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EXISTENTIALISM

Although the intellectual sensibility to which it refers already had a long and distinguished pedigree, it was only in post–World War II France that existentialism transcended philosophical and literary circles to become a full-blown cultural movement. The reason for this phenomenon is not difficult to discern. During the Nazi occupation of France, which was facilitated by the collaboration of many of France's leading citizens, even the most seemingly innocuous actions could have life-and-death consequences. Under these highly pressurized conditions, France became a kind of social laboratory within which, it seemed, the basic structures underlying human existence—crudely, what Heidegger called "existentials"—were more starkly revealed in everyday life. The public mood that these conditions fostered, moreover, did not dissipate in the war's aftermath, but was reinforced by virtue of a painful national self-examination, the use of the atomic bomb, and the burgeoning cold war. Existential themes—even though grasped only intuitively by many who spent a fair bit of their time at the café talking about "the meaning of life"—were the cultural fare of the day.

It was in this context, appropriately enough, that the term "existentialism" itself was first coined by Jean-Paul Sartre, who was, nevertheless, leery of it. And although, in addition to Sartre, such French thinkers as Gabriel Marcel, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus were also deemed existentialists, all of them sought, in varying degrees, to distance themselves from the label. Still, because all of these thinkers were motivated by a concern for the individual's plight in the modern age, which is the conventional hallmark of the longstanding intellectual sensibility to which the term "existentialism" came to refer, it is not unreasonable to speak of them as existentialists. And, because the distinctive intellectual commitments that they shared were motivated by the particulars of both the French philosophical tradition and the sociohistorical conditions through which they were living, it is not unreasonable to speak of French existentialism as a unique philosophical phenomenon.

Although, perhaps, to a somewhat lesser degree, French existentialism, like its non-French antecedents, is a rejoinder to Western rationalism, which, historically, has expressed itself in the dominance of the scientific paradigm, or, more pejoratively, scientism. Thus, although science's experimental style sharply contrasted with Church dogma, in supplanting Christianity as an all-encompassing worldview, science itself became the reigning dogma. The substantial benefits conferred by science's objectifying, universalizing, systematizing methodology were not without substantial costs, however. Objectification engendered a crisis of meaning. Dispossessed of an underlying telos, the world and all that is in it (including, ultimately, human beings) came to be seen in stripped down material terms, as mere objects to be manipulated. So, too, uni-

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versalization, which is reflected in science's drive to find fewer laws to encompass more diverse phenomena, found its social expression in mass society and the bureaucratic state. Paradoxically, then, although Western rationality is theoretically in the service of "the individual," it tends, practically, to give the individual short shrift.

This phenomenon finds philosophical expression in René Descartes's "First Philosophy," in which the *cogito* is set over and against a now alien world. The immediate impetus for existentialism, however, was G. W. F. Hegel's "systematic philosophy," which animated the concerns of Soren Kierkegaard and (via Arthur Schopenhauer) Friedrich Nietzsche, the putative fathers of existentialism. In response to Hegel's "science of experience," which culminates in "Absolute Knowing," Kierkegaard and Nietzsche emphasized the irreducibility of personal experience. In response to Hegel's emphasis on the ethical community, which culminates in "the State," Kierkegaard and Nietzsche attacked what they called "herd mentality" and "slave morality," respectively. Finally, most generally, in response to Hegel's emphasis on Spirit (crudely, the human collective), Kierkegaard and Nietzsche emphasized "the individual." The strongest influences on French existentialism, however, were not Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, but rather Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Indeed, in some sense, French existentialism represents the attempt to synthesize the most prominent features of their respective philosophies, many of which are at odds. Siding with Husserl against Heidegger, the French existentialists (in varying degrees) continued to believe in the primacy of consciousness, which resonated with their deeply ingrained Cartesian commitments. Conversely, siding with Heidegger against Husserl, they rejected the wholly immanent, disembodied nature of the transcendental ego, which hearkens back to the *cogito*, as well as the classical epistemological orientation of Husserl's Cartesian-inspired phenomenology, in favor of seeing all philosophical inquiries as always already enmeshed within the horizon of our worldly concerns.

