

1. What Is Existentialism?

What is existentialism? There seems to be quite some confusion over this. Articles and books on the topic written in English each discuss a variety of thinkers, or a variety of issues, or both, without any clear unity that would explain why these thinkers and issues are included while others are not. What is more, the list of philosophers and other writers changes from one survey to the next, usually includes plenty who did not use the term of themselves, indeed many who would never have heard it, and often includes people who explicitly rejected the label. There is further disagreement between these works over which similarities between the thinkers count as the dominant or defining aspects of existentialism, though never an attempt to show that anything unifies any such set of defining aspects.¹ The ultimate reasons for all of this lie in the origin of the word. So too does a clear sense of the term, one that this book aims to establish as its core meaning.

¹ Two recent collections of essays exemplify this approach: Dreyfus and Wrathall 2006; Crowell 2012. Within the former, see especially Dreyfus 2006. Within the latter, see the disagreement between Cooper 2012 and Malpas 2012. Three recent single-author introductions exemplify the same approach: Reynolds 2005; Earnshaw 2006; Flynn 2006. The current entry in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy – Crowell 2010 – is also of this kind. The history of this understanding of existentialism includes such landmark works as Blackham 1952; Grimsely 1955; Barrett 1958; Warnock 1970; Macquarrie 1972; and Cooper 1990. It owes much to two anthologies of primary texts: Kaufman 1956; Solomon 1974. Kaufman opens the introduction to his anthology by describing existentialism as ‘not a philosophy but a label for a set of widely different revolts against traditional philosophy’ and ‘not a school of thought nor reducible to any set of tenets’ (1956: 11). Solomon ends his introduction claiming that ‘nothing could be further from the existential attitude than attempts to define existentialism, except perhaps a discussion *about* the attempts to define existentialism’ (1974: xix).

1. Origins of the Name

It is a matter of some dispute just who coined the term 'existentialism', but it is agreed that it was first used in the early 1940s to label the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and other Parisian writers who were focused at the time on the nature of human existence. Beauvoir and Sartre soon adopted it as a brand name for their shared philosophy. At the end of the Second World War, they launched what Beauvoir calls 'the existentialist offensive', which was a series of books, popular articles, and public talks that attempted to influence the new cultural and political shape of France (FC: 46).

Sartre's famous lecture 'Existentialism Is A Humanism' was part of this campaign, and is perhaps most to blame for the confusion over the meaning of the term that it set out to define. Most spectacularly, he managed to claim that existentialism is premised on atheism, that there are Christian existentialist philosophers, and that it does not matter to the existentialist whether God exists or not (EH: 27-30, 20, 53-4). Perhaps more damagingly, his strategy was to try to establish his philosophy in relation to various well-known philosophers, mostly by casting them as existentialists too. Each of these thinkers does indeed hold something in common with Sartre, but this hardly suffices to bind them all together as an interesting category.

Beauvoir's article 'Existentialism and Popular Wisdom', published at the same time, has the same aims as Sartre's lecture, which are to define existentialism and defend it from criticisms made against it in the media, and serves these aims in a much more coherent fashion. Although this article was in the first issue of *Les Temps Modernes*, the literary review that they had founded, it was still overshadowed by Sartre's lecture, which itself was something of a sensational event due to Sartre's already having established himself as a major literary figure with his earlier novel *Nausea* and his treatise *Being and Nothingness*. It was perhaps inevitable that the text of this much publicised and much discussed event would be read by many more people than bought the first issue of the literary journal.

Despite its greater coherence, however, Beauvoir's article also contributes to the confusion over the nature of existentialism by employing the strategy of situating it in relation to various other thinkers, both alive and dead. She mentions *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the essay on absurdity that Albert Camus published in 1942, in a way that implies that this is an existentialist work (EPW: 209). Early in her short book *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, published

in 1944, Beauvoir had referred to *The Outsider*, the novel Camus had published alongside his essay on absurdity, to illustrate her claim that emotions are dependent on the goals and values that a person adopts. Her writing here is perfectly ambiguous between presenting Camus as concurring with her claim and simply using his character Meursault to expound her own views (PC: 93). Perhaps it was Beauvoir's mentions of him more than anything else that prompted Camus to state in a newspaper interview during the existentialist offensive: 'I am not an existentialist ... Sartre and I hold nothing in common and refuse to be held responsible for one another's debts' (IJD: 345). As we will see in chapter 2, Camus was right to say this. It is clear from *The Outsider* that he does not accept the basic tenet of existentialism. Indeed, his philosophy serves as a useful counterpoint to the existentialism of Beauvoir and Sartre.

