

The Dialectic of Life and Thought: The Significance of 20th Century Existentialism Today

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Bakewell, Sarah, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails* (New York: Other Press, 2016), 448 pp.

French existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel recounts the story of how in the late '40s once existentialism had assumed the status of a full-blown movement in France, he was often badgered on a daily basis with the question: "What is existentialism?" Marcel's response would fluctuate between making a serious attempt to answer the question in a few short sentences and throwing up his hands in frustration. Many who still read the texts of existential philosophy as philosophical texts, who continue to be inspired by these texts and are committed to the project of communicating their meaning and significance to contemporary students are often revisited with Marcel's dilemma. How do we do justice to the philosophical significance of a doctrine which at every turn resists and opposes the type of essentialist understanding which is built into the enterprise of philosophy itself? Indeed, for anyone who has read Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, or Marcel with any depth and understanding the use of the terms 'existentialist' and 'doctrine' in the same sentence, even the label 'existentialist' itself sounds a discordant note to the ear. Any respectable anthology, or a history of existential philosophy will contain a chapter on Heidegger. It would only be an impoverished attempt to treat Heidegger, who made no reference to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, who in turn are indisputably acknowledged as the joint fathers of existential philosophy in the 19th century. Nevertheless, Heidegger forcefully rejected the existentialist label and did so for reasons which define the core identity of his philosophical project. Existentialism properly describes a methodology or an approach rather than a philosophical doctrine. There is perhaps nothing more intrinsic to this methodology than a rejection of the adequacy of philosophical systems for understanding issues of human meaning; yet Paul Tillich's *The Courage to*

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Be is a classic text of theistic existentialism, this, despite the fact that Tillich was a fully comprehensive and systematic philosophical theologian.

Husserlian phenomenology forms a primary ground out of which 20th century existential philosophy arose. The clear and unambiguous goal of phenomenology is to make philosophy in Husserl's words into "a rigorous science." Nevertheless, it is precisely those 20th century existentialist philosophers who were most powerfully impacted by Husserlian phenomenology, e.g., Heidegger, Sartre and Marcel who most deeply oppose the paradigm of science as adequate to issues of human meaning which lie at the center of philosophy. Heidegger's methodology in *Being and Time* is not purely phenomenological, but also hermeneutical. The explicit starting point of the hermeneutical method is that the methodology of the empirical sciences simply cannot do justice to issues within the *Geisteswissenschaften*, or 'human sciences.' The latter Heidegger rejected systematic thinking entirely. Gabriel Marcel went so far as to say that philosophical problems are a chimera. The necessary circularity involved in human beings thinking about issues of human meaning makes an application of the paradigm of "the problematic" to philosophy impossible. While it was only Sartre who explicitly adopted the dialectical method of Hegel, Heidegger and Marcel are fully dialectical thinkers.

In chapter 12 Bakewell chronicles the unknown story of the discovery of existential philosophy in America and the UK in the late '50s. The texts of Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, and Simon de Beauvoir were translated into English. Articles, books and journals devoted to existential philosophy sprang up. The *Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy* was formed. A school of existential psychology began to develop. Writers and artists were inspired by the vibrancy of something which seemed to involve not simply a new perspective but a new way of being. The enigma of existentialist identity is compounded by the fact that the energy and excitement which propelled existentialism into a full blown cultural and intellectual movement has now wholly evaporated. While schools of philosophical thought once in demise often give rise to new and vibrant forms, it is difficult today to even imagine a new form of existentialism which could preserve its original meaning, a meaning which is inextricably comingled with the historical and cultural context of 19th and 20th century Europe. This is to say nothing either of the neglect on the part of professional philosophers to read and understand the primary texts of existential philosophy, or the fact that in the case of Sartre, Camus, and Marcel many of these texts that are literary and philosophical works at once. To those wholly unfamiliar with the primary texts of existential philosophy and the philosophical worlds out of which these texts arose, or to those whose singular access to the texts of existential philosophy has been through courses

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in literature, the common misunderstanding of existentialism as nothing more than an expression in philosophical language of the *Zeitgeist* of Europe left devastated by two world wars might seem all too plausible. Sarah Bakewell's *At the Existentialist Café* makes a substantial contribution to the effort of disabling this misunderstanding.

