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Sir, What a Horror, Existentialism!

In which three people drink apricot cocktails, more people stay up late talking about freedom, and even more people change their lives. We also wonder what existentialism is.

It is sometimes said that existentialism is more of a mood than a philosophy, and that it can be traced back to anguished novelists of the nineteenth century, and beyond that to Blaise Pascal, who was terrified by the silence of infinite spaces, and beyond that to the soul-searching St Augustine, and beyond that to the Old Testament's weary Ecclesiastes and to Job, the man who dared to question the game God was playing with him and was intimidated into submission. To anyone, in short, who has ever felt disgruntled, rebellious, or alienated about anything.

But one can go the other way, and narrow the birth of modern existentialism down to a moment near the turn of 1932–3, when three young philosophers were sitting in the Bec-de-Gaz bar on the rue du Montparnasse in Paris, catching up on gossip and drinking the house speciality, apricot cocktails.

The one who later told the story in most detail was Simone de Beauvoir, then around twenty-five years old and given to watching the world closely through her elegant hooded eyes. She was there with her boyfriend, Jean-Paul Sartre, a round-shouldered twenty-seven-year-old with down-turned grouper lips, a dented complexion, prominent ears, and eyes that pointed in different directions, for his almost-blind right eye tended to wander outwards in a severe exotropia or misalignment of the gaze. Talking to him could be disorienting for the unwary, but if you forced yourself to stick with the left eye, you

would invariably find it watching you with warm intelligence: the eye of a man interested in everything you could tell him.

Sartre and Beauvoir were certainly interested now, because the third person at the table had news for them. This was Sartre's debonair old school friend Raymond Aron, a fellow graduate of the *École normale supérieure*. Like the other two, Aron was in Paris for his winter break. But whereas Sartre and Beauvoir had been teaching in the French provinces – Sartre in Le Havre, Beauvoir in Rouen – Aron had been studying in Berlin. He was now telling his friends about a philosophy he had discovered there with the sinuous name of phenomenology – a word so long yet elegantly balanced that, in French as in English, it can make a line of iambic trimeter all by itself.

Aron may have been saying something like this: traditional philosophers often started with abstract axioms or theories, but the German phenomenologists went straight for life as they experienced it, moment to moment. They set aside most of what had kept philosophy going since Plato: puzzles about whether things are real or how we can know anything for certain about them. Instead, they pointed out that any philosopher who asks these questions is *already* thrown into a world filled with things – or, at least, filled with the appearances of things, or 'phenomena' (from the Greek word meaning 'things that appear'). So why not concentrate on the encounter with phenomena and ignore the rest? The old puzzles need not be ruled out forever, but they can be put in brackets, as it were, so that philosophers can deal with more down-to-earth matters.

The phenomenologists' leading thinker, Edmund Husserl, provided a rallying cry, 'To the things themselves!' It meant: don't waste time on the interpretations that accrue upon things, and especially don't waste time wondering whether the things are real. Just look at *this* that's presenting itself to you, whatever *this* may be, and describe it as precisely as possible. Another phenomenologist, Martin Heidegger, added a different spin. Philosophers all through history have wasted their time on secondary questions, he said, while forgetting to ask the one that matters most, the question of Being. What is it for a thing

to *be*? What does it mean to say that you yourself *are*? Until you ask this, he maintained, you will never get anywhere. Again, he recommended the phenomenological method: disregard intellectual clutter, pay attention to things and let them reveal themselves to you.

'You see, *mon petit camarade*,' said Aron to Sartre – 'my little comrade', his pet name for him since their schooldays – 'if you are a phenomenologist, you can talk about this cocktail and make philosophy out of it!'

Beauvoir wrote that Sartre turned pale on hearing this. She made it sound more dramatic by implying that they had never heard of phenomenology at all. In truth, they had tried to read a little Heidegger. A translation of his lecture 'What Is Metaphysics?' had appeared in the same issue of the journal *Bifur* as an early Sartre essay in 1931. But, she wrote, 'since we could not understand a word of it we failed to see its interest'. Now they saw its interest: it was a way of doing philosophy that reconnected it with normal, lived experience.



They were more than ready for this new beginning. At school and university, Sartre, Beauvoir and Aron had all been through the austere French philosophy syllabus, dominated by questions of knowledge and endless reinterpretation of the works of Immanuel Kant. Epistemological questions opened out of one another like the rounds of a turning kaleidoscope, always returning to the same point: I think I know something, but how can I *know* that I know what I know? It was demanding, yet futile, and all three students – despite excelling in their exams – had felt dissatisfied, Sartre most of all. He hinted after graduation that he was now incubating some new ‘destructive philosophy’, but he was vague about what form it would take, for the simple reason that he had little idea himself. He had barely developed it beyond a general spirit of rebellion. Now it looked as though someone else had got there before him. If Sartre blanched at Aron’s news about phenomenology, it was probably as much from pique as from excitement.

Either way, he never forgot the moment, and commented in an interview over forty years later, ‘I can tell you that knocked me out.’ Here, at last, was a real philosophy. According to Beauvoir, he rushed to the nearest bookshop and said, in effect, ‘Give me everything you have on phenomenology, now!’ What they produced was a slim volume written by Husserl’s student Emmanuel Levinas, *La théorie de l’intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, or *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*. Books still came with their leaves uncut. Sartre tore the edges of Levinas’s book open without waiting to use a paperknife, and began reading as he walked down the street. He could have been Keats, encountering Chapman’s translation of Homer:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies,
 When a new planet swims into his ken;
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
 He star’d at the Pacific – and all his men
 Look’d at each other with a wild surmise –
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Sartre did not have eagle eyes and was never good at being silent, but he was certainly full of surmises. Aron, seeing his enthusiasm, suggested that he travel to Berlin in the coming autumn to study at the French Institute there, just as he had done. Sartre could study the German language, read the phenomenologists' works in the original, and absorb their philosophical energy from near at hand.

