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EXISTENTIALISM

A Very Short Introduction

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Chapter 1

Philosophy as a way of life

If I do not reveal my views on justice in words, I do so by my conduct.

Socrates to Xenophon

Despite its claim to be novel and unprecedented, existentialism represents a long tradition in the history of philosophy in the West, extending back at least to Socrates (469–399 BC). This is the practice of philosophy as ‘care of the self’ (*epimeleia heautou*). Its focus is on the proper way of acting rather than on an abstract set of theoretical truths. Thus the Athenian general Laches, in a Platonic dialogue by that name, admits that what impresses him about Socrates is not his teaching but the harmony between his teaching and his life. And Socrates himself warns the Athenian court at the trial for his life that they will not easily find another like him who will instruct them to care for their selves above all else.

This concept of philosophy flourished among the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers of the Hellenistic period. Their attention was focused primarily on ethical questions and discerning the proper way to live one’s life. As one Classical scholar put it, ‘Philosophy among the Greeks was more formative than informative in nature’. The philosopher was a kind of doctor of the soul, prescribing the proper attitudes and practices to foster health and happiness.

Of course, philosophy as the pursuit of basic truths about human nature and the universe was also widespread among the Ancient Greeks and was an ingredient in the care of the self. It was this more theoretical approach that led to the rise of science and came to dominate the teaching of philosophy in the medieval and modern periods. Indeed, 'theory' today is commonly taken as synonymous with 'philosophy' in general, as in the expressions 'political theory' and 'literary theory', to such an extent that 'theoretical philosophy' is almost redundant.

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At issue in this distinction between two forms of philosophy (among other things) are two different uses of 'truth': the scientific and the moral. The former is more cognitive and theoretical, the latter more self-formative and practical, as in 'to thine own self be true'. Whereas the former made no demands on the kind of person one should become in order to know the truth (for the 17th-century philosopher René Descartes, a sinner could grasp a mathematical formula as fully as a saint), the latter kind of truth required a certain self-discipline, a set of practices on the self such as attention to diet, control of one's speech, and regular meditation, in order to be able to access it. It was a matter of becoming a certain kind of person, the way Socrates exhibited a particular way of life, rather than of achieving a certain clarity of argument or insight in the way Aristotle did. In the history of philosophy, care of the self was gradually marginalized and consigned to the domains of spiritual direction, political formation, and psychological counselling. There were important exceptions to this exiling of 'moral' truth from the academy. St Augustine's *Confessions* (AD 397), Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* (1669), and the writings of the German Romantics in the early 19th century are examples of works that encouraged this understanding of philosophy as care of the self.

It is in this larger tradition that existentialism as a philosophical movement can be located. The existentialists can be viewed as reviving this more personal notion of 'truth', a truth that is lived as

distinct from and often in opposition to the more detached and scientific use of the term.

It is not surprising that both Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), the 19th-century ‘fathers of existentialism’, had ambivalent attitudes towards the philosophy of Socrates. On the one hand, he was seen as the defender of a kind of rationality that moved beyond merely conventional and subjective values towards universal moral norms, for which Kierkegaard praised him and Nietzsche censured him. But they both respected his individuating ‘leap’ across the gap in rationality between the proofs of personal immortality and his choice to accept the sentence of death imposed by the Athenian court. (Socrates was tried and found guilty on charges of impiety and for corrupting the youth by his teaching.) In other words, each philosopher realized that life does not follow the continuous flow of logical argument and that one often has to risk moving beyond the limits of the rational in order to live life to the fullest. As Kierkegaard remarked, many people have offered proofs for the immortality of the soul, but Socrates, after hypothesizing that the soul *might* be immortal, risked his life with that possibility in mind. He drank the poison as commanded by the Athenian court, all the while discoursing with his followers on the possibility that another life *may* await him. Kierkegaard called this an example of ‘truth as subjectivity’. By this he meant a personal conviction on which one is willing to risk one’s life. In his *Journals*, Kierkegaard muses: ‘the thing is to find a truth which is true *for me*, to find the idea for which I can live and die’ (1 August 1835).

Clarity is not enough

Galileo wrote that the book of nature was written in mathematical characters. Subsequent advances in modern science seemed to confirm this claim. It appeared that whatever could be weighed and measured (quantified) could give us reliable knowledge, whereas the non-measurable was left to the realm of mere opinion. This view became canonized by positivist philosophy in the 19th and

early 20th centuries. This positivist habit of mind insisted that the 'objective' was synonymous with the measurable and the 'value-free'. Its aim was to extract the subject from the experiment in order to obtain a purely impersonal 'view from nowhere'. This led to a number of significant discoveries, but it quickly became apparent that such an approach was inconsistent. The limiting of the knowable to the quantifiable was itself a value that was not quantifiable. That is, the choice of this procedure was itself a 'leap' of sorts, an act of faith in a certain set of values that were not themselves measurable.