It is impossible to do justice to the striking originality of the book in terms of a single genre, or at least within the categories of a pre-existing genre. It is as if Bakewell decided to combine the intellectual biographies of every major, and some minor existentialist figures within the larger historical and cultural narrative of the 20th century into a single book. *At the Existentialist Café* is a history, a cultural history, a history of the formation and development of 20th century existentialism, and a general introduction to the meaning of existential philosophy simultaneously. As a cultural history, the book provides a much-needed introduction to 20th century existentialism within the cultural context of Europe from the early '30s through post World War II.

If there is always a complex dialectical relationship between modes of thought and the forms of life out of which these arise, the radical challenge posed by existentialist thinkers to the historical understanding of the relationship between life and thought in the West requires special attention to cultural context. Might the cultural context in which 20th century existentialist philosophy developed and unfolded provide us with an irreducibly unique mode of access to existentialist thought? This is indeed the route taken in *At the Existentialist Café* and the strategy is carried out masterfully for the way in which it mirrors the complex dialectic between thinking and life embodied in existentialist philosophy itself. Beginning with Nietzsche existentialist thinkers have challenged the adequacy of the understanding of the relation between thought and being implicit in Western philosophy. Here the charge is essentially one of solipsism. Paradoxically while maintaining an allegiance to truth as the highest ideal of life, in the dominant traditions of Western philosophy from Plato to Hegel the integrity of thought has been absurdly overestimated. Far from being an autonomous mode, existentialists remind us of how thought arises out of, and proceeds within historical, cultural and social contexts whose impact is especially significant when we think about issues of human meaning, even while thought by its character transcends the context toward universally valid and objective truth. Bakewell does not shrink from the task of making sense of the difficult texts of existential philosophy, but illuminates these texts in a unique and powerful way through a rich and vividly detailed reconstruction of the historical and cultural world of the early 20th century. The treatment of historical context in *At the Existentialist Café* is as unique as the book itself. With the artistry of a novelist historical context is not simply constructed but

reenacted in and through the life and experiences of the existentialist thinkers of the 20th century. Where this strategy is most successful as in the sections on French existentialism the result is *gestalt* like as the text toggles between historical context and meaning. In the sections on French existentialism which includes Sartre, Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty, Bakewell provides what might be read as a phenomenological description of what the experience might have been like for those who actually lived through the German occupation of France during the period of 1940-1944. The French people with their proud tradition of democracy and participation in the political process were suddenly surrounded and overwhelmed by an ominous alien power whose presence was ubiquitous. Now every word and gesture required caution. The section is amazing for the manner in which drawing on extensive background sources, Bakewell brings the experience of the occupation to life with a minimum of theorizing. With every channel of the free expression of meaning—art, theatre, ordinary everyday conversation, politics challenged, result was experienced as a shattering context of meaning itself and thus a pervasive sense of meaninglessness. The German occupation was real and undeniable; nevertheless, the ideals of the Nazi regime represented a profound challenge to civilized meaning and value integral to the consciousness of the average French citizen. The impact of the combination of what was unimpeachably real and yet rationally absurd ineluctably generated what might be called a kind of “*Twilight Zone* effect,” a perception of living in an alternate reality, in essence, dreamlike and surreal. *Something like this should not be happening. Perhaps it is merely a dream. How long will this continue? What does it mean? Where will it end? What meaning does this life have?* Chapters 6 and 7 of the book involves an attempt to reenact the context of French existentialism, and provides what is perhaps the most insightfully simple introduction to key concepts in Sartre and Camus simultaneously—once again the *Gestalt* effect. Through Bakewell’s artfully rich portrait, and without any obvious shift from context to meaning the reader is brought almost unaware to the insight that the sudden disruption of meaning, the pervasive mood of meaninglessness and *surreality* experienced by the French people during the occupation were a context but also a paradigm of Camus absurd and Sartre’s nausea as a response to the brute facticity of existence.