With the Nazis just coming to power, 1933 was not the perfect year to move to Germany. But it was a good time for Sartre to change the direction of his life. He was bored with teaching, bored with what he had learned at university, and bored with not yet having developed into the author of genius he had been expecting to become since childhood. To write what he wanted – novels, essays, everything – he knew he must first have Adventures. He had fantasised about labouring with dockers in Constantinople, meditating with monks on Mount Athos, skulking with pariahs in India, and battling storms with fisherman off the coast of Newfoundland. For now, just not teaching schoolboys in Le Havre was adventure enough.

He made the arrangements, the summer passed, and he went to Berlin to study. When he returned at the end of his year, he brought back a new blend: the methods of German phenomenology, mixed with ideas from the earlier Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and others, set off with the distinctively French seasoning of his own literary sensibility. He applied phenomenology to people's lives in a more exciting, personal way than its inventors had ever thought to do, and thus made himself the founding father of a philosophy that became international in impact, but remained Parisian in flavour: modern existentialism.

The brilliance of Sartre's invention lay in the fact that he did indeed turn phenomenology into a philosophy of apricot cocktails – and of the waiters who served them. Also a philosophy of expectation, tiredness, apprehensiveness, excitement, a walk up a hill, the passion for a desired lover, the revulsion from an unwanted one, Parisian gardens, the cold autumn sea at Le Havre, the feeling of sitting on overstuffed upholstery, the way a woman's breasts pool as she lies on her back,

the thrill of a boxing match, a film, a jazz song, a glimpse of two strangers meeting under a street lamp. He made philosophy out of vertigo, voyeurism, shame, sadism, revolution, music and sex. Lots of sex.

Where philosophers before him had written in careful propositions and arguments, Sartre wrote like a novelist – not surprisingly, since he was one. In his novels, short stories and plays as well as in his philosophical treatises, he wrote about the physical sensations of the world and the structures and moods of human life. Above all, he wrote about one big subject: what it meant to be free.

Freedom, for him, lay at the heart of all human experience, and this set humans apart from all other kinds of object. Other things merely sit in place, waiting to be pushed or pulled around. Even non-human animals mostly follow the instincts and behaviours that characterise their species, Sartre believed. But as a human being, I have no predefined nature at all. I create that nature through what I choose to do. Of course I may be influenced by my biology, or by aspects of my culture and personal background, but none of this adds up to a complete blueprint for producing me. I am always one step ahead of myself, making myself up as I go along.

Sartre put this principle into a three-word slogan, which for him defined existentialism: 'Existence precedes essence'. What this formula gains in brevity it loses in comprehensibility. But roughly it means that, having found myself thrown into the world, I go on to create my own definition (or nature, or essence), in a way that never happens with other objects or life forms. You might think you have defined me by some label, but you are wrong, for I am always a work in progress. I create myself constantly through action, and this is so fundamental to my human condition that, for Sartre, it is the human condition, from the moment of first consciousness to the moment when death wipes it out. I am my own freedom: no more, no less.

This was an intoxicating idea, and once Sartre had fully refined it – that is, by the last years of the Second World War – it had made him a star. He was feted, courted as a guru, interviewed, photographed, commissioned to write articles and forewords, invited on to committees,

broadcast on the radio. People often called on him to pronounce on subjects outside his expertise, yet he was never lost for words. Simone de Beauvoir too wrote fiction, broadcasts, diaries, essays and philosophical treatises – all united by a philosophy that was often close to Sartre's, though she had developed much of it separately and her emphasis differed. The two of them went on lecture and book tours together, sometimes being set up on throne-like chairs at the centre of discussions, as befitted the king and queen of existentialism.

Sartre first realised what a celebrity he had become on 28 October 1945, when he gave a public talk for the Club Maintenant (the 'Now Club') at the Salle des Centraux in Paris. Both he and the organisers had underestimated the size of the crowd that would show up for a talk by Sartre. The box office was mobbed; many people went in free because they could not get near to the ticket desk. In the jostling, chairs were damaged, and a few audience members passed out in the unseasonable heat. As a photo-caption writer for *Time* magazine put it, 'Philosopher Sartre. Women swooned.'

The talk was a big success. Sartre, who was only about five foot high, must have been barely visible above the crowd, but he delivered a rousing exposition of his ideas, and later turned it into a book, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, translated as *Existentialism and Humanism*. Both lecture and book culminated in an anecdote which would have sounded very familiar to an audience fresh from the experience of Nazi Occupation and Liberation. The story summed up both the shock value and the appeal of his philosophy.

One day during the Occupation, Sartre said, an ex-student of his had come to him for advice. The young man's brother had been killed in battle in 1940, before the French surrender; then his father had turned collaborator and deserted the family. The young man became his mother's only companion and support. But what he longed to do was to sneak across the border via Spain to England, to join the Free French forces in exile and fight the Nazis – red-blooded combat at last, and a chance to avenge his brother, defy his father, and help to free his country. The problem was, it would leave his mother alone and in danger at a time when it was hard even to get food on the

table. It might also get her into trouble with the Germans. So: should he do the right thing by his mother, with clear benefits to her alone, or should he take a chance on joining the fight and doing right by many?

Philosophers still get into tangles trying to answer ethical conundrums of this kind. Sartre's puzzle has something in common with a famous thought experiment, the 'trolley problem'. This proposes that you see a runaway train or trolley hurtling along a track to which, a little way ahead, five people are tied. If you do nothing, the five people will die – but you notice a lever which you might throw to divert the train to a sidetrack. If you do this, however, it will kill one person, who is tied to that part of the track and who would be safe if not for your action. So do you cause the death of this one person, or do you do nothing and allow five to die? (In a variant, the 'fat man' problem, you can only derail the train by throwing a hefty individual off a nearby bridge onto the track. This time you must physically lay hands on the person you are going to kill, which makes it a more visceral and difficult dilemma.) Sartre's student's decision could be seen as a 'trolley problem' type of decision, but made even more complicated by the fact that he could not be sure either that his going to England would actually help anyone, nor that leaving his mother would seriously harm her.

