

Forrest Gump: Existentialism for the Common Man

Watching *Forrest Gump* (1994) is a profoundly moving experience. Moving because it is an emotionally stirring, delightfully humorous, and insightful look into the values of America from the 60s to the 90s. But it is also profound because it is a calculated postmodern philosophical polemic about the meaning of life. Here we have a film that is strong on both style and content, entertainment, and message. *Forrest Gump* is a true work of art. Like any work of art, the movie must be judged not only on its technical or artistic merit, but on the truth of its message. And sad to say the message of Gump is not entirely truthful. While providing an exhortation to experience life to its fullest, it does so in the context of a worldview that rejects a higher meaning or purpose to life in favor of a confusing mixture of chance, self-creation, and unknowable destiny. An existential drama for the common man.

Adapted from the novel by Winston Groom, *Forrest Gump* was written by Eric Roth and stars Tom Hanks in the title role. It explores the life saga of a simple man, Forrest Gump, who has an IQ of 75 (the lowest possible without being a walking vegetable) and goes through life changing the world without even knowing it. The movie chronicles the different generations of growing up in America. Forrest is born in the small town rural south in the 50s and goes to Vietnam in the 60s; comes back and wanders through the protest movements of the late 60s-early 70s; becomes a rich entrepreneur in the 80s and after a self searching 90s run across America, finally settles down with the love of his life. Forrest Gump is in fact an *Everyman*.

Forrest meets presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. He influences the likes of Elvis Presley, John Lennon, and Abbie Hoffman, not to mention the lives of those around him. He affects critical historical events like the start of Apple Computers and the uncovering of the Watergate burglary. He even becomes a media icon. He does all this and more, yet because of his simpleton mental status, he never realizes his impact on the world. He remains a simple man with a simple love of life and a simple desire to be with “his girl,” Jenny, played by actress Robin Wright-Penn.

Unfortunately for Forrest, Jenny had an abusive childhood and so has abandoned herself to self-destructive codependent relationships with abusive men, and loss of identity through commitment to every fashionable cause. Their lives break apart and come together periodically through the years, never quite being able to connect permanently till the end of the movie.

Throughout the picture, Forrest is surrounded by people who are striving for personal dreams and ambitions, trying to find something bigger than themselves to give meaning to their lives. A military lieutenant wants to follow his family line of dead war heroes by dying in the war himself, a fellow soldier dreams of starting a shrimp business after the war; and Jenny dreams of being famous and touching people's lives.

Not so coincidentally, none of them find their dreams and end in despair of the meaninglessness of it all. Meanwhile, our simple hero has no concept of anything bigger than his life. He achieves the so-called successes that everyone else strives for and cannot attain but doesn't even recognize his accomplishments and doesn't even care!

This powerful ironic twist of life destinies brings to mind the ancient wisdom of Solomon:

I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind...I saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise, nor wealth to the discerning, nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all. (Eccles 1:14;9:11)

Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon writes of the futility of so many people's lives striving for significance in a world that does not give it.

Which brings us to the real point behind the story of *Forrest Gump*. It is an incarnation of the ancient book of Ecclesiastes but with one simple yet crucial exception: God. Whereas Solomon looks at the absurdity of life apart from the only Big Picture that makes sense, God himself, *Gump* presupposes that there is no higher purpose to be found or known in life, including God, and therefore we must make our own destinies and meaningfulness by embracing life itself.

The Heart of the Film

This self-creation, in a nutshell, is the “philosophy” of *Forrest Gump*, and that philosophy, as explained in chapter 4 is existentialism. Existentialism seeks to replace God with man by positing man's autonomous existence in an absurd universe, a universe without transcendent meaning to make sense of experience. A universe of little pictures without a Big Picture.

Being all alone, man must “create himself” by the choices he alone makes. After all, if there is no defining standard outside of ourselves, then we ourselves become our own standard. Jean-Paul Sartre, a leading voice in existentialism put it simply that man's existence precedes his essence so

at first, he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also what he wills himself to be.¹

I have spoken with the screenwriter of *Forrest Gump*, who affirmed that he was intending existentialist ideas through the story. I want to focus on just two important results of these beliefs as suggested through *Gump*. The first is its theme of chance and destiny, and the other is its message of rejecting any higher purpose in life than life itself.