The French existentialists' preoccupation with Cartesianism, which had found its most recent expression in Husserl's philosophy, belies the commonly held belief that existentialism—at least in its French manifestation—was merely a reaction against Western rationalism. To the contrary, although they rejected the substantialist metaphysics that underlies Cartesianism, as well as Husserl's account of consciousness comprehending the objects of experience in their ideality through a transcendental reduction, the French existentialists more or less accepted the Cartesian duality of consciousness and world. However, with the exception of Marcel, who embraced a "theistic existentialism," they either refused recourse to God or argued, at least implicitly, that such recourse could not obviate the crises of meaning and knowledge that Descartes's dualistic metaphysics had engendered, but that his proof of God's existence had supposedly repaired.

This problematic is reflected in Camus's essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he reconstitutes Kierkegaard's notion of "the absurd." On the one hand, Camus argues that "the absurd" results from our rationality, which leads us to demand a coherent explanation from a universe that is indifferent to our plight. This is in sharp contrast to Kierkegaard's rendition of "the absurd," which refers to the paradoxes that arise for the understanding in connection with a being that is both human and divine. Indeed, for Camus, recourse to God, who plays such a pivotal role for Kierkegaard and Descartes because He mediates the relation between consciousness and the world (even if only negatively), is nothing less than philosophical suicide. On the other hand, by contending that Sisyphus's plight is emblematic of the absurdity of the human condition, Camus is implicitly suggesting that even if questions concerning God and, for that matter, our mortality are bracketed, "the absurd" would not be mitigated. Sisyphus, it will be recalled, had been condemned by the gods to eternally roll a boulder up a mountain, for the gods believed that futile, repetitive labor was among the worst forms of punishment. On this account, "the absurd" arises from a Schopenhauerian awareness that our labors and concerns, that the *Sturm und Drang* of life, all add up to nothing. For Camus, there are two possible responses: to scorn and defy our fate, which smacks of the sort of life-denying *ressentiment* that Nietzsche and Kierkegaard had criticized, or to throw yourself into your life's projects, to live in the moment. This second, more life affirming, option belies the outside or "objective" perspective that Descartes's duality breeds. It repairs the breach, though arguably at the cost of reflection.

There is, accordingly, a line of thought within the existentialist tradition that suggests that reflection and *ressentiment* are closely aligned, if not inextricably intertwined, and that they are so to the detriment of life itself. In *The Present Age*, Kierkegaard asserts that envy is the "unifying principle" of reflection, and that it gives rise to "moral *ressentiment*," which "hinders and stifles all action." And, in *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche draws parallels between ancient Greek reflection and the Socratic diagnosis that life (even if it is examined) is not worth living, as is reflected in Socrates's dying declaration that "to live . . . means to be sick a long time: I owe Asclepius a rooster." Less pejoratively, the main character in Sartre's first novel, *Nausea*, declares, "you have to choose: live or tell." Certain recent interpretations concerning the nature

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and scope of reflection notwithstanding, this "either/or" is too simplistic and is arguably directed only at the pretenses of a certain kind of reflection. The claim that experience is infinitely rich and that reflection impoverishes, falsifies, or even precludes it is no more justified than the claim that experience is infinitely poor and that it is only reflection that enriches it.

In two of Camus's novels, *The Stranger* and *The Fall*, the logic of these extremes is played out. The chief protagonist in *The Stranger*, Meursault, is, in the first half of the book, an extraordinary example of a nonreflective consciousness. Written in a sparse style designed to mirror the sparseness of Meursault's consciousness, it is a phenomenological account of a nonreflective consciousness that lives in the moment. However, what Meursault's example teaches is that without reflection, experience is as impoverished as his atomized, emotionless account of it suggests, and that the alleged innocence of a nonreflective consciousness, of Rousseau's noble savage, as it were, is a fundamentally misguided piece of nostalgia. Without deliberation, and under conditions that at best only raise the specter of self-defense, Meursault kills an Arab in French colonial Algeria, and is put on trial. At this point, which is when he becomes reflective, and thereby self-conscious, he comes to realize, much like Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial*, that we are all guilty—not in a juridical or even moral sense, but in an existential one. As Heidegger would say, Meursault comes to realize, as he develops self-consciousness, that by virtue of being human, he is "fallen." The chief protagonist in *The Fall*, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, in contrast, is nothing but the self-consciousness of this "fallenness." Formerly a celebrated lawyer living the high life in Paris, Clamence, who had no apparent flaws, was wholly undermined by innocuous events, thus suggesting our own susceptibility. Indeed, the novel, set in a grimy bar in the dreary Red Light district of Amsterdam (suggesting the inner circle in Dante's *Inferno*), involves Clamence's cynical attempt to seduce the reader into recognizing his own existential guilt. Trapped in the prison house of his own reflection, and without any life to speak of, Clamence's *ressentiment* plays out in an all-consuming desire to judge. Subverting the biblical injunction not to judge so as to avoid judgment, Clamence, a self-styled "judge-penitent," judges himself in the harshest possible terms to give himself an unimpeachable standpoint from which to judge.

