Existentialism

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Since it gained currency at the end of the second world war, the term "existentialism" has mostly been associated with a cultural movement that grew out of the wartime intellectual atmosphere of the Left Bank in Paris and spread through fiction and art as much as philosophy. The theoretical and other writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and Frantz Fanon in the 1940s and 1950s are usually taken as central to this movement, as are the sculptures of Alberto Giacometti, the paintings of Jean Dubuffet, and the plays of Samuel Beckett from this time. Existentialism is frequently viewed, therefore, as an aesthetic movement rooted in certain philosophical thoughts and supplanting surrealism at the centre of European artistic fashion. This is the existentialism of black clothes and jazz clubs, coffee and cigarettes.

The term has also been applied retrospectively to various thinkers whose concerns and ideas chime with this movement. Most notably, the nineteenth-century philosophers Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche are usually taken to be the key early existentialists. One a devout Christian, the other an ardent atheist, these thinkers are united by their emphasis on the individual rather than society as a centre of concern and value. Since there are similar themes in the work of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Gabriel Marcel, Karl Jaspers, and more controversially Martin Heidegger, these thinkers are also often found in surveys of existentialism. Beyond this core, many other candidates have been named. Some scholars find existentialist themes and ideas in the works of William Shakespeare, for example, and many Christian theologians have argued for an existentialist understanding of certain passages in the New Testament.

This trend for admitting thinkers into the existentialist fold regardless of whether they would have described themselves in this way seems to have been started by journalists and critics but very swiftly endorsed by Sartre himself in his lecture *Existentialism Is A Humanism* delivered in October 1945 and subsequently published as a book. After complaining that this term being used to describe his work was so nebulous as to be meaningless, he went on to contribute to the confusion: he described certain Christian thinkers as existentialists but then claimed that existentialism is a form of atheism, and he enlisted Heidegger as a fellow existentialist only for Heidegger to publicly repudiate the label a couple of years later in his "Letter on Humanism". Camus also refused to be classified as an existentialist, in an interview in 1945, on the grounds that his thought had little if anything in common with Sartre's, though in his case Sartre had not said otherwise and he was concerned to counter only the media image of his work (Camus 1968: 345).

Rather than try to define existentialism with reference to the concerns and ideas of such a diverse collection of thinkers, a set whose membership is anyway contentious, it seems wiser to follow the lead of Camus and Heidegger and understand the term primarily as a name for Sartre's philosophy as he expounded it in that lecture and in *Being and Nothingness*, which the lecture seeks to defend. That lecture is, after all, the earliest text in which a leading proponent of this purported movement attempts to define the term. (Sartre had accepted the label for the first time a year before in a brief article entitled "A More Precise Characterization of Existentialism" in the underground newspaper *Action*, but did not there define it.)

Taking this as our model of existentialism, we can understand the works of others, and indeed the later works of Sartre himself, to be more or less existentialist according to the degree to which they fit its contours. Before turning to Sartre's early philosophy, however, we should consider the relation between *existentialism* so understood and the broader notion of *existential philosophy*. Drawing this distinction will help us to see quite why such a diverse array of cultural products have been described as existentialist and to see the conceptual connection between the two terms distinguished.

Existential philosophy is concerned with the kind of existence we have, as opposed to the kind of existence had by rocks, plants, and animals. Many existential philosophers reserve the very word "existence" for the way in which we exist, using "being" as the more general term to capture the existence that rocks, plants, animals and humans have in common. Awkward though it sounds in English, according to this usage humans *exist* but, so far as we know, all other things merely *are*. This is not to rule out the possibility

of discovering another species in the universe that exists as we do, just to say that no such species has yet been found. Existential philosophy is the attempt to articulate the nature of this existence.

Central themes of existential thought therefore include the reliability of our everyday views of ourselves and other people, the relation between objective facts and subjective experience, the significance of the temporality and mortality of life, the basic nature of relationships between people, and the role of society in the structure of the individual. The urge to consider these issues is not confined to any particular phase or movement in intellectual history, of course, be it wartime Paris or any other. These are clearly perennial questions arising from the very human condition they ask about, though as William Barrett makes clear in his masterly study of existential thought, *Irrational Man*, their sense of urgency is heightened and lessened by historical circumstances and the framework within which they are addressed varies with other aspects of culture.

This list of central themes makes clear, moreover, that existential thought is not another branch on the philosophical tree along with metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, and politics, but rather a lens through which these topics can be viewed. The nature of reality and the limits of knowledge are important, according to this approach to philosophy, only insofar as they enlighten us about the structure of our own existence. The nature and significance of beauty and art cannot be understood without reference to the sort of existence had by those who find pleasure and solace in them. How we should treat one another and organise our societies depends upon the kind of things we all are.