Martin Heidegger soon also repudiated the label, which in his case had been applied in Sartre's lecture (EH: 20). But the relation between Heidegger and existentialism is more complicated. For it was Heidegger more than anyone else who had made the nature of human existence itself a central philosophical concern by the time of the existentialist offensive. Though not without its forerunners, it was his use of the term 'existence' to mean specifically the kind of existence that humans enjoy, as opposed to the mere being of rocks and plants, and his related coinage of 'existentialia' to label the various aspects of this existence, that had led to the use of the term 'existential' by Sartre, Beauvoir, and others, which in turn had led to their being described as 'existentialists'.

2. Existence Precedes Essence

Heidegger was right, however, to deny that his own philosophy is a form of existentialism. For as defined in Sartre's lecture and Beauvoir's article, existentialism is committed to a particular claim about the nature of human existence, a claim that Heidegger rejects. This is the claim that, as Sartre puts it, 'existence precedes essence' (EH: 22; see also Beauvoir EPW: 212-3). An individual, on this view, is not born with any innate personality. Rather, the individual comes to be a particular kind of person through the goals that they pursue and the values they adopt. Neither are there innate personality differences, therefore, between different groups of people, nor such a thing as human nature, or the human essence.

This might seem contradictory, since it can be described as the claim that our essence is to create our own essence. There is only the appearance of incoherence here, however, for

this description employs two distinct uses of the term 'essence' that are not often clearly distinguished. One derives from John Locke's influential use of 'essence' to refer to the properties an object must have in order to be classified as a particular kind of thing. In this sense, the essence of a horse is the set of properties any object needs in order to be a horse. The other derives from Aristotle's term *to ti ên einai*, a phrase that his Roman translators rendered into Latin by inventing the word *essentia*. Aristotle used this term to refer to the unifying aspect of a thing that explains its organisation. More specifically, in the Aristotelian sense an essence explains the organisation of the thing by explaining why it does what it does. A house is essentially a shelter for living in, which is why it has walls and a roof that fit together to keep the wind and rain out. A human being is essentially a rational animal, which is why humans plan their activities and organise their societies.²

Existentialism does not deny that humans have an essence in the Lockean sense. Indeed, the phrase 'existence precedes essence' is intended as a whole to capture the Lockean essence of our kind of existence. At the same time, that phrase is the denial that humans have any innate Aristotelian essence. According to existentialism, human beings are rational animals, but this does not fully explain their behaviour. Moreover, they have no inbuilt desires or values that explain why they pursue the particular goals that they pursue. Because this is true of each individual, according to existentialism, it is true of groups of people and of humanity as a whole. There are no inbuilt personality traits that distinguish individuals from one another, that distinguish between genders or between ethnic groups, or that are common to all people. Rather, on the existentialist view, it is the Lockean essence of humanity that each person's set of goals and values is ultimately the result of their own choices and actions.

At the time of the existentialist offensive at least, Beauvoir and Sartre disagreed over the details of this claim. Sartre held that the individual's personality or character is never really settled, so they can change their goals and values at any time and can do so without any motivation based in their other goals and values. Beauvoir, on the other hand, saw the individual's goals and values as becoming increasingly embedded in their outlook, with the result that she considered Sartre mistaken about the prospects for radical personal change. Nevertheless, they both subscribed to the core claim that 'existence precedes essence', in that they both denied that humans have inbuilt Aristotelian essences. Moreover, as we will see in this book, while Beauvoir repeatedly claimed that Sartre was

² On the distinction between Aristotelian and Lockean essences, see Witt 2013.

the primary theoretician of existentialism, her version of existentialism resolves what she considers to be an inconsistency in his version. This book will argue that he came to accept her version of existentialism by 1952. In that sense, she was perhaps more paradigmatic of existentialism than Sartre at the time of the existentialist offensive. At any rate, her philosophy at this time has just as much claim to be called 'existentialism' as his does.