Sartre gives a more systematic expression to many of these concerns in his philosophical works. Given the absence of God, he argues in "Existentialism is a Humanism," there is no human essence; or, as he famously puts it, "existence precedes essence." Sartre's notion, simply put, is that there is nothing "essential" about us, and that we make ourselves through our choices. However, given the ungrounded nature of these choices, which results from our ultimate inability to found ourselves, he states in *Being and Nothingness* that "man is a useless passion." This twist on the theme of "the absurd" plays out in what Sartre calls the "fundamental" project of human beings, namely, the unobtainable desire to be (as we conceive of) God. This abstract, universal desire, which finds its concrete expression in every individual, refers to the desire to be both essential, that is, self-identical, and absolutely free. Crucially, however, although for Camus "the absurd" is a psychological sensibility, for Sartre it is merely an ontological given. Camus's sensibility is but one way that we might freely choose to comport ourselves in the world, given that we cannot avoid positing values despite the fact that we can found neither ourselves nor absolute values toward which we should strive.

Our inability to found ourselves or to be self-identical, Sartre contends, is the result of the fact that consciousness is always already beyond "the self." Extending and transforming Husserl's notion of "intentionality," namely, that all conscious states are about some object, Sartre argues that consciousness itself is insubstantial (or, as he puts it, "nothing"), and that "the self" is an object for it. We are thus estranged from ourselves. What's more, "the self" is contested terrain insofar as it is not in consciousness, but rather is out in the world, where it is constituted not only by consciousness but also by the limiting "facts" and other people. To use the Hegelian categories that he appropriates and reconfigures, "the self" is a construction of the interaction between being-for-itself, being-in-itself, and being-for-others, respectively. With his notion of being-for-others, Sartre expresses philosophically what Camus implicitly conveys in *The Fall*, namely, that human beings seek in various ways to dominate one another in the attempt to bolster their own self-conceptions. This portrayal of selfhood draws on Hegel's master–slave parable in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but with one key difference: although, for Hegel, the battle for recognition is ultimately overcome, as human beings increasingly come to recognize themselves in one another, for Sartre there are no higher-order syntheses. Because of his conception of consciousness, namely, his Cartesian position that consciousness is always beyond the facts and others, not to mention its very own "self," ultimate reconciliations with others are impossible. This also sharply contrasts with Heidegger's view of social relations as a "being-with," which, Sartre claims, is facilitated by Heidegger's unnuanced rejection of the Cartesian *cogito*.

Because consciousness or being-for-itself is always beyond both the facts (being-in-itself) and what other

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people try to make of it (being-for-others), as well as "the self" that it constructs in conjunction with these other two aspects of being, we are free. Indeed, given Sartre's ontological commitments, we are, as he graphically puts it, "condemned to be free." With this freedom, which, he argues, is "absolute," comes an absolute responsibility for not only everything that we do but also for the world itself. Sartre's point, although hyperbolic, is that it is only through our projects that we constitute a world, as our most basic choice of ourselves, which is free and gives rise to our projects, is what orients us within the world as an initial matter. Without such an orientation, indeed, the world would be a blooming, buzzing confusion. This absolute freedom to choose the way in which we comport ourselves within the world, which should not be confused with practical freedom, that is, the freedom to obtain what we desire, is something that we usually hide from ourselves. Drawing on Kierkegaard and (to a lesser extent) Heidegger, Sartre argues that acknowledging this freedom to comport ourselves in the world as we choose induces anxiety, and that we almost always flee this uncomfortable insight in bad faith: it is only though a "purifying" reflection that we can come to grasp the exigencies of our irreducible freedom. However, what induces this type of reflection (unlike its counterpart, an all but ubiquitous instrumental or "accessory" reflection), and how it relates to the seeming necessity of having an initial orienting project (which seems to ineluctably lead to bad faith), are questions that Sartre does not answer.