Existential philosophy encompasses all the classic philosophical problems, therefore, but with the distinctive twist that they should be understood in relation to a single overarching question: what is it to exist as a unique individual person? In asking what it should profit a person to gain the whole world and lose his own soul, Jesus was posing the question at the heart of existential thought, as was Hamlet when he pondered whether to be or not to be, but it is a mistake to categorise Jesus or Shakespeare as existentialists purely on these grounds. Focusing on the human individual in this way, moreover, has led many existential thinkers to see the social and material worlds as at best dimensions of the individual, at worst a threat to each of us. This explains why artworks that focus on isolated and lonely figures, such as many of Giacometti's more famous sculptures or the classic movies of the film noir genre, have often been described as existentialist: they fit a standard conception of existential thought, a notion often conflated with existentialism.

Existentialism, as Sartre defines it, is an ethical theory. It is a form of humanism, which means that it takes humanity as the central ethical value. But it is distinguished from other forms of humanism in the way it understands humanity. What is valuable is not simply the empirical fact of human existence. Our ethical aims should not be to increase our numbers, lengthen our lives, satisfy our desires and preferences, or improve on our achievements. What distinguishes existentialism – or, more precisely, existential humanism – as an ethical theory is its view that all that is intrinsically valuable is the nature or structure of our existence, the kind of thing we are. The relation between existentialism and existential philosophy therefore justifies the similarity of the two terms: existentialism seeks the flourishing of the human individual, where this is

understood as the unfettered realisation of our most fundamental nature (see Sartre 2007: 52-3).

Existentialism therefore has much in common with the ethical theory propounded by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Both see the aim of ethics as promoting human flourishing, and both understand this as requiring that we first ascertain the underlying nature of human existence. Aristotle argues that we are essentially rational animals, so sees flourishing in terms of the good exercise of our rational faculties, and understands ethical virtue as the set of dispositions manifested in this exercise (2002: bk 1 ch 7). This is the central inspiration for the tradition that has become known as virtue ethics, according to which the centre of our ethical concern should not be the intentions with which individual actions are performed or the consequences of those actions but rather the character traits that we possess and that are manifested in our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and actions.

The ethical theory Sartre propounds is along these lines. What matters is that we possess and express the single overarching virtue of authenticity: the disposition to recognise and promote what is most genuinely our own, the fundamental nature of our existence (see 2007: 50-1). Any theory that places authenticity at the centre of ethical value can fairly be described as a form of existentialism, whether or not it concurs with Sartrean existentialism on the fundamental nature of human existence. This does not include Aristotelian ethics, however, since authenticity is primarily a matter of *recognising and promoting* the deep structure of humanity wherever it is found, whereas for Aristotle flourishing consists primarily in *manifesting it eminently*.

Sartre's argument for authenticity being the cardinal virtue takes us deeper into his philosophy. The values and significances that we find in the world, he argues, do not exist independently of our awareness, but rather reflect our own aims and purposes, themselves a filter through which we see the world. It might seem to us that our desires simply react to what is objectively good and bad, attractive and unattractive, but in fact things seem good, bad, attractive, or unattractive only because of the goals we are already pursuing. As soon as we realise this, Sartre thinks, we can no longer choose to pursue any goal without also promoting the underlying cause of the significance that goal has. Since our goals are freely chosen and pursued, this means that once we understand this aspect of our existence we cannot value anything without also valuing "freedom as the foundation of all values" (2007: 48).

Just how this argument is supposed to work is a matter of some controversy. It is clearly alluding to a similar argument given by Immanual Kant in section II of his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant argues that the value we find in most of our goals is really only relative to our needs and desires, but since we do take our endeavours seriously we must therefore ascribe intrinsic value to whatever lends relative value to our goals. Since our goals are grounded in our rational nature, the argument runs, we cannot consistently value anything unless we also admit that rational nature itself is intrinsically valuable. Hence the injunction to treat rational creatures always as ends and never as means. Where Kant talks about rationality, it might seem, Sartre has simply substituted freedom.

These two arguments seem to face the same objection: surely the conclusion is, at best, that I should value *my own* rationality or freedom as the source of my other values, not

that I should value rationality or freedom wherever it is found. Controversy over just how each of these arguments should be understood is partly generated by the attempt to obviate this objection. But the parallels between these arguments should not be overplayed. They occur in quite different contexts, giving them quite different meanings. Kant is presenting a normative account of practical reason, of the ways in which we are rationally required to think. Sartre, on the other hand, seems to be making a psychological claim about what it is to recognise the actual relation between our values and the goals we pursue. It would be misleading, therefore, to describe Kantian ethics as a form of existentialism, despite Sartre's obvious debt to Kant.