Camus, on the other hand, does not subscribe to this central claim of existentialism. His philosophical outlook is premised on the idea that there are certain desires and values that we all have in common as a result of being human. 'The whole effort of German thought has been to substitute for the notion of human nature that of human situation', he wrote in his notebooks soon after the existentialist offensive, and 'existentialism carries that effort even further', whereas 'like the Greeks I believe in nature' (CN: 136). He does not see this nature as wholly determining our behaviour, as we will see, but rather as setting limits to our range of possibilities. To an extent, therefore, he does agree with Beauvoir and Sartre that much of our behaviour results from the goals and values that we adopt. Nevertheless, the limits that he describes are sufficient to set his philosophy apart from the radical claim that we have no inbuilt Aristotelian essence at all. This difference, we will see, was soon to be played out in a very public dispute between Camus and Sartre over the role of violence in politics. This difference, moreover, is reason enough to agree that Camus was right to deny that his philosophy is a form of existentialism.

3. Existential Philosophy and Ethics

Heidegger's denial that he is an existentialist was also motivated by his rejection of the claim that our existence precedes our essence. In his book *Being and Time*, he had written of 'the priority of "*existentia*" over "*essentia*"' (B&T: § 9), which does sound similar to the existentialist slogan 'existence precedes essence'. But in context it is clear that this use of '*essentia*' is meant in the Lockean sense. Heidegger is claiming here that to be the kind of thing that we are is to exist in a particular kind of way, which he goes on to define as being concerned with our own lives. The resemblance to the existentialist slogan is therefore only superficial. When he rejected the label 'existentialist', however, he did it by rejecting these ideas of '*existentia*' and '*essentia*' altogether. He had come to see those terms as loaded with metaphysical connotations that derail any attempt to think clearly about human being, and indeed about being in general (LH: 157-8). We should retain, he thinks, the German term for existence (*existenz*) to label the human kind of being and retain his own coinage 'existentialia' (*Existenziale*) as a collective term for its various dimensions,

such as our position in a social and physical environment, our understanding of our own mortality, and our relations with our own past and future (B&T: § 9).

Heidegger was soon a very influential figure and it was his terminology that led to the use of 'existential' among German and French philosophers as a term for issues concerning aspects of human existence. Kierkegaard had used the Danish word *existenz* to refer specifically to human existence almost a century earlier. He was an important influence on Heidegger. But he was not generally influential in German and French philosophy until Heidegger had brought these questions to the centre of discussion. It was thus Heidegger's work that had brought the idea of specifically existential philosophy into German and French cultural life, where it had already taken root by the time Beauvoir and Sartre had begun to publish.³

This is not to say, however, that Kierkegaard or Heidegger invented existential thought. Careful attention has been paid to structures of human life by secular and religious thinkers, and occasionally movements, throughout the history of Western thought. This is why the terms 'existential' and 'existentialist' have been applied very widely. Indeed, if all it takes to be classified as an existential thinker is that one pays attention to some dimension of human existence, such as mortality or the relation between individual and society, then it is hardly surprising that the label has been applied to so many diverse thinkers, from Jesus through Shakespeare to Kafka. But if existential philosophy is concerned with investigating the dimensions of human existence in their totality, with providing a complete philosophical understanding of human existence, then far fewer thinkers qualify for the label and Kierkegaard and Heidegger are landmark figures.

Heidegger differs from most existential philosophers, at least in his early work, in that his motivation for studying human existence is to provide a path to the study of being in general. Most existential philosophers, Beauvoir and Sartre included, are motivated by the basic ethical question that Socrates identified as the fundamental question of philosophy: how should one live? It has been common in Western secular ethics to answer this

³ Karl Jaspers had begun to publish philosophical works that employed a sense of *existenz* derived from Kierkegaard a few years before Heidegger did. Jaspers used the term more narrowly, to denote the particular kind of human existence he recommends. But this aspect of his work was not well known until the 1930s, after Heidegger had established the idea of existential philosophy in German and French culture.

through an account of human life. Aristotle's ethical philosophy is an exploration of what it is for a rational animal to flourish. Immanuel Kant argues that we are imperfectly rational, since we have desires as well as reason, and are therefore subject to the moral command to act in line with reason. John Stuart Mill sees the pursuit of happiness as the core of human existence and understands morality as a system for regulating each individual's aims in order to maximise overall happiness.

