of the Michel Foucault playbook.

Mind you, each of the four thinkers has very interesting and fascinating things to say. I'm not in a one-sided way just trying to dismiss all these thinkers, but it is clear that, generally speaking, the Church stands athwart almost all of this. How come? First of all, because we speak of God. What is one thing that all four of these thinkers, Marx, Nietzsche, Sartre, Foucault, have in common? The denial of God. If God exists as the supreme truth and value, then there is an objective ground for these things. Key to all four of these systems is a dismantling of the objectivity of truth and value. Therefore, the institution that speaks most clearly of God is going to stand athwart this point

of view and then by extension speak of objective truth and moral value. That is going to be problematic.

Marx and Foucault as well, Sartre too in his own way, have an antagonistic social theory. There is an essential struggle involved in the social order. The whole point of the Marxist revolution is to foment this class struggle. The Church proposes in its social teaching a *cooperative* social theory, not an antagonistic one. It doesn't see violence as the means of affecting social change but rather cooperation. Maybe most profoundly, the Church, as Sartre correctly saw, is the supreme representative of the precedence of essence over existence.

The drama, the adventure, is not finding my freedom and asserting it. No, the glory, the fun of life is bringing my freedom in line with these great and beautiful and compelling intellectual and moral values that stand outside of me, that draw me to themselves. I have always found Sartrean existentialism with its roots in these earlier thinkers as a deeply dull system because it takes away the compelling power of these great objective values. All I am left with is the boring little space of my self-assertive ego. No, I am much more interested, to use von Baltazar's language, in the theo-drama. Not the boring little ego-drama that I am in charge of, but the theo-drama where this world of objective value is drawing me to itself, and behind that



realm of objective value is the supreme truth and value of God.

That is not oppressive to my freedom; it awakens and invites and lifts me up in my freedom! Sartre knew that the Church stood athwart that system. We still do. Why do so many of the forces influenced by these thinkers not like us? Not because we have some little cultural hang-up. They know that Catholicism above all stands athwart these philosophical assumptions. So it is good for us to know where a lot of this ideation today comes from, to step back and look at these philosophical sources but also to claim our own great tradition as the best way to stand against it.

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