Rather than follow Kant's emphasis on rationality, as we have seen, Sartre understands our values to be rooted in our freedom. Exactly what he means by this is often misunderstood. The confusion is largely due to his use of the language of choice. He describes our values as freely chosen, the ways in which we see the world as freely chosen, and even the ways in which we think about and emotionally respond to the world as freely chosen. He is often taken to be saying that when we confront any situation, we choose there and then how we will construe it, how we will feel about it, and what to think about it.

Such a theory would be palpably false. Although it is true that we can have a certain amount of voluntary control over how we see certain images, such as the famous duck-rabbit picture, such control is remarkable precisely because we usually understand the things around us without making decisions. Our emotional responses similarly seem to us utterly spontaneous: we are pleased or angered directly and immediately by the situation as we see it, not after some consideration about how to feel. And an obvious

regress threatens any theory that claims that we do not make a decision without first deciding how much weight to assign to each consideration. What is more, this idea that we simply choose how to see things and think and feel about them sits uneasily with other key aspects of Sartre's early philosophy, such as his famous view that we generally hide our freedom from ourselves, and the idea that we might need the help of a psychoanalyst to uncover our true motivations.

Sartre uses the language of choice to emphasise his claim that the ways in which we see things, the relative importance each consideration has for us when we deliberate, and our emotional responses to events are all determined by the projects that we have adopted and that we can change. Such projects may have become so habitual that it is no longer obvious to us that we are pursuing them, or their very pursuit might even require that we do not acknowledge that we are doing so, but they are projects we have chosen and can revise nonetheless. The deepest roots of our perceptions, thoughts, and feelings, therefore, are neither fixed facts about us due to our genetic inheritance or early childhood nor the mechanical effects of our material and social environment, but rather the goals that we choose to pursue and can choose to abandon. Sartre allies this teleological understanding of character with an indeterminist theory of freedom. Nothing can determine which goals we adopt, according to Sartre, and nothing can determine whether we continue to pursue a given goal or abandon it altogether. Freedom is radical in the sense that it is freedom over the deepest roots of our behaviour, and causal determinism is incompatible with this freedom.

Despite his own protestations to the contrary, these two aspects of Sartre's account of the structure of human existence seem to be separable. We can agree that the kind of

person you are is determined by the goals that you are freely pursuing without also agreeing that your freedom over these goals is incompatible with determinism. Perhaps one can revise or abandon a specific goal only if one is sufficiently motivated to do so by one's other projects. Some philosophers think this would not really be freedom, since our initial goals would come about without our control and then ultimately determine whatever else we did. Others argue that it is rather Sartre's indeterminist picture that leaves our fates beyond our control, by leaving entirely to chance whether or not we continue to pursue a given project at any given moment. This is just an application of the general debate over the compatibility of freedom and determinism, however. Wherever you stand on that issue, therefore, you can still agree with Sartre on the role of our projects in determining the ways in which we see the world, think and feel about it, and thereby behave in it.

Thus we can classify as a form of existentialism any philosophical theory that broadly agrees with Sartre on the role our goals play in our overall outlook, regardless of whether that theory also embraces an incompatibilist notion of freedom. One way to read Nietzsche's philosophy, particularly as set out in *Beyond Good and Evil*, takes him to support the belief that we each see the world through the lens of our projects that in turn manifest the unruly will-to-power that underlies everything including ourselves. Nietzsche would therefore be recommending an existentialist theory of our relation to the world, albeit one that does not include an indeterminist freedom. This reading is, however, contentious. Rival scholarship contends that Nietzsche only employs this view as part of a dialectical argument for rejecting the entire enterprise of metaphysics and epistemology within which it might gain any sense or significance. If this is right, then

it seems that Nietzsche has very little in common with Sartre and so, existential though his thought is, perhaps it should not be understood as existentialist at all.

Sartrean existentialism, the paradigmatic form of existentialism, is the ethical theory that we ought to recognise that our values are rooted in the projects we freely pursue and so promote the freedom of all to pursue their projects. This is not, however, simply the liberal view that each person should be allowed to pursue whatever they see as good so long as this does not infringe on the similar freedom of someone else, but rather the more stringent view that the only acceptable goals are those pursued "in the name of freedom" (2007: 50). Opponents have argued that this is inconsistent. If values are rooted in projects, the argument runs, there cannot be any objective ethical injunction at all: why should anyone value authenticity unless they are already pursuing projects that generate this value? This is the charge that existentialism is at best a form of moral relativism, at worst a form of nihilism according to which nothing really matters at all.