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Moreover, the exclusion of the non-measurable from what counted as knowledge left some of our most important questions not only unanswered but unanswerable. Are our ethical rules and values merely the expression of our subjective preferences? To paraphrase the mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell, scarcely an existentialist: can anyone really believe that the revulsion they feel when they witness the gratuitous infliction of pain is simply an expression of the fact that they don't happen to like it? Such was the doctrine of the 'emotivists' in ethical theory, sometimes called the 'boo/hurrah' theory of moral judgements. They were forced in that direction by acceptance of the positivist limitation of knowledge to the measurable. But are we even capable of the kind of antiseptic knowledge that the positivists require of science? Perhaps the knowing subject can be reintroduced into these discussions without compromising their objectivity. Much will depend on us revising our definition of 'objectivity' as well as on discovering other uses of the word 'true' besides the positivists' 'agreement with sense experience'. The existentialists among others responded to this challenge.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80) exemplifies this response when he remarks that the only theory of knowledge that can be valid today is one which is founded on that truth of microphysics: the experimenter is part of the experimental system. What he has in mind is the so-called Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle from atomic

physics which, in its popular interpretation at least, states that the instruments which enable us to observe the momentum and the position of an orbital electron interfere with the process such that we can determine the one or the other but never both at once. Analogously, one can object that the very act of intervening in the life of a 'primitive' tribe prevents the ethnologist from studying that people in their pristine condition. Such considerations served to undermine the positivists' concept of knowledge as measurability. But they also clouded the rationalists' view of reality as exhaustively available to a logic of either/or with no middle ground. To cite another example, light manifests qualities that indicate it is a wave and others that show it to be a particle. Yet these two characteristics seem to exclude each other, leaving the question 'Is light a wave or a particle?' unanswerable with the standard logic of either/or. Light seems to be both and yet neither exclusively. Another kind of logic seems called for to make sense of this phenomenon. Numerous other examples from physics and mathematics appeared early in the last century that offered counterexamples to the positivists' and the rationalists' claims about knowledge and the world.

Lived experience

It is into this world of limited and relative observation and assessment that the existentialist enters with his/her drive to 'personalize' the most impersonal phenomena in our lives. What, for example, could be more impersonal and objective than space and time? Even the chastened view of space-time that the Relativity Theory offers us relies on an absolute or constant referent, namely the speed of light. We measure time by minutes and seconds and chart space by yards or metres. This too seems quantitative and hence objective in the positivists' sense. And yet the notion of what existentialists call 'ekstatic' temporality adds a qualitative and personal dimension to the phenomenon of time-consciousness. For the existentialist, the value and meaning of each temporal dimension of lived time is a function of our attitudes and choices. Some people, for example, are always pressed to meet obligations

whereas others are at a loss to occupy their time. Time rushes by when you're having fun and hangs heavy on your hands when you are in pain. Even the quantitative advice to budget our time, from an existentialist point of view, is really a recommendation to examine and assess the life decisions that establish our temporal priorities in the first place. If 'time is of the essence', and the existentialist will insist that it is, then part of who we are is our manner of living the 'already' and the 'not yet' of our existence, made concrete by how we handle our immersion in the everyday.

The existentialist often dramatizes such 'lived time'. Thus, Albert Camus (1913–60) in his allegory of the Nazi occupation of Paris, *The Plague*, describes the people in a plague-ridden, quarantined city: 'Hostile to the past, impatient of the present, and cheated of the future, we were much like those whom men's justice, or hatred, forces to live behind prison bars.' The notion of imprisonment as 'doing time' is clearly existential. And Sartre, in an insightful analysis of emotive consciousness, speaks of someone literally 'jumping for joy' as a way of using their bodily changes to conjure up, as if by magic, the possibility of possessing a desirable situation 'all at once' without having to await its necessary, temporal unfolding. Though Sartre stated this thesis in the 1930s, one immediately thinks of the photo of Hitler's little 'jig' under the Arc de Triomphe during the German occupation of Paris. Time has its own viscosity, as Michel Foucault remarked. Ekstatic temporality embodies its flow.