What is different about the existential approach to ethics, therefore, is not that it answers the basic ethical question through an account of human existence. It is rather that it answers it through a much more thorough consideration of that existence. It is not satisfied with a single organising principle of the lives that we lead, such as rationality or the pursuit of happiness, to provide the direct grounding of ethics all by itself. Existential ethics instead inquires into the ethical relevance of all the dimensions of our existence. What difference should one's own mortality make to the way one lives one's life? What difference should our particular social positions make to the way we live? How should I take into account the limits of my knowledge of my own motivations and my capacity for self-deception? Raising such questions about the ethical significance of the *existentialia* provides a richer and arguably more human approach to the question of how we should live.

4. Existentialism as Existential Humanism

Existentialism itself is a particular existential ethical theory. It is a form of humanism in that it views human beings as valuable in themselves and nothing else as having such intrinsic value. But it is existential in that it sees this value as rooted not in human achievements or abilities, but in the structures of what it is to be human (EH: 51-3). At its core, as we have seen, is the claim that existence precedes essence. This is deeper and richer than Aristotle's classification of us as rational animals, Kant's refinement that we are imperfectly rational creatures, or Mill's picture of us as seekers of happiness. For the basic tenet of existentialism is intended to explain why we have all of the desires and emotions that we have, why we each take certain considerations to be important in our deliberations, and why we each perceive the same world in the different ways we do. All of this, according to existentialism, results from the values and goals that we have each chosen to adopt, which is what it means to say that our existence precedes our essence.

Arising out of this, existentialism also provides an explanation of why it is not obvious to us that our outlooks are so comprehensively shaped by our chosen goals and values. Sartre developed a sophisticated account of the ways in which the roots of one's own outlook can be obscured from the perspective of that very outlook. This is his celebrated diagnosis of 'bad faith'. It draws on his account of the structures of emotion, imagination, perception, and deliberation, along with subtle nuances in our attitudes to evidence, and our public behaviour in response to social expectations, seeing all of these as themselves rooted in the goals and values we have chosen. It purports to explain how it is that we can hide our own motivations from ourselves to such an extent that we can need the help of an existential psychoanalyst to uncover them. Sartre further argued that the failures of our personal relationships and the social problem of racism are rooted in this same bad faith.

Beauvoir's version of existentialism augments this account of bad faith by describing a clear limit to the extent to which our misunderstandings of our own motivations result from the self-deception of bad faith. For on her view, one's goals and values can become sufficiently embedded through habituation that they shape one's outlook even when one is no longer clearly aware of having them. This grounds a more moderate form of existential psychoanalysis, which Beauvoir employs in her work on gender. Frantz Fanon's theory of the relations between white colonisers and black colonised people in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* also embodies this more moderate form of existentialism. Both forms of existentialism agree that our existence precedes our essence, and that this explains our motivations and deliberations, our capacity for self-deception, the need for external help in uncovering our own motivations, and the character of our relations with other individuals and social groups. Their disagreements over the details of these dimensions of human existence are the result of the basic disagreement over precisely what is meant by the claim that existence precedes essence. We will explore the details of these arguments in chapters 4-8.

It is a vexed question how existentialism is supposed to provide an ethical theory. Beauvoir, Fanon, and Sartre all criticise existing ethical outlooks and social arrangements as failing to recognise the true structures of human existence. But why should existentialists be entitled to claim that this failure objectively matters? On what grounds, consistent with existentialism, can any values legitimately be criticised? A similar problem arises for the existentialists' positive ethical prescriptions. It is clear from their account of motivation that these should be a form of virtue ethics. Existentialists cannot be content with persuading people to accept a set of ethical propositions. They must rather require us

to make certain goals or values our own in such a way that these shape our emotions, deliberations, and perceptions. This is why the central ethical concept of existentialism – authenticity – is a virtue. But why should authenticity be an objectively valuable character trait? Moreover, why should its recognition of the truths of human existence require that we value people in the way that existentialist humanism demands? These will be our concerns in chapters 9-10.