Sartre was not concerned with reasoning his way through an ethical calculus in the traditional way of philosophers, however – let alone 'trolleyologists', as they have become known. He led his audience to think about it more personally. What is it like to be faced with such a choice? How exactly does a confused young man go about dealing with such a decision about how to act? Who can help him, and how? Sartre approached this last part by looking at the question of who could *not* help him.

Before coming to Sartre, the student had thought of seeking advice from the established moral authorities. He considered going to a priest – but priests were sometimes collaborators themselves, and anyway he knew that Christian ethics could only tell him to love his neighbour and do good to others, without specifying which others

– mother or France. Next, he thought of turning to the philosophers he had studied at school, supposedly founts of wisdom. But the philosophers were too abstract: he felt they had nothing to say to him in his situation. Then, he tried to listen to his inner voice: perhaps, deep in his heart, he would find the answer. But no: in his soul, the student heard only a clamour of voices saying different things (perhaps things like: I must stay, I must go, I must do the brave thing, I must be a good son, I want action, but I'm scared, I don't want to die, I have to get away. I will be a better man than Papa! Do I truly love my country? Am I faking it?). Amid this cacophony, he could not even trust himself. As a last resort, the young man turned to his former teacher Sartre, knowing that from him at least he would not get a conventional answer.

Sure enough, Sartre listened to his problem and said simply, 'You are free, therefore choose – that is to say, invent.' No signs are vouchsafed in this world, he said. None of the old authorities can relieve you of the burden of freedom. You can weigh up moral or practical considerations as carefully as you like, but ultimately you must take the plunge and do something, and it's up to you what that something is.

Sartre doesn't tell us whether the student felt this was helpful, nor what he decided to do in the end. We don't know whether he existed, or was an amalgam of several young friends or even a complete invention. But the point Sartre wanted his audience to get was that each of them was as free as the student, even if their predicaments were less dramatic. You might think you are guided by moral laws, he was saying to them, or that you act in certain ways because of your psychological make-up or past experiences, or because of what is happening around you. These factors can play a role, but the whole mixture merely adds up to the 'situation' out of which you must act. Even if the situation is unbearable – perhaps you are facing execution, or sitting in a Gestapo prison, or about to fall off a cliff – you are still free to decide what to make of it in mind and deed. Starting from where you are now, you choose. And in choosing, you also choose who you will be.

If this sounds difficult and unnerving, it's because it is. Sartre does not deny that the need to keep making decisions brings constant anxiety. He heightens this anxiety by pointing out that what you do really *matters*. You should make your choices as though you were choosing on behalf of the whole of humanity, taking the entire burden of responsibility for how the human race behaves. If you avoid this responsibility by fooling yourself that you are the victim of circumstance or of someone else's bad advice, you are failing to meet the demands of human life and choosing a fake existence, cut off from your own 'authenticity'.

Along with the terrifying side of this comes a great promise: Sartre's existentialism implies that it *is* possible to be authentic and free, as long as you keep up the effort. It is exhilarating to exactly the same degree that it's frightening, and for the same reasons. As Sartre summed it up in an interview shortly after the lecture:

There is no traced-out path to lead man to his salvation; he must constantly invent his own path. But, to invent it, he is free, responsible, without excuse, and every hope lies within him.

It's a bracing thought, and was an attractive one in 1945, when established social and political institutions had been undermined by the war. In France and elsewhere, many had good reason to forget the recent past and its moral compromises and horrors, in order to focus on new beginnings. But there were deeper reasons to seek renewal. Sartre's audience heard his message at a time when much of Europe lay in ruins, news of Nazi death camps had emerged, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been destroyed by atom bombs. The war had made people realise that they and their fellow humans were capable of departing entirely from civilised norms; no wonder the idea of a fixed human nature seemed questionable. Whatever new world was going to arise out of the old one, it would probably need to be built without reliable guidance from sources of authority such as politicians, religious leaders, and even philosophers – the old kind of philosophers, that is, in their remote and abstract worlds. But

here was a new kind of philosopher, ready to wade in and perfectly suited to the task.

Sartre's big question in the mid-1940s was: given that we are free, how can we use our freedom well in such challenging times? In his essay 'The End of the War', written just after Hiroshima and published in October 1945 – the same month as the lecture – he extorted his readers to decide what kind of world they wanted, and make it happen. From now on, he wrote, we must always take into account our knowledge that we can destroy ourselves at will, with all our history and perhaps life on earth itself. Nothing stops us but our own free choosing. If we want to survive, we have to *decide* to live. Thus, he offered a philosophy designed for a species that had just scared the hell out of itself, but that finally felt ready to grow up and take responsibility.

The institutions whose authority Sartre challenged in his writings and talks responded aggressively. The Catholic Church put Sartre's entire works on its *Index of Prohibited Books* in 1948, from his great philosophical tome *Being and Nothingness* to his novels, plays and essays. They feared, rightly, that his talk of freedom might make people doubt their faith. Simone de Beauvoir's even more provocative feminist treatise *The Second Sex* was also added to the list. One would expect political conservatives to dislike existentialism; more surprisingly, Marxists hated it too. Sartre is now often remembered as an apologist for Communist regimes, yet for a long time he was vilified by the party. After all, if people insisted on thinking of themselves as free individuals, how could there ever be a properly organised revolution? Marxists thought humanity was destined to move through determined stages towards socialist paradise; this left little room for the idea that each of us is personally responsible for what we do. From different ideological starting points, opponents of existentialism almost all agreed that it was, as an article in *Les nouvelles littéraires* phrased it, a 'sickening mixture of philosophic pretentiousness, equivocal dreams, physiological technicalities, morbid tastes and hesitant eroticism . . . an introspective embryo that one would take distinct pleasure in crushing'.