But existential space is personalized as well. Sartre cites the social psychologist Kurt Lewin's notion of 'hodological' space (lived space) as the qualitative equivalent to the lived time of our quotidian existence. The story is told of two people, one who prefers to get as closely face-to-face in conversation as possible and the other a distant, stand-off kind of person, propelling and repelling each other around the room at a cocktail party in an attempt to carry on a conversation. Lived space is personal; it is the usual route I take to work, the seating arrangement that quickly establishes itself in a

classroom, or the ordering of the objects on my desk. It is what psychologists call my 'comfort zone'. This too is a function of my life project. How I deal with my meaningful 'spaces' depends on how I choose to order my life.

These are, of course, psychological considerations. But it is a defining feature of existentialist thought and method that they carry an ontological significance as well. They articulate our ways of existing and provide access to the meaning and direction (two translations of the French word '*sens*') of our lives. As we shall see, whereas many philosophers have tended to discount or even to criticize the philosophical significance of our feelings and emotions, the existentialists will place great significance on such emotions as 'anguish' (which Kierkegaard called our awareness of our freedom) and feelings like 'nausea' (which Sartre characterized as our experience of the contingency of existence and a 'phenomenon of being'). This sets them immediately in likely dialogue with creative artists, who trade on our emotional and imaginative lives. In fact, the relation between existentialism and the fine arts has been so close that its critics have often dismissed it as solely a literary movement. To be sure, the dramatic nature of existentialist thought, as well as its respect for the disclosing power of emotional consciousness and its use of 'indirect communication', to be discussed shortly, does invite the association. But the issues they address, the careful distinctions they draw, their rigorous descriptions, and, above all, their explicit conversation with others in the philosophical tradition clearly identify the existentialists as primarily philosophical even as they underscore the ambiguity of the distinction between the conceptual and the imaginative, the philosophical and the literary.

'A truth to die for'

If impersonal space and time can be personalized and brought into the domain of our choice and responsibility, so too can the notion of 'objective' truth. As mentioned at the outset, Kierkegaard

Five themes of existentialism

There are five basic themes that the existentialist appropriates each in his or her own way. Rather than constituting a strict definition of 'existentialist', they depict more of a family resemblance (a criss-crossing and overlapping of the themes) among these philosophers.

1. *Existence precedes essence.* What you are (your essence) is the result of your choices (your existence) rather than the reverse. Essence is not destiny. You are what you make yourself to be.

2. *Time is of the essence.* We are fundamentally time-bound beings. Unlike measurable, 'clock' time, lived time is qualitative: the 'not yet', the 'already', and the 'present' differ among themselves in meaning and value.

3. *Humanism.* Existentialism is a person-centred philosophy. Though not anti-science, its focus is on the human individual's pursuit of identity and meaning amidst the social and economic pressures of mass society for superficiality and conformism.

4. *Freedom/responsibility.* Existentialism is a philosophy of freedom. Its basis is the fact that we can stand back from our lives and reflect on what we have been doing. In this sense, we are always 'more' than ourselves. But we are as responsible as we are free.

5. *Ethical considerations are paramount.* Though each existentialist understands the ethical, as with 'freedom', in his or her own way, the underlying concern is to invite us to examine the authenticity of our personal lives and of our society.

distinguished between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ reflection and truth. He allowed for the common scientific uses of objective reflection, which he described as follows:

The way of objective reflection makes the subject accidental, and thereby transforms existence into something indifferent, something vanishing. Away from the subject the objective way of reflection leads to the objective truth, and while the subject and his subjectivity become indifferent, the truth also becomes indifferent, and this indifference is precisely its objective validity; for all interest, like all decisiveness, is rooted in subjectivity. The way of objective reflection leads to abstract thought, to mathematics, to historical knowledge of different kinds; and always it leads away from the subject, whose existence or non-existence, and rightly so, becomes infinitely indifferent.

The existentialists are not irrationalists in the sense that they deny the validity of logical argument and scientific reasoning. They simply question the ability of such reasoning to access the deep personal convictions that guide our lives. As Kierkegaard said of the dialectical rationalism of Hegel: ‘Trying to live your life by this abstract philosophy is like trying to find your way around Denmark with a map on which that country appears the size of a pinhead.’

In contrast to the objective reflection that ignores individual existence, Kierkegaard speaks of subjective reflection and its corresponding truth as subjectivity:

When subjectivity is truth, subjectivity’s definition must include an expression for an opposition to objectivity, a reminder of the fork in the road, and this expression must also convey the tension of inwardness [the self’s relation to itself]. Here is such a definition of truth: *the objective uncertainty, held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth*, the highest truth available for an *existing* person.