5. Existentialism and Existential Psychoanalysis

Sartre's answer to these questions about the foundations of ethics can be understood as a form of eudaimonism. This is the view, at the heart of ancient Greek ethics, that the question of how one should live is to be answered with an account of the kind of life that is best for oneself. Sartre holds that the life of bad faith inevitably generates a set of values that are then frustrated. He concludes from this that the rejection of bad faith, the life of authenticity, is one that is preferable from the perspective of anyone holding such frustrated values. We will explore this chapter 9, finding that Sartre fails to explain why the best life for oneself requires any concern or respect for other people. Sartre fails to ground a recognisably moral system in his theory of human existence. But this failure is not fatal to his philosophical project. It does matter whether existentialism is consistent with an acceptable ethical system and we will see that Beauvoir's work on ethics looks promising in this regard. But it does not matter for Sartre's primary purpose whether such a system can be derived directly from his philosophy.

For the primary ethical purpose of Sartre's philosophy, his concern with how one should live, is not to try to ground a set of constraints or prescriptions for behaviour. Although he did try to derive such a moral system, the focus of his existentialism is rather the question of how each individual comes to live the kind of life that they live and the difficulties caused by our misconceptions of this. In this regard, his ethical concern is psychoanalytical rather than moral. Iris Murdoch is right to identify Sartre's *Saint Genet*, a psychoanalytical biography of the poet and professional thief Jean Genet, as the work on ethics that Sartre promises at the end of *Being and Nothingness* as a sequel. She calls this a 'paradoxical guise' for a work on ethics (1957: 676). But this is paradoxical only if we expect a work of ethics to focus on providing moral constraints and prescriptions, rather than on clarifying how a person develops the commitments, preferences, tastes, and other characteristics that shape their lives for better or for worse, a clarification that is highly instructive for anyone thinking about how one should live.

Beauvoir shares this ethical concern, which is most evident in her work on the origins of gender. Fanon's analysis of ethnicity under the conditions of French colonialism has the same aim. As existentialists, these three develop their forms of psychoanalysis by rejecting the idea that we each develop according to our inbuilt natures and the idea that we are unwittingly socially programmed. Both of these ideas would contradict the principle that our existence precedes our essence: the first because it explicitly employs the idea of an individual Aristotelian essence; the second because it relies on the idea that humans have an Aristotelian essence in common, that of responding to social cues in a particular way. Beauvoir, Fanon, and Sartre hold instead that at the basis of our lives are the sets of goals and values that we choose to adopt and which then influence our perceptions of the world around it and our responses to it.

Bad faith, the idea at the heart of Sartre's form of psychoanalysis, should be understood in this context. It is the project of denying that our lives are rooted in our projects and affirming instead the falsehood that we each have Aristotelian essences that determine our attitudes and behaviour. Bad faith thus requires that we are able to conceal from ourselves our own pursuit of projects, including the project of bad faith itself. Beauvoir augments this with her idea of the sedimentation of projects. The values I pursue and the social meanings they embody can become, on her view, deeply engrained in my outlook as a result of their repeated use, with the result that I can lose sight of them completely even though they continue to shape my experience and behaviour. Indeed, as we will see in chapter 7, the reason why Sartre eventually comes around to accepting this idea in his Saint Genet is that his own theory of bad faith is incomplete without it.

Beauvoir and Sartre are both strongly influenced here by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, but they depart from it in an important way. They view Freud's theory of the denial through repression of our basic drives as resting on a mistakenly mechanistic picture of human existence, one that cannot explain the problematic thoughts and behaviour that it is intended to explain. Beauvoir and Sartre both want to retain Freud's insights while rejecting what they see as his untenable theoretical framework. Their existentialist form of psychoanalysis is no mere spin-off from a core theory of existentialism. Rather, they explicitly develop their forms of existentialism as theories standing in the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition. This is usually obscured in analyses of existentialism, partly because Sartre's argument that Freud's conception of the unconscious is incoherent is placed much earlier in *Being and Nothingness* than his positive comments on Freud, and

partly because Beauvoir's own works have not received the attention they deserve as contributions to the development of existentialism itself.

But this relation between existentialism and Freudian psychoanalysis has also been obscured by the tendency of French philosophers from the 1950s onwards to endorse the broad Freudian tradition of psychoanalysis at the same time as they exaggerate the distance between their own positions and existentialism while (Crowell 2012b: 11-13). This has led to existentialism being characterised as alternative to psychoanalysis, an entirely different account of human functioning drawn from an entirely different set of influences. In fact, as we will see, Beauvoir and Sartre both preserve much of what they found most valuable in Freud's work, objecting primarily to the theory of mind that Freud developed in order to explain his findings, which they claim fails to do so. Moreover, this false opposition between existentialism and broadly Freudian psychoanalysis makes it difficult to understand Fanon's work, which is based on Freud and Sartre as well as his own clinical experiences, as anything other than an incoherent conceptual mix. As we will see in chapter 8, Fanon is rightly understood as an existentialist psychoanalyst and thus part of the broad Freudian movement.

