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存在主义

EXISTENTIALISM:
A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

Steven Earnshaw 著

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS EXISTENTIALISM?

Existentialism is a philosophy that takes as its starting point the individual's existence. Everything that it has to say, and everything that it believes can be said of significance – about the world we inhabit, our feelings, thoughts, knowledge, ethics – stems from this central, founding idea. Hence what sets it apart from most other philosophies is that it begins with the 'individual' rather than the 'universal' and so does not aim to arrive at general truths: its insistence on personal insights as the only means to real understanding entails that it makes no claims to objective knowledge. Sartre states that 'being is an individual venture' (1995: 619) and Merleau-Ponty puts it most forcefully when he declares that 'I am the absolute source' (2002: ix). Nor does Existentialism offer a particularly systematic account of its ideas. As a result of this, it is sometimes not classed as a 'philosophy' at all, but something more akin to an association of shared concerns. In addition, there is a certain 'literariness' to Existentialism, so that the prevalence of novels and other literary texts in the canon of Existential literature would seem to remove it further from the possibility of being a philosophy. Many of the 'straight' philosophical essays and books by thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are themselves cast in a literary vein, rather than in the disciplined rhetoric of a rigorous philosophical discourse.

It may well be this focus on individual, subjective truths, its accessibility through literature and its reluctance to define either itself or its areas of interest in any categorical manner, which continue to make Existentialism a fascinating subject. Its concerns are fundamental and immediate to ourselves – who am I? what am I? what life shall I live? how shall I live it? – and by 'adopting' this attitude there

is an inherent sense of dynamism, of process, journey, discovery, enlightenment and revelation that is felt and believed to be more important than the building of self-contained, all-encompassing systems more usual to philosophic endeavour. But these questions are framed in Existentialism in a way that makes them somewhat different from the manner in which psychology, moral philosophy, self-help manuals or religion might consider the same questions. We can get nowhere, Heidegger argues, unless we consider the most fundamental of all questions – 'What is the meaning of Being?' – and it is clear, both in Heidegger and in Sartre, that self and existence can have no fixed definition at all: to exist as a human being is precisely to ask the question 'What is Being?' For Heidegger it is a kind of 'potential' and for Sartre it is a 'freedom' 'to be', so that each individual is 'unique' in his or her being and thus escapes categorization at fundamental or universal levels. The most commonly held view of self is that it is an entity which has 'substance' in some way – there is something there, inside of me, which can be located and which I can identify as 'me' or 'I'. However, from Kierkegaard through to Sartre, self is not understood as a concrete entity, a thing that pre-exists my thinking or recognition of it, as if it lies around waiting for me to inspect as the mood takes me. Instead, for Existentialism, self is a 'relational' term, a way of being which dynamically constitutes or constructs the self at the same time as it reflects upon a self which might appear to be already present. For Kierkegaard 'a system of existence cannot be given' (1992: 109 and 118), and for Sartre 'the being of human reality is originally not a substance but a lived relation' (1995: 575). 'Lived relation' alerts us to another feature of Existentialism: the responsibility of the individual to take hold of his or her self in a way which ensures *really* existing, rather than sleepwalking through life. That there are no easy answers to the questions Existentialism raises, and that any conclusions are rare and hard-won, can make the engagement with Existentialism both exciting and frustrating.

The History of Existentialism

Although St Augustine (354–430) and Pascal (1623–62) are often cited as exhibiting Existentialist leanings, the modern origins of Existentialism are usually traced back to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55). There is something misleading in this chronology, however, since Kierkegaard did not really find an

international audience until the beginning of the twentieth century, when he became popular with those later identified with Existentialism: Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Franz Kafka, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and others. Two other writers from the nineteenth century are also regarded as helping to shape Existential thought – Friedrich Nietzsche and Fyodor Dostoevsky – and while Nietzsche came to know the work of Kierkegaard late on, it is unlikely that Dostoevsky was acquainted with it. The chain of influence and development is thus not linear, and it is perhaps anachronistic to call writers and thinkers who were active before Sartre 'Existentialists'. That few of the major writers or thinkers have actually nominated themselves as 'Existentialists' since then is often seen as in keeping with the idea of Existentialism itself, which refuses any attempt to pigeon-hole individuals into prescribed and prescribing systems. In fact, who is, and who is not, an Existentialist, has always been open to argument. David E. Cooper in *Existentialism: A Reconstruction* does not consider literary texts (1999: 12), and also excludes Albert Camus (8–9), who wrote both novels and philosophical treatises. Even more severe would be Jean Wahl's suggestion that only those who called themselves 'Existentialists' should be considered as such, which would limit it to Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir (Kern, 1970: 1). Nevertheless, turning to Kierkegaard first allows us to give a historical context to some of the ideas that have come to dominate Existentialism.