The lecture *Existentialism Is A Humanism* was partly aimed at rebutting these criticisms, but few have found the responses Sartre gave there convincing. He claims that any attitude other than authenticity is based on falsehood and inconsistency (2007: 47-8). The first of these seems obviously right: authenticity is, after all, supposed to be the recognition of the actual nature of human existence. The second seems to rest on the idea that it is inconsistent to value anything without valuing the freedom in which that valuing is itself rooted. But even if we grant that this is so, we might well ask what is wrong with falsehood and inconsistency. Within the account of valuing that Sartre has given, that is, we might ask why someone has to care about truth or consistency.

To be fair to Sartre, we ought to take seriously his comment that to give a popular presentation of a philosophical theory is to "agree to dilute our thinking in order to make it understood" (2007: 55). We should understand his talk of truth and consistency as summarising an argument presented in full elsewhere. What he condemns as false and inconsistent is bad faith (see 2007: 47-8). So we should look more closely at his theory of bad faith, detailed in *Being and Nothingness*, to see just what is so bad about it. Bad faith is the project of deceiving ourselves about the nature about our existence. Since a deceiver must know the truth being hidden from the deceived, and must also hide the intention to deceive, it is difficult to see how deceiver and deceived could be the same person. Sartre's attempt to address this issue is one of his most widely discussed contributions to moral theory. But we need not consider it here, since we are looking for a reason to prefer the correct view of ourselves irrespective of how our incorrect views might come about.

Quite which incorrect views Sartre thinks we prefer is a matter of debate. Some commentators find in his writing two forms of bad faith: one in which we deny our freedom, another in which identify wholly with it. We consider our outlook and behaviour to be strictly determined by our genetic inheritance, childhood experiences, or social position, on this view, or we deny that these form any part of ourselves. But this reading does not sit well with Sartre's claim that the recognition of our freedom, and the responsibility it brings with it, is unpleasant. The desire to escape the anguish of this recognition is, he tells us, "the basis of all attitudes of excuse" (2003: 64). Other commentators therefore claim that there is only one form of bad faith in Sartre's philosophy: seeing one's outlook and behaviour as rooted in a fixed nature determined by inheritance, upbringing, or socialisation.

However that dispute is to be resolved, it seems that Sartre has not given an account of what is wrong with bad faith, at least by the time of the popular lecture, unless we take his theory of interpersonal and social relations to provide that account. This theory is the subject of further exegetical disagreement. Some read it as the pessimistic view that we can only ever misunderstand one another and must inevitably struggle to dominate one another. Certain limitations on the ways in which we see the world mean, according to this reading, that we cannot avoid categorising other people in ways that they find alienating, but the only way in which they can react against this is to constrain us in turn in categories that we find alienating. A struggle for supremacy is therefore built into the very fabric of human relations: each individual wants control of their own image and this requires their control over the images of those around them. The famous line from the end of Sartre's 1943 play *Huis Clos* – "Hell is … other people!" – is taken to encapsulate this pessimism.

Some commentators argue that the limitations on our views of one another that lead to this conflict are not the necessary result of the structure of consciousness, according to Sartre, but are rather the manifestation of our contingent bad faith. The claim that "conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others" (2003: 386), therefore, is not the claim that human relations are necessarily conflictual, but that bad faith condemns us to such relations. This certainly seems to be the view that Sartre held soon after the publication of *Being and Nothingness*. In his work on anti-semitism, written in 1944, he portrays bad faith as the root of all racial hatred: it is "fear of the human condition" manifested in a social outlook (1948: 54; see also 71n). According to this reading of

Sartrean existentialism, therefore, what is wrong with bad faith is the impact it has on our relations with other individuals and with society at large.

For someone happy to live in perpetual struggle for domination, of course, this consequence of bad faith would provide no reason to abandon it. So if this construal of Sartre's ethical theory is to make sense, it must involve the idea that nobody could be happy with a life led in bad faith. To remain consistent with the claim that our values are rooted in our projects, and that these in turn are chosen and changeable, we cannot appeal to any necessarily held values that are frustrated by the life of bad faith. The argument must rather be that bad faith restricts the goals that one can pursue in one's relations with other people while at the same time ensuring that none of the goals that can be pursued can actually be achieved. Sartre's lengthy discussions of personal relationships, particularly his discussion of sexuality, have precisely this flavour: each project is frustrated, leading inevitably to a new project that it is in turn frustrated.