Chance and Destiny

From the opening shot of a feather drifting randomly in the breeze to the closing shot of the same feather returning to its frail floating, *Forrest Gump* attempts to address one of

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Essays in Existentialism* (New York, N.Y.: Citadel, 1993), p. 36.

the primary questions of existence: Does life happen by chance or destiny? At the end of the story, Forrest talks to the grave of his beloved and muses, “I don’t know if we each have a destiny or we’re all just floating accidental-like in the breeze.” The previous two hours of film explored the absurdity of life by showing that what at first appears to be chance occurrence seems to all fit together in the end and what appears to be meaningful destiny turns out to be chance.

Forrest’s life is filled with random tragedies that turn out for the better in the end. He is born with a spine problem that forces him to wear leg braces and get teased by the kids. But this brings out his miraculous ability to run, which gives him a future. A tragic hurricane helps Forrest’s shrimping business become an industry overnight, while at the same time destroys everyone else’s in the area. Throughout the entire movie, Forrest has no intent or purpose yet achieves what most would consider a grand destiny: Wealth, fame, influence.

Because of his amazing running ability, Forrest leads his college football team to become All American while never even realizing what he is doing on the field. After personally meeting four presidents, his response to such an envied good fortune is, “The real great thing about meeting the president of the United States is the food they give you.” While running across America, he draws a crowd of people after him because he seems to be “a man with a purpose, someone who’s got it all together, who’s got it all figured out.” Yet we know he has no conscious reason or goal at all. The masses look for hope, a higher purpose, and find it where none exists. A true reluctant Messiah myth. People will create messiahs out of nothing because of their need to follow something outside of themselves.

Lieutenant Dan, Forrest’s counterpart and friend, has a breakdown because he has convinced himself that “We all have a destiny. Nothing just happens. It’s all part of a plan.” And yet, his hoped-for destiny of a glorious death on the battlefield is botched when Forrest rescues him!

After all these chance events turned fortuitous, and purposeful events turned arbitrary, Forrest concludes his monologue at his beloved’s grave with, “I don’t know if we each have a destiny, or we’re all just floating accidental-like in the breeze. But I think maybe it’s both. Maybe both is happening at the same time.”

This synthesis of chance and destiny is what the movie is all about. So much of life seems to happen without purpose, or as the bumper sticker in the movie says, “S_ _ _ Happens,” and, “As Momma always said, ‘Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re goin’ to get.’” Yet at the same time, “it’s all part of a plan,” *a plan that we cannot know, so we must make our own destiny.*

No Higher Purpose Than Ourselves

Another key to understanding *Gump* is its rejection of any knowable higher purpose to life. One of the main tenets of existentialism is its insistence that the Universe is absurd and there is no higher meaning that can be found outside of man’s experience. There are no universal absolutes to guide us or shape us— only our personal particular experiences of life. There is no Big Picture, only little pictures; no universals, only particulars; no

ultimate meaning, only existence. Therefore man's search for meaning in a higher purpose will always end in agnostic despair as does Jenny's and Dan's.

Both Dan and Jenny contemplate suicide because of their despair in facing the meaninglessness of their lives. Sartre called this "Nausea," a sickening encounter with Nothingness.² Søren Kierkegaard called it "the sickness unto death," "angst" or "dread."³ It relates to facing death and recognizing that all we strive after ultimately amounts to nothing. Camus' myth of Sisyphus, eternally rolling the stone, forever accomplishing nothing.