Commentators on existential philosophy struggle with how to explain what Camus meant by the sense of the absurd, or why Roquentin in Sartre’s novel *Nausea* suddenly gets physically sick while staring at the root of a Chestnut tree. Yet neither Sartre nor Camus understood their insights to presuppose and require refined metaphysical awareness. On the contrary meaninglessness and absurdity are basic human, albeit painful and disconcerting, experiences which are all too easily veiled in complex

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philosophical systems. As the story, "Brain in a Vat" so wonderfully illustrates questions about the ultimate parameters of our experience can suddenly shock our calm, everyday presuppositions about what is real to the foundations. Neither are these questions the privileged prerogative of philosophers, even if philosophy provides us with uniquely powerful methodology in which ultimate questions can be systematically explored. If philosophical questions are questions about meaning, above all questions about the meaning of our human existence, if as Marcel held the effort to make sense of our human experience is an "inner, urgent need," then meaninglessness and despair are the ever-present possibilities implicit in being human. In one of Marcel's plays the heroine asks: "Don't you feel that we are living ... if you can call it living...in a broken world? Yes, broken like a broken watch. The mainspring has stopped working. Just to look at it, nothing has changed. Everything is in place" The concept of living in a broken world might be a powerful paradigm for understanding how the German occupation of France was experienced. It might also describe the alienation and estrangement of the individual in the modern world, or be a metaphor for the human situation itself. Ordinary human experiences of injustice, suffering death, or a disruption in ordinary channels of meaning can easily become transparent to questions of ultimate meaning. The experience of one person's death might easily lead us to reflect on the possibility that consciousness might survive the death of the body and brain. The experience of injustice might lead us to consider whether life in a world without ultimate justice is meaningful at all; and as Camus so hyperbolically stated, in the final sense there is only one real, true philosophical question and this is the question of whether or not to commit suicide, which is to say the ultimate philosophical question is the question of whether or not life has meaning.

In his 1945 lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre famously provides an explanation and a defense of his own mode of existentialism. Sartre recounts how his foundational claims—existence precedes essence, the primacy of life over thought, the denial of objectively existing values was assailed both from the left and from the right as a dangerous form of nihilism. Critics on the philosophical right essentially in the form of Neo-Thomists as well as Marxists on the left were true to form. Philosophy provides a basis for *praxis*. The concept of values cut loose from enduring foundations is both incoherent and a formula for moral absurdity. How are values to retain their integrity apart from rational grounds? Are there no values which are intrinsically wrong or destructive? In the absence of intrinsic value on what basis do we condemn those who choose the values of conquest, hedonism, or unapologetic self-interest? Existentialist ethics, critics argued are also practically absurd. The moral life requires an ongoing commitment to and a defense of values which only a rational foundation can provide. Values

chosen with no assurance of their intrinsic rightness will yield in the face of the slightest challenge. These are very serious charges. For generations of students *Existentialism is a Humanism* has been read as a classic statement of Sartre's own brand of atheistic existentialism. Despite the fact that the lecture was originally delivered, at least in part to answer some of the above charges, it is all too easy to read *Existentialism is a Humanism* as a manifesto for ethics without reason. The quest for a self-illuminating basis for ethics is a chimera. Values can only be created by human choices and these choices are ultimately those of an individual.

Based on an impressive mastery of sources Bakewell largely succeeds in bringing the 20th century existentialists to life, both as thinkers and as human beings. In the case of such a multifaceted, complex and ever changing figure, one can forgive the fact that Bakewell's portrait of Sartre of the late '40s is missing some desired nuances. Noticeably lacking is the extent to which Sartre seriously considered the major objections to his system while remaining deeply persuaded that the early critique of existentialism was remarkably weak and ineffectual. Such nuance might explain why although *Existentialism is a Humanism* has for generations been read as a classic introduction to existentialism, it was the one work which Sartre regretted having published. Despite a lack of nuance in some respects, the broad lines of Bakewell's portrait are sharply detailed. With regard to the issue of ethical grounds Blackwell rightly inscribes Sartre squarely within the Western metaphysical tradition which as Heidegger so deeply understood is altogether characterized by a quest for ultimate grounds. If for Sartre ethics is groundless, this is not a presupposition but a conclusion which is achieved through the ambitious ontological analysis, the exhaustive search for grounds contained within *Being and Nothingness*. It is precisely at this point that we might glimpse to quote Nietzsche, the "small abyss" between Sartre and Heidegger. For Heidegger, the endeavor which lies at the center of Western metaphysics to establish a self-authenticating ground of life and experience, which must include ethics, is a massive philosophical error. The name of this enterprise is metaphysics, and its legacy has been a series of philosophical systems, each resting on a purportedly self-authenticating ground. Sartre remains solidly within this metaphysical tradition which it was Heidegger's central project to deconstructuralize or overcome. Accordingly, Sartre posits one more ultimate ground—or rather two, a metaphysical dualism grounded upon two ultimate principles—the *pour soi* and the *en soi*.