Beauvoir characterises existentialism this way in her essay "Existentialism and Popular Wisdom", published a couple of months after Sartre gave his famous lecture. The touchstone of existentialism, she explains, is the idea that we are better off if we accept that people do not have unchangeable natures than we are if we continue to pretend that they do. After attacking the popular but pessimistic view that humans are by nature self-interested and that the fate of each of us is determined by the fixed facts of our personalities, she proclaims that the aim of existentialism is to save us "from the morose disappointments and sulking that [this] cult of false idols brings about" (2004b: 216).

There is quite some scholarly discussion over the relation between the philosophies of Beauvoir and Sartre. As lifelong intellectual as well as personal companions since they met as students in 1929, they must have influenced each other immeasurably through critique of one another's writings and through casual conversation. Sartre dedicated *Being and Nothingness* to Beauvoir, but his publications do not acknowledge any specific debts to her influence. Beauvoir's writings of the 1940s, on the other hand, clearly develop moral and political theories within the framework of Sartre's account of human existence, bad faith, and authenticity, but do so independently of Sartre's own applied moral and political writings. Her treatises *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and *The Second Sex* should therefore all be counted as paradigmatically existentialist writings. Her other works, like Sartre's other works, should be understood as existentialist to the degree to which they affirm the existential theory of *Being and Nothingness*.

How much we should consider the works of Fanon to be expressions of existentialism is a more complicated question. It is not simply the case, as it seems to be with Camus, that he was labelled an existentialist because of his personal association with Sartre rather than because of any deep connection between his works and Sartre's. His first book, *Black Skin White Masks*, is very much influenced by Sartre's account of relations between people as developed in *Being and Nothingness* and applied in *Anti-Semite and Jew*. What is more, it is a clear example of the kind of socially engaged literature that Sartre urges writers to produce in his essay *What is Literature?*: Fanon mixes philosophical reflection, literary criticism, political polemic, and poetry to address issues of identity and interaction with the goal of liberating us all from the constraining, distorting, oppressive influences of colonialism and racism.

Fanon is not, however, simply applying Sartrean philosophy. His work draws on a wide range of other sources, including psychoanalytical work on the unconscious that Sartre considered to be based on a confused and somewhat arbitrary understanding of human motivation and behaviour. Fanon criticises Sartre's discussion of encounters between people for failing to take account of the backdrop of prejudices and power relations against which they occur, moreover, and sees his own encounter with Sartre's works in just this way: as the experience of a black man from a French colony reading the works of a white man from France who dominated the francophone intellectual scene at the time. The precise nature and extent of Sartre's influence on Fanon's thinking is therefore is an intricate issue but one that seemingly must be addressed if we are to fully understand *Black Skin White Masks*, or indeed his later book *The Wretched of the Earth*.

The example of Fanon's writings should make clear that problems can be generated by classifying a thinker as an existentialist. We should not treat this label as a guide to interpreting any particular works, as though we could resolve exegetical issues by considering what "an existentialist" would say at that point. There has been something of a tendency to distort the works of the various thinkers grouped under this label by emphasising their agreements, downplaying or even denying their deep differences, and ignoring their debts to thinkers not accorded the same label. Perhaps this has been necessary to bring these diverse and often extensive works into the purview of anglophone intellectual life, but if we are to sharpen our focus on them we need to guard against the continuation of this tendency. Whether a particular work counts as existentialist, and the ways in which it does so, are now questions to be answered only after we have understood that work.

Should we think of the writings of Kierkegaard, for example, as existentialist? There are undeniably existentialist themes in his philosophy, such as his theory in *The Sickness Unto Death* that we are aware that we perpetually remake ourselves through our ongoing commitments but prefer not to face this truth, and his related discussion in *The Concept of Anxiety* of this aversion to our freedom. Perhaps these aspects of his work influenced Sartre and others in such a way as to justify the traditional description of Kierkegaard as "the father of existentialism". But even if so, we should not allow this to blind us to other strands of his sophisticated and subtle writings.

Treating the idea of existentialism in this way might well have the further benefit of affording us insightful perspectives on works not previously grouped under this label. This might improve our understanding of those works or enhance their relevance to our present concerns. Perhaps we should find existentialist themes in the philosophy of Karl Marx, for example, as Sartre suggested (1985: 157), or in the writings of the Stoic philosophers to which Sartre and Beauvoir refer so often, or indeed in myriad other places.

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RELATED TOPICS

Aristotle, Heidegger, Kant, Nietzsche, Virtue Ethics

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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