As the masses purposefully follow an aimlessly running Forrest, so we clamor after the illusion that we can find purpose outside of ourselves. But there is nothing to be found outside of ourselves. We are ultimately alone and without an external reference point to define us. We must become our own reference point. Since man is radically free, then he has no nature (being) which defines how he acts, but rather how he acts defines his nature. So Forrest repeats throughout the film in response to people thinking he is stupid by nature, "Stupid is as stupid does." Or as Sartre would say, "I am what I create,"⁴ or "Ignorance is imposed by action."⁵

The problem with proposing that there is no higher purpose than our own experience is that it degenerates into the irrelevancy of self-refutation. Without a higher purpose behind our experiences, those experiences are ultimately without meaning. Without universals to give meaning to life, the particulars of existence can have no meaning. Without a Big Picture, little pictures cannot make sense. *Experience* as a concept is itself a universal, so without universals, even our experiences cannot be accounted for *as* experiences, but only random subjective perceptions without value or intelligibility. The universe simply cannot exist without universals through which the particulars of life can be experienced or understood.

Imagine the insanity of a world without love, mercy, justice, beauty, goodness, logic, rationality, and on and on. These are all universals that give the particulars of our experience meaning. Without them and without God, the ultimate standard, as Creator and Sustainer, nothing has any ultimate value. Existence reduces to arbitrary valueless activity.

In the existential viewpoint, even virtue as a higher purpose is an illusion. Forrest's heroism of saving a handful of his platoon in Viet Nam was not really heroism at all but Forrest's attention span being randomly diverted from his intent to find his fellow platoon-mate Bubba! Since Forrest had no concept of wealth, all his vast charitable gifts of money were simply a kid sharing what he did not value. Contrary to Forrest's random acts of kindness, in reality, there is no courage without fear, and there is no giving without loss.

² Jean-Paul Sartre *Nausea* (New York, N.Y.: New Directions, 1964).

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton, 1980).

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Truth and Existence* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago, 1992), p. 57.

⁵ *Ibid.* page 68.

God's Place in *Forrest Gump*

With all our hopes for finding a higher meaning to life dissolved into unattainable illusions of despair, and the guiding value that we must make our own destiny, the question must be asked, "What place for God, the ultimate Higher Meaning?"

God does make a few appearances in the movie, but ultimately he is more of a personal issue than an objective reality. One of many subjective ways to redemption, rather than objective truth for all mankind.

Lieutenant Dan's story is the one that deals with God. He seeks a heroic destiny in wartime death, but instead survives with the crippling loss of both his legs, leaving him destitute and miserable. When Forrest visits him on New Year's Eve, he expresses bitterness at God for promising the impossible hope of walking down streets of gold. His anger at God for not giving him his destiny reaches climax during the hurricane, which becomes a battle of control between the two of them. As torrential rains pound the shrimping boat, Dan climbs the mast, shaking his fist at God with bravado and screaming in total defiance. But God wins.

Dan is broken and "gets baptized" by jumping into the water after accepting life as a worthy thing to be lived, rather than heroic death. Forrest attributes Dan's resignation to his fate as "making his peace with God." Dan's redemption was in giving up his idea of destiny as death to God's idea of destiny as life.

To be fair, there is room for God in *Gump*. But is this God knowable? Is he really there or is he just "silent," an unsubstantiated belief? When asked by Dan if he's found Jesus, Forrest replies, "I didn't know I was supposed to be looking for him." For if God really existed and we needed to be "saved" by him then would we not at least know that we should be looking for him? The implication is, of course, that God is not a universal reality but a relative personal belief. If that's your truth, then fine. You can find existential redemption through "God" as well. God is a subordinate category under our power of will.

Forrest's mom says "God is listening, but I have to help myself," and, "I happen to believe that you make your own destiny. You have to do the best with what God gave you." This Deistic "God-helps-those-who-help-themselves" philosophy is no different from saying, "There is no God, we must help ourselves." In both cases, the bottom line is that *we help ourselves*. It reduces God to an excuse for what we do not understand and a rationalization of our personal desires.

There is a place for God in *Forrest Gump's* existentialism: as a personal subjective belief that is relative to the individual. God as you see him. In the end, even God is not truly God because he has to reckon with the equally powerful *chance* that also operates on people's lives. As pointed out above, with both "God" and chance as equally ultimate, they cancel each other out and you end up doing what seems right in your own eyes anyway, making your own destiny. There is no effectual difference between this kind of God allowed in *Forrest Gump* and an imaginary one that does not exist at all.