Such attacks only enhanced existentialism's appeal for the young and rebellious, who took it on as a way of life and a trendy label. From the mid-1940s, 'existentialist' was used as shorthand for anyone who practised free love and stayed up late dancing to jazz music. As the actor and nightclubber Anne-Marie Cazalis remarked in her memoirs, 'If you were twenty, in 1945, after four years of Occupation, freedom also meant the freedom to go to bed at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning.' It meant offending your elders and defying the order of things. It could also mean mingling promiscuously with different races and classes. The philosopher Gabriel Marcel heard a lady on a train saying, 'Sir, what a horror, existentialism! I have a friend whose son is an existentialist; he lives in a kitchen with a Negro woman!'

The existentialist subculture that rose up in the 1940s found its home in the environs of the Saint-Germain-des-Prés church on the Left Bank of Paris – an area that still milks the association for all it is worth. Sartre and Beauvoir spent many years living in cheap Saint-Germain hotels and writing all day in cafés, mainly because these were warmer places to go than the unheated hotel rooms. They favoured the Flore, the Deux Magots and the Bar Napoléon, all clustered around the corner of the boulevard Saint-Germain and the rue Bonaparte. The Flore was the best, for its proprietor sometimes let them work in a private room upstairs when nosy journalists or passers-by became too intrusive. Yet they also loved the lively tables downstairs, at least in the early days: Sartre enjoyed working in public spaces amid noise and bustle. He and Beauvoir held court with friends, colleagues, artists, writers, students and lovers, all talking at once and all bound by ribbons of cigarette or pipe smoke.

After the cafés, there were subterranean jazz dives to go to: in the Lorientais, Claude Luter's band played blues, jazz and ragtime, while the star of the club Tabou was the trumpeter and novelist Boris Vian. You could undulate to a jazz band's jagged parps and bleats, or debate authenticity in a dark corner while listening to the smoky voice of Cazalis's friend and fellow muse, Juliette Gréco, who became a famous chanteuse after her arrival in Paris in 1946. She, Cazalis and Michelle Vian (Boris's wife) would watch new arrivals at the Lorientais and



Tabou, and refuse entry to anyone who did not look suitable – although, according to Michelle Vian, they would admit anyone ‘so long as they were interesting – that is, if they had a book under their arm’. Among the regulars were many of the people who had written these books, notably Raymond Queneau and his friend Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who both discovered the nightclub world through Cazalis and Gréco.

Gréco started a fashion for long, straight, existentialist hair – the ‘drowning victim’ look, as one journalist wrote – and for looking chic in thick sweaters and men’s jackets with the sleeves rolled up. She said she first grew her hair long to keep warm in the war years; Beauvoir said the same thing about her own habit of wearing a turban. Existentialists wore cast-off shirts and raincoats; some of them sported what sounds like a proto-punk style. One youth went around with ‘a completely shredded and tattered shirt on his back’, according to a journalist’s report. They eventually adopted the most iconic existentialist garment of all: the black woollen turtleneck.

In this rebellious world, just as with the Parisian bohemians and

Dadaists in earlier generations, everything that was dangerous and provocative was good, and everything that was nice or bourgeois was bad. Beauvoir delighted in telling a story about her friend, the destitute alcoholic German artist known as Wols (from Alfredo Otto Wolfgang Schulze, his real name), who hung around the area living on handouts and scraps. One day, he was drinking with Beauvoir on the terrace of a bar when a wealthy-looking gentleman stopped to speak to him. After the man had gone, Wols turned to Beauvoir in embarrassment, and said, 'I'm sorry; that fellow is my brother: a banker!' It amused her to hear him apologise exactly as a banker might on being seen speaking to a tramp. Such topsy-turvydom may seem less odd today, following decades of such counter-cultural inversions, but at the time it still had the power to shock some – and to delight others.

Journalists, who thrived on salacious tales of the existentialist milieu, took a special interest in the love lives of Beauvoir and Sartre. The pair were known to have an open relationship, in which each was the primary long-term partner for the other but remained free to have other lovers. Both exercised this freedom with gusto. Beauvoir had significant relationships later in life, including with the American writer Nelson Algren and with Claude Lanzmann, the French film-maker who later made the nine-hour Holocaust documentary *Shoah*. As a woman, Beauvoir was judged more severely for her behaviour, but the press also mocked Sartre for his serial seductions. One story in *Samedi-soir* in 1945 claimed that he tempted women up to his bedroom by offering them a sniff of his Camembert cheese. (Well, good cheese was hard to get in 1945.)

In reality, Sartre did not need to dangle cheese to get women into his bed. One may marvel at this, looking at his photos, but his success came less from his appearance than from his air of intellectual energy and confidence. He talked enthrallingly about ideas, but he was fun too: he sang 'Old Man River' and other jazz hits in a fine voice, played piano, and did Donald Duck imitations. Raymond Aron wrote of Sartre in his schooldays that 'his ugliness disappeared as soon as he began to speak, as soon as his intelligence erased the pimples and swellings of his face'. Another acquaintance, Violette Leduc, agreed

that his face could never be ugly because it was illuminated by the brilliance of his mind, as well as having ‘the honesty of an erupting volcano’ and ‘the generosity of a newly ploughed field’. And when the sculptor Alberto Giacometti sketched Sartre, he exclaimed as he worked, ‘What density! What lines of force!’ Sartre’s was a questioning, philosophical face: everything in it sent you somewhere else, swirling from one asymmetrical feature to another. He could wear people out, but he wasn’t boring, and his clique of admirers grew and grew.

For Sartre and Beauvoir, their open relationship was more than a personal arrangement; it was a philosophical choice. They wanted to *live* their theory of freedom. The bourgeois model of marriage had no appeal for them, with its strict gender roles, its hushed-up infidelities, and its dedication to the accumulation of property and children. They had no children, they owned little, and they never even lived together, although they put their relationship before all others and met almost every day to work side by side.