6. Existentialism and French Literature

The misalignment of existentialism in opposition to, rather than as a variant of, Freudian psychoanalysis has been encouraged by the common approach to understanding existentialism by looking for family resemblances between a set of thinkers collected together under the label 'existentialist', rather than by starting with an analysis of the core philosophies of Beauvoir and Sartre, the first thinkers to describe their own work as existentialism. The common approach starts from a list of thinkers described as existentialists by Sartre in *Existentialism Is A Humanism*, expands this list by noticing commonalities between some of its members and other thinkers, and considers removing people from the list if, like Heidegger, they have asked to be removed. Freud is not cited in *Existentialism Is A Humanism* and has little in common with those that are, which is why this approach supports his being outside the existentialist tradition.

Freud is not the only important figure whose influence on existentialism is obscured by this approach. Beauvoir and Sartre both make frequent references to Stoicism in their works of the 1940s. Stoics collectively explored the dimensions of human existence and their ethical significance in a way that is unusual in the history of Western philosophy,

though since they form a tradition of thought that developed over centuries this does not form a single systematic existential philosophy. Their influence on the development of existentialism does not seem to have been analysed at all. What is most obscured by the usual approach to understanding existentialism, however, is how very French it is. In particular, the central themes of existentialism, including the theories of bad faith and relations with other people that Sartre details in *Being and Nothingness*, develop ideas that have been explored in French literature since the Enlightenment.

For example, one important aspect of Sartre's account of bad faith is the role that he assigns to one's publicly observable behaviour in helping to present oneself to oneself as having a particular Aristotelian essence. This idea that belief can be inculcated through action formed part of Blaise Pascal's famous wager in favour of Christianity over atheism in the seventeenth century. In response to the objection that one cannot simply decide to believe in God, Pascal argued that one should act as though one believes, since 'taking the holy water, having masses said, etc' will 'naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness' (1931: § 233). His contemporary Molière presented a similar idea in his play *The Imaginary Invalid*. The doctors he lampoons really know nothing of health or medicine. 'All the excellency of their art consists in pompous gibberish, in a specious babbling' (2009: 93). But their performance is sufficiently strong that it does not only hoodwink their patients. Some of them are taken in by their own vacuous erudition and inflict their disastrous imaginary medicine on themselves and their loved ones. This same basic idea can be found in the maxims of François de la Rochefoucauld, written at about the same time, which detail his view that ethics and etiquette are designed to disguise our true motives from ourselves and one another.

Similarly, the existentialist idea that many of the problems that beset our individual lives and our social organisation result from our having the wrong attitude towards our own image in the eyes of other people can be found in the political philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He argued that it is part of the nature of human existence that we each seek the affirmation of our value from other people. Because this drive of 'self-love' (*amour propre*) is satisfied only by positive comparative evaluation, by being affirmed as better than someone else, Rousseau argued, it has been the root cause of much individual and social strife, but in principle the right educational and social arrangements could channel it towards more benign ends (Bertram 2012: xx-xxiii). Although this theory of self-love asserts a common human nature, so is inconsistent with the principle that our existence precedes our essence, Sartre's own theory that our interpersonal and social relations are

poisoned by the project of presenting ourselves in a particular light, as having a particular Aristotelian essence, is clearly indebted to it.

We will not be concerned with tracing the details of the existentialism of Beauvoir and Sartre back through the history of modern French literature. But their position in that tradition will nevertheless be established and illuminated by this book's approach of focusing on their theories themselves as the core of existentialism, rather than taking the more usual approach of looking for themes across the works of the diverse range of philosophers and novelists to whom the term has been haphazardly applied. Moreover, that the traditions of modern French literature have shaped the central philosophical concerns of Beauvoir and Sartre helps to explain their pursuit of philosophy outside of the academic world and through fiction as much as through philosophical treatises. Against the background of Western philosophy generally, this looks rather eccentric. But it is not at all unusual in the French tradition running from Descartes, Pascal, Voltaire, and Molière through Victor Hugo and Marcel Proust to the present day. This is no coincidence. As we will see in the chapters of this book devoted to works of fiction, the issues explored in this tradition of thought lend themselves particularly well to such literary treatment.