Notwithstanding the fact that Sartre's ultimate referents appear more like an abyss than a ground, Sartre is no less a metaphysician than Plato or Aristotle. Another nuance lacking in Bakewell's portrait concerns the paradoxical manner in which Sartre was both a paradigmatic metaphysician as well as a critic of metaphysics. Despite his fundamentally metaphysical

orientation Sartre's insight into the limits of metaphysics could rival that of Wittgenstein. It is in terms of the limits of metaphysics that the ostensibly powerful critique against his existentialist ethics that emerged in the late '40s and is today still repeated emerges with problems of its own. Paradoxically for Sartre this critique fails because it is founded upon an ontologically inadequate understanding of the relationship of life to thought, and on this point Heidegger, Sartre, and Wittgenstein very powerfully converge. We struggle in life to find a basis in thought for our values, actions and choices. Nevertheless, this process takes place within life. There is simply no autonomous dimension of thought which might serve as a basis for life; in this sense existence precedes essence. If the question *Was soll ich tun?* actually describes the most fundamental question of ethics, if Kant was right in thinking that the exercise of establishing a ground for ethics cannot ultimately improve upon the ordinary moral consciousness then Kant was no less an existentialist than Sartre. Once again, the historical context of the German occupation and the French resistance illuminates the integral character and the enduring value of Sartre's thought. In the face of enveloping darkness sides had to be taken, commitments made and battles fought. Were Kantians or utilitarians poised to make better and more courageous choices, natural law theorists or Marxists, Hegelians or Spinozians? Again, a paradigmatic instance of the over-estimation of thought.

To her enormous credit, Bakewell does not fail to discern at this point the shadow of Kierkegaard whose influence upon 20th century existentialism was subtle yet pervasive. With ferocious irony Kierkegaard reminds us of the enormous paradox that an ethical system by its nature must exclude the aspects of risk, commitment, ambiguity, courage, and particularity, precisely those factors which are most irreducible for real persons who strive to live a good life.

Despite some omissions, Bakewell's account inspires renewed appreciation for the contributions of Sartre to discussion of ethics in our own time. In the past ten years, many ethicists have made what is now being called "the practical turn." The presupposition of this movement is that notwithstanding the fact of genuine ethical dilemmas most ethicists regardless of their theoretical systematic commitment do in fact largely agree on matters of right and wrong. Proponents of practical ethics likewise stress the uniqueness and specificity of ethical situations. Sometimes—as in the case of human rights issues, ethics is a matter of principle. In other contexts—as in the case of the environment, the issue essentially turns upon consequences. Recall one of the early critiques of Sartre's ethics: 'In the absence of intrinsic value on what basis do we condemn those who chose the values of conquest, hedonism or unapologetic self-interest?' Thinking within the context of his experience in the French resistance we come to understand how so much

beside the point this question must have appeared to Sartre. During the German occupation of France, many did choose the cowardly and contemptable path of collaboration. Without ultimate legitimation others chose the courageous and noble path of resistance. The latter choice did not require values in a heaven of ideas, but those which civilized people of genuine good will do in fact overwhelmingly agree on.

Ethical theorists regardless of their stripe must inevitably have recourse to the practical realm in order to test the rightness of their theories— a move which modern ethicists refer to as the ‘right results test.’ Sartre merely took this exercise a step further, or rather a step back. In the lights of Sartre and Camus as well the French resistance represented a paradigmatic context in which to reconsider the value of theory itself in relation to *praxis*.

Returning for a moment to Gabriel Marcel’s own existential dilemma with which we began, one might imagine how Marcel in an engaging mood may have actually attempted to answer the question: what is existentialism? Perhaps one day Marcel responded to a thoughtful inquirer with the suggestion that there is indeed a master key which will at once unveil the mystery of the essence of existential philosophy. This key simply involves understanding some of the principled objections held by existentialist thinkers both against major philosophical systems of the past as well as many of the current trends in philosophy today. It is difficult to read Bakewell’s remarkable book without obtaining a genuine understanding of what some of these principled objections are. I was disappointed with the fact that *At the Existentialist Café* largely neglects the rich domain of 20th century theistic existentialism on the grounds that this would require an entirely separate book. One hopes this is a book which Bakewell will seriously consider writing.

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