They turned their philosophy into the stuff of real life in other ways, too. Both believed in committing themselves to political activity, and put their time, energy and fame at the disposal of anyone whose cause they supported. Younger friends turned to them for help in starting their careers, and for financial support: Beauvoir and Sartre each maintained protégés. They poured out polemical articles and published them in the journal they established with friends in 1945, *Les Temps modernes*. In 1973, Sartre also co-founded the major left-wing newspaper *Libération*. This has undergone several transformations since, including moving towards a more moderate politics and nearly going bankrupt, but both publications are still going at the time I’m writing this.

As their status grew and everything conspired to tempt them into the Establishment, Sartre and Beauvoir remained fierce in their insistence on remaining intellectual outsiders. Neither became academics in the conventional sense. They lived by school-teaching or freelancing. Their friends did likewise: they were playwrights, publishers, reporters, editors or essayists, but only a handful were university insiders. When Sartre was offered the Légion d’honneur for his Resistance activities

in 1945, and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1964, he rejected them both, citing a writer's need to stay independent of interests and influences. Beauvoir rejected the Légion d'honneur in 1982 for the same reason. In 1949, François Mauriac put Sartre forward for election to the Académie française, but Sartre refused it.

'My life and my philosophy are one and the same', he once wrote in his diary, and he stuck to this principle unflinchingly. This blending of life and philosophy also made him interested in other people's lives. He became an innovative biographer, publishing around two million words of life-writing, including studies of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Genet and Flaubert as well as a memoir of his own childhood. Beauvoir too collected the minutiae of her own experience and that of friends, and shaped it all into four rich volumes of autobiography, supplemented by one memoir about her mother and another about her last years with Sartre.

Sartre's experiences and quirks found their way even into his most serious philosophical treatises. This could make for strange results, given that his personal take on life ranged from bad mescaline flashbacks and a series of embarrassing situations with lovers and friends to bizarre obsessions with trees, viscous liquids, octopuses and crustaceans. But it all made sense according to the principle first announced by Raymond Aron that day in the Bec-de-Gaz: *you can make philosophy out of this cocktail*. The topic of philosophy is whatever you experience, as you experience it.

Such interweaving of ideas and life had a long pedigree, although the existentialists gave it a new twist. Stoic and Epicurean thinkers in the classical world had practised philosophy as a means of living well, rather than of seeking knowledge or wisdom for their own sake. By reflecting on life's vagaries in philosophical ways, they believed they could become more resilient, more able to rise above circumstances, and better equipped to manage grief, fear, anger, disappointment or anxiety. In the tradition they passed on, philosophy is neither a pure intellectual pursuit nor a collection of cheap self-help tricks, but a discipline for flourishing and living a fully human, responsible life.

As the centuries went by, philosophy increasingly became a profession conducted in academies or universities, by scholars who sometimes prided themselves on their discipline's exquisite uselessness. Yet the tradition of philosophy as a way of life continued in a sort of shadow-line alongside this, often conducted by mavericks who had slipped through the gaps in traditional universities. Two such misfits in the nineteenth century had a particularly strong influence on the later existentialists: Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Neither was an academic philosopher: Kierkegaard had no university career, and Nietzsche was a professor of Greek and Roman philology who had to retire because of ill health. Both were individualists, and both were contrarians by nature, dedicated to making people uncomfortable. Both must have been unbearable to spend more than a few hours with. Both sit outside the main story of modern existentialism, as precursors, but had a great impact on what developed later.



Søren Kierkegaard, born in Copenhagen in 1813, set the tone by using 'existential' in a new way to denote thought concerning the problems of human existence. He included it in the unwieldy title of a work of 1846: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments: a mimical-pathetical-dialectical compilation: an existential contribution*. This eccentric title was typical of him: he liked to play games with his publications, and he had a good eye for the attention-grabbing phrase: his other works

included *From the Papers of One Still Living*, *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, and *The Sickness Unto Death*.

Kierkegaard was well placed to understand the awkwardness and difficulty of human existence. Everything about him was irregular, including his gait, as he had a twisted spine for which his enemies cruelly mocked him. Tormented by religious questions, and feeling

himself set apart from the rest of humanity, he led a solitary life much of the time. At intervals, though, he would go out to take ‘people baths’ around the streets of Copenhagen, buttonholing acquaintances and dragging them with him for long philosophical walks. His companions would struggle to keep up as he strode and ranted and waved his cane. One friend, Hans Brøchner, recalled how, when on a walk with Kierkegaard, ‘one was always being pushed, by turns, either in towards the houses and the cellar stairwells, or out towards the gutters’. Every so often, one had to move to his other side to regain space. Kierkegaard considered it a matter of principle to throw people off their stride. He wrote that he would love to sit someone on a horse and startle it into a gallop, or perhaps give a man in a hurry a lame horse, or even hitch his carriage to two horses who went at different speeds – anything to goad the person into seeing what he meant by the ‘passion’ of existence. Kierkegaard was a born goader. He picked quarrels with his contemporaries, broke off personal relationships, and generally made difficulties out of everything. He wrote: ‘Abstraction is disinterested, but for one who exists his existing is the supreme interest.’

He applied the same argumentative attitude to the personnel of philosophical history. He disagreed, for example, with René Descartes, who had founded modern philosophy by stating *Cogito ergo sum*: I think, therefore I am. For Kierkegaard, Descartes had things back to front. In his own view, human existence comes first: it is the starting point for everything we do, not the result of a logical deduction. My existence is active: I live it and choose it, and this precedes any statement I can make about myself. Moreover, my existence is *mine*: it is personal. Descartes’ ‘I’ is generic: it could apply to anyone, but Kierkegaard’s ‘I’ is the ‘I’ of an argumentative, anguished misfit.

He also took issue with G. W. F. Hegel, whose philosophy showed the world evolving dialectically through a succession of ‘forms of consciousness’, each stage superseding the one before until they all rise up sublimely into ‘Absolute Spirit’. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* leads us to a climax as grand as that of the biblical Book of Revelation, but instead of ending with everyone divided between heaven and hell, it subsumes us all into cosmic consciousness. Kierkegaard countered

Hegel with typically awkward questions: what if I don't choose to be part of this 'Absolute Spirit'? What if I refuse to be absorbed, and insist on just being *me*?