Here too it is a matter of a change in the direction one is taking in one's life, the 'fork in the road'. That is what makes the option for subjective reflection an 'existential' choice. Were it simply a question of an impersonal claim about a fact or a law of nature, we would be dealing with 'objective certainty' and the wager of one's personal existence would be irrelevant. One would simply be following the complete directions. Such would be the case of Socrates if his belief in personal immorality were merely the conclusion of an argument. But here the 'truth' is more of a 'moral' nature. As Kierkegaard says, it's a question of 'appropriation' (of 'making it one's own') rather than of 'approximation' to some objective state of affairs, the way one weighs the probabilities of a possible outcome or reads the distance markers along the way to a destination. As he notes elsewhere, for truth as subjectivity, the emphasis is on the 'how' and not on the 'what' of our belief. This has led some to misunderstand him as claiming that it doesn't matter what you believe so long as you believe it. Though scarcely espousing religious relativism, as a deeply committed Christian, Kierkegaard was more concerned with combating lukewarm or purely nominal religious belief than with apologetics.

If one translates a secularized existential truth into the language of the meaning of life, it would imply that there is no 'objectively' correct path to choose. Rather, for the existentialist, after getting clear on the options and the likely outcomes, one *makes* it the right choice by one's follow-through. For the existentialist, such truth is more a matter of decision than of discovery. But, of course, one is not making these choices blindly and without criteria (contrary to popular misconception). But the nature of the choice is *criterion-constituting* rather than *criterionless*, as some have objected. What Kierkegaard is talking about expresses what one might call a 'conversion' experience, where the decisive move is not purely intellectual but a matter of will and feeling (what Kierkegaard calls 'passion') as well. Such is the nature of the so-called 'blind leap' of faith that catapults one into the religious sphere of existence, as we shall see in the next chapter. But it applies



1. Socrates discourses over personal immortality as he is about to take the poison as commanded by the State

equally to other fundamental ‘turnings’ in a person’s life, from a basic change in one’s political convictions to falling in love.

This is but one of many places where existentialist, pragmatist, and ‘analytic’ philosophy overlap. The great American psychologist and pragmatist philosopher William James, for instance, makes an analogous claim in his *The Will To Believe* when he observes that our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds. But some such options are what British ethicist R. M. Hare calls ‘decisions of principle’. Such decisions are not themselves principled because they are what establish the principles according to which we shall make subsequent options in our life. Such principles are like the ‘rules of the game’ that one opts for when deciding to participate but which do not apply beforehand. You do not follow those rules before deciding to play the game; your decision to play means abiding by those very rules. These are what I have been calling ‘criteria-constituting’ choices. As we shall see, this is analogous to what Sartre calls initial or ‘fundamental Choice’ that gives unity and direction to a person’s life. We discover it by reflecting on the direction of our lives up to the present. It is a ‘Choice’, Sartre claims, that we find we’ve already made implicitly all along.

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Committed philosophy and literature

Kierkegaard’s ‘truth’ as subjectivity is the forerunner to what Sartre will call ‘commitment’ (*l’engagement*) in the next century. As if to play down the concept of objective truth, or at least to subscribe to a new meaning for ‘objectivity’ in light of late modern science, Sartre remarks: ‘There is only committed knowledge.’ On the other hand, he also subscribes to the more classical, ‘objectivist’ view of knowledge and truth proposed by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and his descriptive method of phenomenology (see below). One way to reconcile these two views is to claim with Kierkegaard that each refers to a different use of the term ‘truth’. In Sartre’s case, it may be

a question of absorbing the phenomenological descriptions into a more pragmatist, dialectical notion of truth; that is, one that reconciles alternative claims in a higher viewpoint. This would fit better with a hermeneutical or interpretive phenomenology such as Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) introduced in the 1920s (see Chapter 6). Nietzsche had insisted that all knowledge was interpretation and that there was no ‘original’ non-interpreted text. In other words, what counted as knowledge was interpretation ‘all the way down’. So whether completely with Nietzsche or merely in part with Kierkegaard, truth too has been ‘personalized’ by the existentialists. ‘My truth’ ceases to be a self-contradictory expression.