7. Rethinking Existentialism

How, then, should the term 'existentialism' be understood and applied? One way to use it would be to restrict it to Beauvoir and Sartre, since their works defined it. This would be unduly narrow, however, since it would simply provide a term for works we can already indicate by the names of these two authors. An alternative approach is to identify Beauvoir and Sartre as paradigm cases and allow that any other thinker is existentialist to the degree to which they agree with one or other paradigm. This would include most of the authors usually classified as existentialist. But it would include plenty of others usually excluded, notably Freud, and for this reason it seems too broad. So it seems preferable to accept the definition offered by Beauvoir and Sartre, and endorsed by Camus and Heidegger in their rejections of the label. To be an existentialist, then, it is both necessary and sufficient to accept the basic tenet that for human beings existence precedes essence, though the disagreement between Beauvoir and Sartre shows that there is some room for existentialists to differ over precisely what this means. To be an existentialist about the nature of humanity is to accept this slogan as descriptive of the origins of motivation. To be an existentialist in ethics is to ground ethical value in the structure of human existence that this slogan describes. The classical existentialists occupy this richer, ethical position.

Given this understanding of existentialism, analysis of the works of Beauvoir and Sartre should be central to an investigation of the nature of existentialism. The works in which these two thinkers initially detailed and developed their central doctrine, that existence precedes essence, were those of the 1940s. During this time, their writings were partly shaped by disagreements with two of their friends and colleagues, Camus and Merleau-Ponty. In historical terms, we will be concerned with the years from 1942 to 1952. This period begins with the publication by Camus of both *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which define his existential philosophy. The following year sees Beauvoir's *She Came To Stay* and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, which together define their shared existentialist theory and the disagreement between them. From there, the book will argue, existentialism develops most notably through Beauvoir's 1949 book *The Second Sex*, until Sartre finally subscribes to Beauvoir's form of the idea that existence precedes essence in *Saint Genet*, published in 1952.

That same year sees the publication of Fanon's first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, which presents an existentialist psychoanalytic account of ethnicity that echoes aspects of Beauvoir's account of gender in *The Second Sex*, but which is most explicitly developed in critical dialogue with Sartre's thoughts on ethnic identity and on social relations more generally. Fanon's book, it will be argued, subscribes to what was originally Beauvoir's version of the claim that existence precedes essence, so by 1952 this is the core of existentialism as agreed by Beauvoir, Fanon, and Sartre. This was also the year in which Camus published his treatise on political philosophy, *The Rebel*, with the result that the philosophical disagreement between Camus and the existentialists exploded into a very public row about the role of violence in politics. For this reason too, we should take the theory subscribed to by Beauvoir, Fanon, and Sartre in 1952 as the core definition of existentialism.

Although the focus will be on the works of a particular ten-year period, the approach will be resolutely philosophical rather than historical. The theme of the book is the tenet that existence precedes essence. The disagreement between Beauvoir and Sartre on the details of this tenet are first elaborated through analysis of their thought in relation to that of Camus, Merleau-Ponty, and Freud, then through analysis of Beauvoir's development of existentialism through critical engagement with Sartre. It is argued that certain criticisms of Sartre's interpersonal and social philosophy effectively show that existentialism needs to incorporate an idea of habituation, which Sartre accepts in his biography of Genet. It

will then be argued that Fanon's concern with psychiatry grounds his formulation, in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, of a version of existentialism that incorporates habituation. Having established that habituation is central to the mature and agreed form of the idea that existence precedes essence, we will turn to the question of how this can ground an ethical theory. The problem of absurdity will be clarified as a problem of how there can be any genuinely normative ethics at all. Then we will consider answers to this problem presented by Camus, Sartre, and Beauvoir, finding that one reading of Beauvoir's argument is the most promising. Finally, we will consider the prospects for this mature form of existentialism in contemporary philosophical and psychological thought.