Sartre read Kierkegaard, and was fascinated by his contrarian spirit and by his rebellion against the grand philosophical systems of the past. He also borrowed Kierkegaard's specific use of the word 'existence' to denote the human way of being, in which we mould ourselves by making 'either/or' choices at every step. Sartre agreed with him that this constant choosing brings a pervasive anxiety, not unlike the vertigo that comes from looking over a cliff. It is not the fear of falling so much as the fear that you can't trust yourself not to throw yourself off. Your head spins; you want to cling to something, to tie yourself down – but you can't secure yourself so easily against the dangers that come with being free. 'Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom', wrote Kierkegaard. Our whole lives are lived on the edge of that precipice, in his view and also in Sartre's.

There were other aspects of Kierkegaard's thought that Sartre would never accept, however. Kierkegaard thought that the answer to 'anguish' was to take a leap of faith into the arms of God, whether or not you could feel sure that He was there. This was a plunge into the 'Absurd' – into what cannot be rationally proved or justified. Sartre did not care for this. He had lost his own religious beliefs early in life: apparently it happened when he was about eleven years old and standing at a bus stop. He just knew, suddenly, that God did not exist. The faith never came back, so he remained a stalwart atheist for the rest of his life. The same was true of Beauvoir, who rejected her conventional religious upbringing. Other thinkers followed Kierkegaard's theological existentialism in various ways, but Sartre and Beauvoir were repelled by it.

They found a philosophy more to their taste in the other great nineteenth-century existentialist precursor, Friedrich Nietzsche. Born in Röcken in Prussia in 1844, Nietzsche set out on his brilliant career in philology, but turned to writing idiosyncratic philosophical treatises and collections of aphorisms. He directed these against the pious dogmas of Christianity and of traditional philosophy alike: for him,

both were self-serving veils drawn over the harsher realities of life. What was needed, he felt, was not high moral or theological ideals, but a deeply critical form of cultural history or 'genealogy' that would uncover the reasons why we humans are as we are, and how we came to be that way. For him, all philosophy could even be redefined as a form of psychology, or history. He believed that every great philosopher actually wrote 'a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir' rather than conducting an impersonal search for knowledge. Studying our own moral genealogy cannot help us to escape or transcend ourselves. But it can enable us to see our illusions more clearly and lead a more vital, assertive existence.

There is no God in this picture, because the human beings who invented God have also killed Him. It is now up to us alone. The way to live is to throw ourselves, not into faith, but into our own lives, conducting them in affirmation of every moment, exactly as it is, without wishing that anything was different, and without harbouring peevish resentment against others or against our fate.

Nietzsche was unable to put his ideas into much effect in his own life, not because he lacked the courage, but because his body betrayed him. In his forties, he fell victim to a disease, possibly syphilis or a brain tumour, which destroyed his faculties. After a distraught episode on the streets of Turin in January 1889, during which (the story goes) he weepingly threw his arms around the neck of an abused horse, he fell into irreversible dementia and spent the rest of his life an invalid. He died in 1900, having no idea of the impact his vision of human existence would one day have on the existentialists and others. Probably it would not have surprised him: while his own time failed to understand, he always felt his day would come.

Nietzsche and Kierkegaard were the heralds of modern existentialism. They pioneered a mood of rebellion and dissatisfaction, created a new definition of existence as choice, action and self-assertion, and made a study of the anguish and difficulty of life. They also worked in the conviction that philosophy was not just a profession. It was life itself – the life of an individual.

Having absorbed these older influences, the modern existentialists went on to inspire their own and later generations in a similar way, with their message of individualism and nonconformity. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, existentialism offered people reasons to reject convention and change their lives.

The most transformative existentialist work of all was Simone de Beauvoir's pioneering feminist study, *The Second Sex*, published in 1949. An analysis of women's experience and life choices, as well as of the whole history of patriarchal society, it encouraged women to raise their consciousness, question received ideas and routines, and seize control of their existence. Many who read it may not have realised they were reading an existentialist work (partly because the English-language translation obscured much of its philosophical meaning), but that was what it was – and when women changed their lives after reading it, they did so in existentialist ways, seeking freedom and a heightened individuality and 'authenticity'.

The book was considered shocking at the time, not least because it included a chapter on lesbianism – although few yet knew that Beauvoir herself had had sexual relationships with both sexes. Sartre too supported gay rights, although he always insisted that sexuality was a matter of choice, which put him at odds with the views of many gay people who felt that they were simply born that way. In any case, existentialist philosophy offered gay people encouragement to live in the way that felt right, rather than trying to fit in with others' ideas of how they should be.

For those oppressed on grounds of race or class, or for those fighting against colonialism, existentialism offered a change of perspective – literally, as Sartre proposed that all situations be judged according to how they appeared in the eyes of those most oppressed, or those whose suffering was greatest. Martin Luther King Jr was among the civil-rights pioneers who took an interest. While working on his philosophy of non-violent resistance, he read Sartre, Heidegger and the German-American existentialist theologian Paul Tillich.

No one could argue that existentialism was responsible for every social change in the mid-twentieth century. But, with its insistence on

freedom and authenticity, it gave impetus to radicals and protesters. And when the waves of change rose and broke into the students' and workers' uprisings of 1968, in Paris and elsewhere, many of the slogans painted on city walls echoed existentialist themes:

- It is forbidden to forbid.
- Neither god nor master.
- A man is not 'intelligent'; he is free or he is not.
- Be realistic: demand the impossible.

As Sartre remarked, the demonstrators on the 1968 barricades demanded nothing and everything – that is to say, they demanded freedom.