This emphasis on the inextricable relation between freedom and responsibility, which, in Sartre's case, is engendered by a neo-Cartesian conception of consciousness, as well as the experience of the German occupation (when even mundane choices could have deeply negative consequences), is, perhaps, the distinctive feature of French existentialism. As Camus's Clamence declares in *The Fall*, "freedom is not a reward or decoration . . . [but] a long distance race, quite solitary and very exhausting." Similarly, in *The Rebel*, Camus asserts that one who rebels in the name of freedom must do so in a responsible spirit of self-sacrifice. This reflects the recognition of a prior commitment to others in terms of understanding our freedom, and it is a recognition that Merleau-Ponty shares. Although he endorses many of Sartre's commitments with respect to freedom, as his references to Sartre's account of freedom in his own magnum opus *Phenomenology of Perception* attest, Merleau-Ponty saw Sartre's notion of freedom, and indeed his overall philosophy, as a bit too Cartesian. In his own account of freedom, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes its embeddedness in a network of human relations: "We are involved in the world and with others in an inextricable tangle [that] rules out absolute freedom at the source of our commitments, and, equally, indeed, at their terminus." Freedom here is at least as much a matter of identification as it is transcendence.

Like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty worked out his thought in the interregnum between Husserl's and Heidegger's philosophies. More than Sartre, however, Merleau-Ponty is concerned with working out the implications of Husserl's phenomenology in terms of classical epistemological questions concerning perception. However, in addition, as indicated, he is, more than Sartre, concerned with moving away from a Cartesian-cum-Husserlian conception of consciousness as standing over and against the world of its experience. This had also been Heidegger's chief concern: it had induced him to refer to human beings as *Dasein* (being-there) and to describe human existence as a being-in-the-world. What mediates these two commitments for Merleau-Ponty, and, indeed, leads him to go beyond both Husserl and Heidegger, is "the body." Sartre, too, had contended in *Being and Nothingness* that the body is one with consciousness, and that it is our point of departure on the world, but it is Merleau-Ponty who explores the insight. In particular, according to Merleau-Ponty, prereflective bodily perception is the ground on which all subsequent knowledge arises.

The French existentialists, in contrast to their predecessors in the existentialist tradition, were also unique in terms of the richness of their ethical and, especially, political commitments. After *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre attempted to work out an existentialist ethics, but deemed his efforts a failure and therefore chose not to publish his work in this area. De Beauvoir, however, sought to make good the project. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she attempts to show that Sartrean freedom presupposes a commitment to the freedom of others, and, furthermore, that to speak of "freedom" abstractly—that is, without giving it content through our actions—is, invariably, to falsify it. (Along similar lines, in *The Second Sex*, one of the seminal works in feminist thought, de Beauvoir argues that there is no abstract, eternal "feminine," but rather a sociohistorically produced femininity that must be understood within its concrete situation.) Accordingly, it is on the plane of the concrete that de Beauvoir considers the ethical failures of certain archetypal subjectivities, which she juxtaposes with the tensions inherent in an existentialist ethics. Distancing herself from both Camus's notion of "the absurd," which suggests that existence cannot be given a meaning, and the hypostatized meanings of historical materialism, de Beauvoir argues that an existentialist ethics is one of ambiguity. In response to the antinomies intrinsic to both action (using violence against violence) and inaction (leaving the existing violence in place to avoid doing violence),

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it counsels a thoroughgoing consideration of how the dialectical relation between means and ends will play out within the concrete situation in which action is being contemplated.

Pointing to the French resistance (in which the French existentialists all participated), de Beauvoir suggests in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that, from a theoretico-political standpoint, the negative attitude of resistance is easy compared with the attempt to posit substantive ends. This insight was borne out as to the French existentialists themselves. Camus and Sartre split over Camus's book *The Rebel*, in which Camus attacks not only the Soviet Union under Stalin but also the pretenses of Hegelian-Marxist philosophy itself, which, he asserts, can be used to justify any heinous action. So, too, although an erstwhile communist who had mentored Sartre on political issues, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre split over Merleau-Ponty's positions in such books as *Humanism and Terror* and *The Adventures of the Dialectic*, in which he not only attacks communism's "objectivistic" conception of history and Sartre's "subjectivistic" philosophy but also sees convergences between the two. In response, Sartre produced *Search for a Method* and his mammoth *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, in which he attempts to break up the ossified structures of the materialistic dialectic with existentialism. Rejecting historical materialism's reliance on both an ontological macrosubject and an ultimate totalization, Sartre tries to show how human beings freely aggregate in an attempt to remake the history that has made them.

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See also **Simone de Beauvoir; Albert Camus; Gabriel Marcel; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Jean-Paul Sartre**

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