Much of Kierkegaard's work was a critique and running commentary on his Christian faith and his relationship with Christianity. The 'aesthetic' works were published under pseudonyms and using *personae*, or voices, through which themes were explored – a fictional or poetic technique rather than a philosophical one. 'What should we choose to do with our lives?' is a central question for Kierkegaard. How can we commit to anything, since any kind of commitment must surely be a leap in the dark? At the same time, to choose one course of action is to close off other possibilities. Kierkegaard also introduced the idea of 'authenticity' and the idea of 'an authentic self' for which we alone are responsible. He described how there was a public pressure to conform to society and that this necessarily led to 'inauthenticity', and that a certain feeling or mood, 'anxiety', indicated or revealed to us that the true nature of our lives is founded on choices which we must make based only

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on what we as individuals create as values. As such, we are therefore forced to make choices based on 'nothing' that is certain: our existence has no grounding, or, to put it in a more dramatically Existential way, we are suspended over an abyss. 'How to live', 'commitment', 'choice', 'freedom', 'anxiety' and 'authenticity' are key concepts in Kierkegaard and we will see them manifest in later thinkers and writers.

If Kierkegaard is the first 'thinker' in the line of Existential philosophers then Dostoevsky (1821–81) stands out as the first Existentialist novelist. Whereas Kierkegaard wrestled with his Christian faith, struggling from within its boundaries, the works of Dostoevsky, particularly the novels *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), question the very notion of there being a God, and envisage what a world looks like without him. Without a God there is no given meaning to the world, there are no set moral standards by which we are to abide. But what does that signify? Does it mean we are free to do whatever we want, without moral constraint? Are we free to murder, for instance? Without a God all our rules can be understood as mere conventions – arbitrary decisions we as humans have made, which we can unmake and replace if we so choose. After all, who is there to tell us otherwise? Without a God there is no authority for any particular law or moral, or at least, no authority higher than each individual. Does that then mean individuals are free to set their own moral standards, their own values, become their own gods? Who has the right to say 'Thou shalt not kill'? This is the question at the heart of *Crime and Punishment* when the main character, Raskolnikov, decides to test his individual values against social morality by murdering a malicious pawnbroker; in *The Brothers Karamazov* it leads to the conclusion that 'nothing would be immoral' (Dostoevsky, 2003: 94).

Just as it is not always possible to credit a particular opinion directly to Kierkegaard the writer because he dramatizes issues through narrators and speakers, Nietzsche too sometimes finds it more fruitful to express ideas through other voices rather than speak directly. Nevertheless, we can identify certain themes which Nietzsche worries away at and which inform Existentialism. Again, as with both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, the role of God, or his absence, is crucial. For Nietzsche, a godless universe allows each man the possibility of becoming his own God, of living his own life according to self-created values. Not only that, Nietzsche urges that

this should be the goal of mankind, or at least a certain type of man within it, who should set himself apart from 'the herd' and follow his own drives and destiny, not slavishly follow those of society. In *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov identifies such a man as Napoleon, a genius not bound by social convention. In Nietzsche's terminology it is the *übermensch* (literally the 'overman', although usually translated as 'superman') who should take up this role. Nietzsche called Dostoevsky 'a psychologist with whom I am in agreement', and the influence, or set of similar concerns, is very apparent (Lavrin, 1971: 128).

It may seem strange that for a philosophy so often characterized as atheistic, its origins are so rooted in questions of the individual's relationship with God, or how we might live in a world where God is absent or dead. For later Existentialist writers and thinkers the issue may not arise at all – it is assumed that there is no God, and the matter is of little or no importance. But for those writing in the deeply religious nineteenth century, such as Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, the place of mankind and the place of the individual with respect to God underpinned all musings. So even when Nietzsche has Zarathustra declare that 'God is dead' in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1981: 41) there is an intimate relationship with the concept of 'God', and his absence from the universe is of the gravest consequence. Taken together, these religious elements in the origins of Existentialism go some way to explaining why there is a very strong spiritual current that carries through into Existentialist writing well into the twentieth century and why there is often a desire to go beyond the present material, physical being and to achieve some kind of transcendence. Again, however, it should be noted that this move towards transcendence is not present in all writers regarded as Existentialists, and Camus in particular takes issue with any thinking that makes an unwarranted 'leap' from what we know to what lies beyond.

Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche can be seen as outsiders, in their writings and in their lives, and it is a feature of Existentialism that its precepts and many of its examples present us with alienated figures. The refusal to conform to society's received values is common to both these writers and is a strong thread that runs throughout Existentialism. But alienation – the sense of 'not belonging', of being 'outside' normal society – can be felt in other ways. In Kakfa's *The Trial* (1925), for instance, K. is arrested at the start of the novel for

reasons which are never specified. He then finds himself in a world where he is unlike others, forced to defend his existence in a world which comes without a rule-book. Who has charged him? Who are the authorities? Is K. guilty without knowing it? How should he behave? Can he ignore the accusations? Since he is not put in prison, there do not appear to be any consequences to being 'under arrest'. After a series of puzzling episodes whereby K. is no nearer to finding out the truth of his circumstances, someone relates a story to him which has a resonance for the novel as a whole (1978: 235–43). A man comes from the country to seek entrance to the Law. He stands in front of the door but the doorkeeper will not let him in. Behind the door, so he is told, is another door, with a doorkeeper of even more terrifying aspect. Behind that door is another door with another doorkeeper . . . and so on. The man from the country tries everything to get past the first doorkeeper, but fails. Finally, in old age, the man from the country asks what will happen when he dies. The doorkeeper tells him the door will be closed – it exists for him only.

The man's search for truth and the granting of meaning appear to lie with some higher authority, which traditionally would have been God, but now in an apparently godless world is uncertain and perhaps impossible. The fact that the door only exists for the man also suggests that meaning and truth are individual matters, that whatever a man discovers is valid for him alone. The closing of the door would also suggest that it is only at the moment of death that the meaning of life can be revealed, although K.'s actual death is very unlike the promise hinted at here. The puzzle of existence, and the necessity to take responsibility for one's existence when there are no guarantees for life other than what each individual creates for his or her self, are both encountered and avoided by K.

If we return to the Existential philosophical lineage, after Nietzsche it is Edmund Husserl's work on phenomenology which leads, quite directly, into the main Existential thought of the twentieth century. His ideas were seized upon by Jaspers, Heidegger and Sartre, among others. He argued that science could only know the world in a certain way which it had already presupposed, but that this was not the way the world was apprehended by individuals. The fact that an object is present or represented in our consciousness has no bearing on the way that that object is in the world. Also crucial for Husserl is that consciousness itself is always 'consciousness of', it is always awareness 'of something'. In Husserl's terminology, such

a consciousness is 'intentional' in that it 'intends' the object ('posits' might be a more accessible term). He argued that we should bracket out objects from the world in order to see them or understand them more clearly, understand them without any preconceptions. In this way, and only in this way, could we truly understand 'phenomena' and this would lead us to an understanding of essences, including an understanding of the essence of consciousness.

The most immediate beneficiary of Husserl's thought was his assistant, Martin Heidegger, and it is with Heidegger that the question of 'Being' truly enters into the canon of Existentialist thought with his seminal work, *Being and Time*, published in 1927. Here, 'Being'[1] becomes central to philosophic enquiry, and 'existence' itself is what we need to explore, or, to anticipate Chapter 4, open ourselves up to. Part of Heidegger's argument is that we are all engaged with the question of Being, since only man questions Being at all, and *should* question it. With what has already been said, it can be seen that such an approach has clear affinities with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, both of whom Heidegger was heavily influenced by. In placing Being alongside time, so that Being can only be understood through time rather than as some abstract, transcendental entity, Heidegger introduces the Existential concept of finitude – each individual's awareness of his or her death. And with Heidegger there is also the awareness of 'others' which demands that we are necessarily in some relation with others, although what this relationship amounts to in Heidegger is open to debate. This putative social aspect of Existentialist thought is often overshadowed by the more self-absorbed subjectivity of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and Existentialism, not unsurprisingly, has a reputation for being individualistic and egotistical at the expense of society. This is not entirely true when we look at the detail of Existentialism, particularly with some of the ideas surrounding 'intersubjectivity', for example, in the work of Martin Buber.