By 1968, most of the torn-shirted, kohl-eyed night-owls of the late 1940s had settled down to quiet homes and jobs, but not Sartre or Beauvoir. They marched in the front line, joined the Paris barricades, and addressed factory workers and students on picket lines, even though they sometimes found themselves perplexed by the new generation's way of doing things. On 20 May 1968, Sartre spoke to a gathering of about 7,000 students who had occupied the Sorbonne's magnificent auditorium. Of all the eager intellectuals who had wanted to get involved, Sartre was the one chosen to be wired up to a microphone and led before the melee to speak – as always, so diminutive that he was hard to spot, but in no doubt about his qualification for the role. He appeared first at a window to address students in the courtyard outside, like the Pope on the Vatican balcony, before being led into the packed auditorium. The students had piled themselves everywhere inside, climbing over the statues – 'there were students sitting in the arms of Descartes and others on Richelieu's shoulders', wrote Beauvoir. Loudspeakers mounted on the columns in the hallways transmitted the speeches outside. A TV camera appeared, but the students shouted for it to be taken away. Sartre had to bellow to be heard even through the microphone, but the crowd slowly calmed down to listen to the grand old existentialist. Afterwards, they kept him busy with questions about socialism and about post-colonial liberation movements. Beauvoir worried that he'd never get out of the hall again. When he did, it was

to find a jealous group of writers waiting in the wings, annoyed that he'd been the only 'star' (as Marguerite Duras allegedly grumbled) whom the students wanted to hear.

Sartre was then just short of his sixty-third birthday. His listeners were young enough to be his grandchildren. Few would have remembered the end of the war, let alone those early years of the 1930s when he had begun thinking about freedom and existence. They would have seen Sartre more as a national treasure than as truly one of themselves. Yet they owed even more to him than they could have realised, in a way that went beyond political activism. He formed a link between them and his own generation of dissatisfied students in the late 1920s, bored with their studies and longing for 'destructive' new ideas. Further back, he connected them to the whole line of philosophical rebels: Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and the rest.

Sartre was the bridge to all the traditions that he plundered, modernised, personalised and reinvented. Yet he insisted all his life that what mattered was not the past at all: it was the future. One must keep moving, creating what *will* be: acting in the world and making a difference to it. His dedication to the future remained unchanged even as, entering his seventies, he began to weaken, to lose what remained of his vision, and to become hard of hearing and confused in his mind – and eventually to succumb to the weight of years after all.

Twelve years after the Sorbonne occupation, the biggest crowd of all assembled for Sartre's final celebrity appearance: his funeral, on 19 April 1980. It was not a state ceremony, as his refusal of Establishment pomp was honoured to the end. But it was certainly a massive public occasion.

Excerpts from the television coverage are still viewable online: you can watch as the hospital doors open and a small truck slowly emerges, piled high with a mountain of floral sprays that teeter and wave like soft coral as the vehicle creeps into the mass of people. Helpers walk in front to clear the way. Behind the truck comes the hearse, inside which you see the coffin, and Simone de Beauvoir with other chief mourners. The camera focuses on a single rose which someone has tucked into the hearse's door handle. Then it picks out a corner of

the black cloth draped over the coffin inside, decorated with a single letter 'S'. The hushed commentator tells us that some 50,000 people are attending; about 30,000 of these line the three kilometres or so of streets between here and the Montparnasse cemetery, while another 20,000 wait at the cemetery itself. Just like the 1968 students, some people inside the cemetery have climbed onto the laps or heads of memorial figures. Minor mishaps have occurred; one man reportedly fell into the open grave and had to be hauled out.

The vehicles arrive and halt; we see bearers extract the coffin and convey it to the graveside, struggling to push through while maintaining their dignified demeanour. One bearer removes his hat, then realises the others have not, and replaces it: a tiny awkward moment. At the graveside, they lower the coffin in, and the mourners are handed forward. Someone passes a chair for Simone de Beauvoir to sit on. She looks dazed and exhausted, a headscarf tied over her hair; she has been dosing herself with sedatives. She drops a single flower into the grave, and many more flowers are thrown in on top of it.

The film footage shows only the first of two ceremonies. In a quieter event the following week, the coffin was dug up and the smaller coffin inside it removed so that Sartre could be cremated. His ashes went to their permanent spot, in the same cemetery but less accessible to a large procession. The funeral was for the public Sartre; the second burial was attended only by those close to him. The grave, with Beauvoir's ashes interred next to him when she died six years later, is still there, kept well tidied and occasionally flowered.

With these ceremonies, an era ended, and so did the personal story that wove Sartre and Beauvoir into the lives of so many other people. In the filmed crowd, you see a diversity of faces, old and young, black and white, male and female. They included students, writers, people who remembered his wartime Resistance activities, trade-union members whose strikes he had supported, and independence activists from Indochina, Algeria and elsewhere, honouring his contribution to their campaigns. For some, the funeral verged on being a protest march: Claude Lanzmann later described it as the last of the great 1968 demonstrations. But many attended only out of curiosity or a

sense of occasion, or because Sartre had made some small difference in some aspect of their lives – or because the ending of such an outsized life simply demanded some gesture of participation.

I have watched that brief film clip online a dozen or more times, peering into the low-definition images of the many faces, wondering what existentialism and Jean-Paul Sartre meant to each of them. I only really know what they meant to me. Sartre's books changed my life too, albeit in an indirect and low-key way. I somehow failed to notice the news of his death and funeral in 1980, although I was already a suburban existentialist by then, aged seventeen.

I had become fascinated by him a year earlier. On a whim, I spent some of my sixteenth-birthday money on his 1938 novel *Nausea*, mainly because I liked the Salvador Dalí image on the Penguin cover: a bile-green rock formation and a dripping watch. I also liked the cover blurb, which called *Nausea* 'a novel of the alienation of personality and the mystery of being'. I wasn't sure what alienation meant, although I was a perfect example of it at the time. But I had no doubt that it would be my kind of book. It was indeed: when I started



reading, I bonded at once with its gloomy outsider protagonist Antoine Roquentin, who spends his days drifting disconsolately around the provincial seaside town of 'Bouville' (modelled on Le Havre, where Sartre had been stuck as a teacher). Roquentin sits in cafés and listens to blues records instead of getting on with the biography he is supposed to be writing. He walks by the sea and throws pebbles into its grey, porridge-like depths. He goes to a park and stares at the gnarled exposed root of a chestnut tree,

which looks to him like boiled leather and threatens to overwhelm him by the sheer opaque force of its being.