Redemption Through Self-Actualization

The problem with the philosophy of existentialism as depicted in the movie is that it comes so close and is yet so far from true redemption. As with any inadequate worldview, it expresses partial truth. In its honesty, it understands to a limited extent the nature of man's problem. It asks the right questions, but fails to provide an adequate answer.

This view understands the diagnosis revealed in Solomon's ancient wisdom: "In many dreams and in many words there is emptiness" (Eccles 5:7), but ignores the prescription: "rather, fear God."(v. 7b). It agrees with Solomon's conclusion that "There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good" (Eccles 2:24), without the context: "This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God"(v. 24b).

When the existentialist says that man is responsible for his life, he does not mean that man is morally accountable for his behavior, but that man is literally totally responsible for what he becomes, good or bad. No thanks to any outside forces. As Sartre put it, "Those who seek to hide from themselves the wholly voluntary nature of their existence and its complete freedom... with deterministic excuses I shall call cowards."⁶

If freedom means there are no external standards, then Sartre was right when he concluded that there is no value difference between helping a little old lady across the street or running her down with your car. But without an ultimate universal (God) as a starting point, Man's existential experience itself would not even be knowable in order for him to give it meaning. The second he begins to give an experience his own meaning, he is assuming the objective existence of something he defines as "an experience." To label as "experience" that which is already defined as "random, chance events," is to attribute to those random events something that the existential worldview already denies—namely, order. That order presupposes a universal standard that transcends man and destroys radically free self-creation.

And herein lies the grand illusion of proposing that life is both absurd and random as *Forrest Gump* does. Something and its opposite cannot both be true at the same time. As the law of non-contradiction demands, a statement and its antithesis cannot both be true. It cannot be true that I exist and I do not exist at the same moment. For if this is the case, then there is no truth at all because there is no distinction between true and false. Worse yet, all language is destroyed as meaningless and the existentialist cannot even express his worldview because communication assumes distinction of meaning between words, and if there is no distinction of meaning, then words mean nothing.

Chance and destiny, randomness and determinism, accident and purpose are all words that are exclusively opposite of one another. Life simply cannot be both destiny and chance. To suggest so would have the ultimate effect of negating man's responsibility to objective standards of behavior. And perhaps this is what existentialism is all about, rationalizing one's selfish desire to control one's life without moral consequence. The search for ultimate freedom without ultimate responsibility.

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1948), p. 52.

Whereas *Forrest Gump*'s existentialism accurately expresses man's state of vain existence while offering redemption through self-creation, Solomon shows that the inescapable origin of that sense of vanity is the negation of God, the ultimate higher purpose, the only Creator. The basis, then, for true meaning of experience in the here and now becomes a rooting in the eternal hereafter.

For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God... Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things. (Eccles 5:7; 11:9)

And therein lies sanity for the absurd man. Moral responsibility in the face of eternal judgement, not self-creative responsibility in the face of nothingness.

The Way of Discernment

As pointed out earlier, critics of movies often cite excessive sex and violence as being the most destructive elements in film. But perhaps an even deeper influence on the way we look at reality may be the philosophical worldview that underlies them.

Now it is true that not all movies are philosophical polemics like *Forrest Gump*, but all movies do communicate values. And it is true that most viewers will not walk away from watching *Gump* thinking of themselves as philosophical existentialists. But they will be affected, if they are not discerning. Because the philosophy is embodied in the story, incarnate in the characters and the choices they make.

The mythology of *Forrest Gump* affects the emotions and spirit of a person who is not using his mind. The genius of *Gump* lies in its warm humorous entertainment that simultaneously peddles the existential mythology that there are no universals to be known and man in his alleged autonomy is his own god, creating his reality in an ultimately absurd universe. Life should then be merely experienced to find its meaning.

And so people are encouraged to turn in to themselves and away from the only "big picture" that can give their "little pictures" lasting value: The Living God.