If there is one name synonymous with Existentialism, it is Jean-Paul Sartre. It is always wise to treat the Sartre soundbite with some caution, but his claim that '[Existentialism] . . . is intended strictly for technicians and philosophers' (1973: 26) would suggest that he viewed Existentialism as a serious critical endeavour with a cogent set of ideas. Steeped in Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's *Being and Time*, his own major work *Being and Nothingness* (1943) is a response to Heidegger's book. It is here that Sartre outlines his concepts of

'bad faith', the 'in-itself' and the 'for-itself'. For Sartre, the self is not a thing which I am and simply refer to when I speak about myself, as if it is an entity with fixed propensities and a personal history which amount to (for me) 'Steven Earnshaw', but is a relation between what is there when I reflect upon who Steven Earnshaw is (the 'in-itself'), and the recognition that in reflecting upon this supposedly fixed thing called 'Steven Earnshaw' I am free to imagine and constitute Steven Earnshaw in a different way (the 'for-itself'). According to Sartre, it is the common goal of human beings to strive for a coincidence of the 'for-itself' with the 'in-itself' since this would remove the gap (abyss) between what I think I find as my self and the fact that I am free to be other than this, and would remove the accompanying angst (anxiety) that this self (being) is based on nothing. I should know that to achieve a state of 'in-itself-for-itself' is a pipe-dream, yet if I refuse to accept responsibility for thus 'making' my self I will lapse into 'bad faith', I will lapse into 'inauthenticity'.

The fifth thinker to be discussed in detail is Camus. Camus, Sartre and de Beauvoir were close friends from 1943 when they met during the German occupation of France, and remained so up until the acrimonious dispute and break between Camus and Sartre in 1952, a major event in French political and cultural affairs. The figure of Meursault in Camus's novel *The Outsider* (1942) has epitomized the alienated Existentialist: he remains true to his own beliefs and emotions, and refuses to accept the dictates and hypocrisy of public morality, even when it means his own execution. In his philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) Camus depicts another version of what is taken as a quintessential Existential position: man is alone in the universe, and the only truth open to him is to accept the absurdity of this existence. As with K. in *The Trial*, there is a sense in which we become desensitized to 'existence', we do not take it upon ourselves 'to exist', but merely live a conventional life much as everybody else does; we do not live our own lives. *The Myth of Sisyphus* consequently focuses on another aspect of Existential thought, that to exist is to face the burden of existence, and we should face it with fortitude, we should be aware of it and maintain the struggle with absurdity each day.

The Existential Movement

How much should Existentialism be regarded and perhaps judged as a social movement? It is unusual for a philosophy to attract so

directly a following for its ideas from people who would perhaps otherwise have no interest in philosophy. The typical image of an Existentialist as clad all in black, drinking coffee and smoking on the Paris Left bank has endured, though by all accounts the emergence of the stereotypical Existential figure was something of a surprise to de Beauvoir and other Existentialists of the time (MacDonald, 2000: 5). From 1945 to the 1960s was its heyday, as popular versions of it chimed perfectly with increasing individualism and the concomitant anti-establishment attitudes of those decades, particularly with the counter-culture movements of the Beats in the 1950s and the hippy movement of the 1960s, once it had moved outside mainland Europe. Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* (1956) is indicative, offering a popular socio-cultural analysis of the outsider figure in history, but with a major interest in the Existentialists and their ideas, and a bias towards the literary, with Blake and Dostoevsky featuring alongside Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. This populist side of Existentialism probably had little impact on Existential thought 'proper', however, even if it may have coloured later appreciations and criticisms of it. After all, what are now considered the major texts had all been published by 1943 with Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, or by 1946 if his *Existentialism and Humanism* is included. The social and cultural impacts nevertheless were rather wide, and set in motion a series of books and ideas where other interests are viewed through the concepts of Existentialism, for example: Sociology; Creativity; Education; Theology; Psychotherapy.[2] Some acceptance of existential ideas had quite significant ramifications, for example in R. D. Laing's 'anti-psychiatry' books and practice. A recent book, *Existential Perspectives on Human Issues* (van Deurzen and Arnold-Baker, 2005), would suggest that Existentialism continues to subsist in these related tributaries, a consequence of both the original ideas as propounded in Existential thought and those areas of endeavour caught up in its possible social applications as a practical approach to existence.

The Aesthetics of Existentialism

Although there will no doubt always be a division between those who argue Existentialism should properly be regarded as a philosophy (see below), with any literary and artistic works at best secondary, and those who regard Existentialism as having a wider remit, I think it is fair to say that all those involved have taken a keen interest in

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