In the English language, discussions of existentialism have been very strongly influenced by the decisions of Walter Kaufmann and Robert Solomon to include particular thinkers and writings in their anthologies, which sketched a purview that became consolidated by the regular succession of introductory articles and books that surveyed the thinkers in those anthologies. When these works were published, it was very common among anglophone philosophers to dismiss European philosophy without any serious engagement with it. In this climate, bringing a wide range of major European philosophers together under a label that tied them to major popular works of literature and other arts, and so carried an immediate appeal for students, was perhaps essential to getting those philosophers discussed at all. We should certainly be grateful to those anthologists, authors, and translators who accomplished this in the face of such widespread and unreasonable opposition. Their great success has been to establish the possibility of the critical scholarship of European philosophy that now informs much of mainstream anglophone philosophy.

But that scholarship no longer benefits from classifying those thinkers together under the label 'existentialism'. Instead, as this book aims to demonstrate, there is now much to be gained from a sharper focus on what existentialism really is and the intellectual pressures that shaped its development. This should afford greater insight into the historical role of existentialism in the development of post-war moral and political thought, including feminist thought and critical race theory, and a deeper appreciation of the classic works of existential literary fiction and their argumentative functions. But the emphasis of this book will be on the contributions to contemporary philosophical debates concerning metaethics and moral psychology – in particular the origins of normativity, the development of individual character, and the extent of self-knowledge – that can be drawn from the core of existentialism.

Works Cited

- Barrett, William. 1958. *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. EPW. *Existentialism and Popular Wisdom*. Translated by Mary Timmerman. In *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, edited by Margaret A. Simons. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. FC. *Force of Circumstance*. Translated by Richard Howard. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. PC. *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. Translated by Mary Timmerman. In *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, edited by Margaret A. Simons. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Bertram, Christopher. 2012. Introduction. In *Of The Social Contract and Other Writings*, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, translated by Quintin Hoare, edited by Christopher Bertram. London: Penguin.
- Blackham, H. J. 1952. *Six Existentialist Thinkers*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Camus, Albert. IJD. Interview with Jeanine Delpech. Translated by E. Kennedy. In *Albert Camus, Lyrical and Critical Essays*, edited by Philip Thody, 345-348. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968.
- Camus, Albert. CN. *Notebooks 1942-1951*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010.
- Cooper, David E. 1990. *Existentialism: A Reconstruction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Crowell, Steven. 2010. Existentialism. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta.
<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/existentialism/>>
- Crowell, Steven (ed). 2012. *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cooper, David E. 2012. Existentialism as Philosophical Movement. In *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, edited by Steven Crowell, 27-49. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dreyfus, Hubert. 2006. The Roots of Existentialism. In *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, edited by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall, 137-161. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L. and Mark A. Wrathall (eds). 2006. *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Earnshaw, Steven. 2006. *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Fanon, Frantz. BSWM. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2008.

- Flynn, Thomas. 2006. *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Grimsley, Ronald. 1955. *Existentialist Thought*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. B&T. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell, 1962.
- Heidegger, Martin. LH. Letter on Humanism. In *Basic Writings*, by Martin Heidegger, edited by David Farrell Krell. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Kaufman, Walter (ed). 1956. *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre*. New York: Meridian Books.
- Macquarrie, John. 1972. *Existentialism: An Introduction, Guide, and Assessment*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Malpas, Jeff. 2012. Existentialism as Literature. In *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, edited by Steven Crowell, 291-321. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Molière. 2009. *The Imaginary Invalid*. Translated by Charles Heron Wall. Auckland: The Floating Press.
- Murdoch, Iris. 1957. Hegel in Modern Dress. *The New Statesman and Nation* 53, 1367 (25 May): 675-676.
- Pascal, Blaise. 1931. *Pensées*. Translated by W. F. Trotter. London: J.M. Dent.
- Reynolds, Jack. 2005. *Understanding Existentialism*. Durham: Acumen.
- Rochefoucauld, François VI de la. 2001. *Maxims*. Translated by Stuart D. Warner and Stéphane Douard. South Bend: St Augustine's Press.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. EH. *Existentialism Is A Humanism*. Translated by Carol Macomber. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Solomon, Robert C. 1974. *Existentialism*. New York: Random House.
- Warnock, Mary. 1970. *Existentialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Witt, Charlotte. 2013. Gender Essentialism: Aristotle or Locke? In *Powers and Capacities in Philosophy: the New Aristotelianism*, edited by Ruth Groff and John Greco, 308-318. London and New York: Routledge.