I loved all this and was intrigued to learn that this story was Sartre's way of communicating a philosophy called 'existentialism'. But what was all this about 'being'? I had never been overwhelmed by the being of a chestnut root, nor had I noticed that things *had* being. I tried going to the public gardens in my own provincial town of Reading and staring at one of the trees until my eyes blurred. It didn't work; I thought I saw something move, but it was just the breeze in the leaves. Yet looking at something so closely did give me a kind of glow. From then on, I too neglected my studies in order to *exist*. I had already been inclined to absenteeism; now, under Sartre's influence, I became a more dedicated truant than ever. Instead of going to school, I got myself an unofficial part-time job in a Caribbean emporium selling reggae records and decorative hash pipes. It provided a more interesting education than I had ever had in a classroom.

Sartre had taught me to drop out, an underrated and sometimes useful response to the world. On the other hand, he also made me want to study philosophy. That meant passing exams, so I reluctantly applied myself to the syllabus at the last moment and squeaked through. I went to Essex University, where I did a philosophy degree and read more Sartre, as well as other thinkers. I fell under the spell of Heidegger and started a PhD on his work – but then dropped out again, in my second such disappearing act.

In the interim, I had been transformed yet again by my student experience. I managed to spend my days and evenings more or less as the existentialists had in their cafés: reading, writing, drinking, falling in and out of love, making friends, and talking about ideas. I loved everything about it, and thought life would always be one big existentialist café.

On the other hand, I also became aware that the existentialists were already considered out of fashion. By the 1980s, they had given way to new generations of structuralists, post-structuralists, deconstructionists and postmodernists. These kinds of philosopher seemed to treat philosophy as a game. They juggled signs, symbols and meanings;

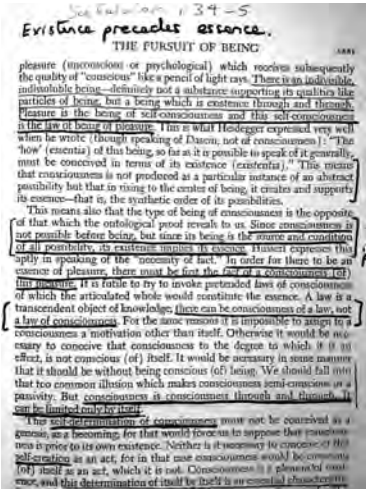
they pulled out odd words from each other's texts to make the whole edifice collapse. They searched for ever more refined and unlikely wisps of signification in the writers of the past.

Although each of these movements disagreed with each other, most were united in considering existentialism and phenomenology the quintessence of what they were *not*. The dizziness of freedom and the anguish of existence were embarrassments. Biography was out, because life itself was out. Experience was out; in a particularly dismissive mood, the structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss had written that a philosophy based on personal experience was 'shop-girl metaphysics'. The goal of the human sciences was 'to dissolve man', he said, and apparently the goal of philosophy was the same. These thinkers could be stimulating, but they also turned philosophy back into an abstract landscape, stripped of the active, impassioned beings who occupied it in the existentialist era.

For decades after my second dropping-out I dipped into philosophy books occasionally, but lost the knack of reading them with the deep attention they needed. My old favourites remained on the far reaches of my bookcase, making it look like a spice shelf in a demiurge's kitchen: *Being and Nothingness*, *Being and Time*, *Of Time and Being*, *Totality and Infinity*. But they rarely shifted their dust – until, a few years ago, I picked up a collection of essays by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, looking for one I vaguely remembered about the Renaissance writer Michel de Montaigne, whom I was researching at the time.

Merleau-Ponty was a friend of Sartre and Beauvoir (until they fell out), and a phenomenologist who specialised in questions of the body and perception. He was also a brilliant essayist. I became diverted from Montaigne into the volume's other essays, and then to Merleau-Ponty's main work *The Phenomenology of Perception*. I was amazed afresh at how adventurous and rich his thinking was. No wonder I used to love this sort of thing! From Merleau-Ponty, I went on to revisit Simone de Beauvoir – whose autobiography I'd discovered during a long student summer selling ice creams on a grey, dismal English beach. I now read the whole thing again. Then came Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre. Eventually I returned to the monumental Heidegger.

As I went on, I got the eerie feeling of blending again with my twenty-year-old self, especially as my copies of the books were filled with that self's weirdly emphatic juvenile marginalia.



Yet my present-day self also watched over my responses, making critical or sardonic remarks from the sidelines. The two of me alternated as I read, sometimes quarrelling, sometimes being pleasantly surprised by each other, sometimes finding each other ridiculous.

I realised that, while I had changed in those twenty-five or so years, the world had changed too. Some of those fashionable movements that knocked existentialism out of the way have aged badly themselves,

going into a decline of their own. The concerns of the twenty-first century are no longer the same as those of the late twentieth century: perhaps we are inclined to look for something different in philosophy these days.

If this is so, then there is a certain refreshment of perspective to be had from revisiting the existentialists, with their boldness and energy. They did not sit around playing with their signifiers. They asked big questions about what it means to live an authentic, fully human life, thrown into a world with many other humans also trying to live. They tackled questions about nuclear war, about how we occupy the environment, about violence, and about the difficulty of managing international relations in dangerous times. Many of them longed to change the world, and wondered what sacrifices we might or might not make for such an aim. Atheist existentialists asked how we can live meaningfully in the absence of God. They all wrote about anxiety and the experience of being overwhelmed by choice – a feeling that has become ever more intense in the relatively prosperous parts of the twenty-first-century world, even while real-world