In a famous set of essays, *What is Literature?* published in 1948, Sartre develops the concept of ‘committed literature’. His basic premise is that writing is a form of action for which responsibility must be taken, but that this responsibility carries over into the content and not just the form of what is communicated. The experience of the Second World War had given Sartre a sense of social responsibility that, arguably, was lacking or at least ill-developed in his masterpiece, *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In fact, the existentialists had generally been criticized for their excessive individualism and apparent lack of social conscience. Sartre, who had already distinguished himself with several well-received plays and the impressive novel *Nausea*, now addressed the moral responsibility of the prose artist. ‘Though literature is one thing and morality another,’ he admits, ‘at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative’, namely an act of confidence in the freedom of both parties. The concept of the relation between artist and audience as one of ‘gift-appeal’ emerges as central to Sartre’s aesthetics and soon serves as the model for disalienated social relations generally; that is, the example for relations that do not treat humans as mere things or instruments but as values in themselves. What might appear to be the merely formal condition of one freedom respecting another assumes a substantive character when Sartre concludes:

The unique point of view from which the author can present the world to those freedoms whose concurrence he wishes to bring about is that of a world to be impregnated always with more freedom. It would be inconceivable that this unleashing of generosity provoked by the writer could be used to authorize an injustice, and that the reader could enjoy his freedom while reading a work which approves or accepts *or simply abstains from condemning* the subjection of man by man.

In other words, as we shall see, existentialism is developing a social conscience and, with it, a conviction that the fine arts, literature at least, should be socially and politically committed.

In this seminal essay, written in the early post-war years, in a remark he will come to regret, Sartre draws a famous distinction between poetry and prose. Poetry, on this account, signifies any non-instrumentalist form of language or of any art form such as music and visual and plastic art. Such forms essentially pursue art for its own sake and so are incapable of commitment to social change under pain of violating their artistic nature. Prose, on the other hand, because it is instrumental in character, can and, in our day, should be committed to the fostering of individual and collective freedom both by the subject matter it addresses and by its manner of treatment. Though he will subsequently revise that distinction in an essay on the revolutionary character of Black African Francophone poetry, Sartre's general thesis remains that literature, at least in our current situation of what he sees as social oppression and economic exploitation, should be committed to its alleviation. As he wrote, merely failing to condemn such practices is not enough. Active opposition is called for. We shall pursue the matter of social responsibility among the various existentialist authors in Chapter 5. But for the moment it may suffice to mention the socially and politically 'committed' character of the artistic works that several of these writers produced.



2. Sartre addresses a student uprising in 1968

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80)

A native Parisian, he was probably the most renowned philosopher of the 20th century. He travelled extensively throughout the world, usually with his lifelong partner, Simone de Beauvoir. His name became synonymous with the existentialist movement. He wrote numerous plays, novels, and philosophical works, the most famous of which was *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Offered the Nobel Prize for Literature, he declined the honour. He was deeply committed to the political Left for the greater part of his public life. At his death, thousands of people spontaneously filled the streets to join his cortège. As one publication headlined: 'France has lost its conscience.'

Existentialism and the fine arts: indirect communication

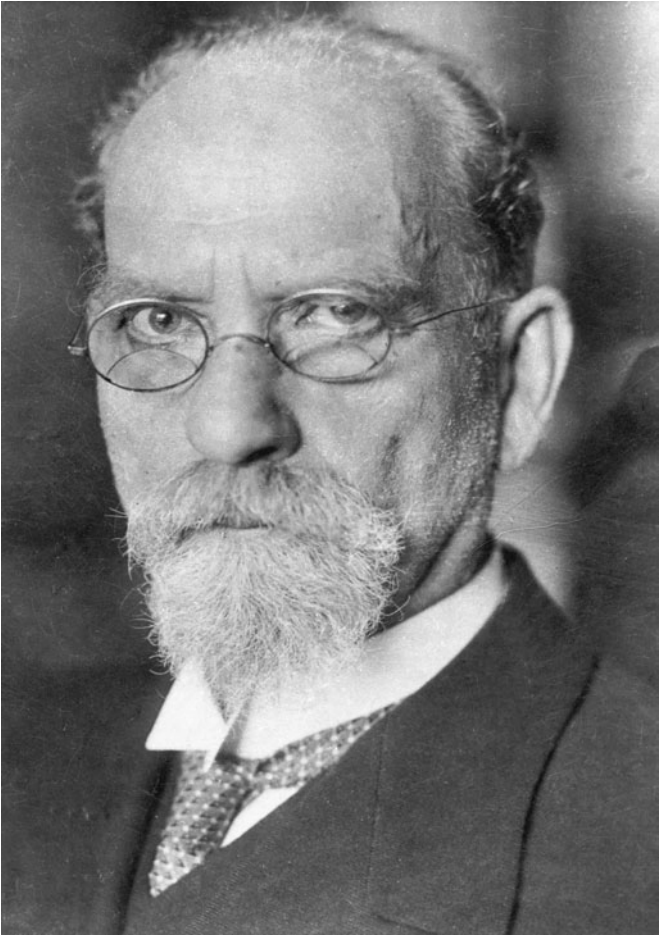
Because of its dramatic conception of existence, its widespread use of powerful images in its arguments, and its appeal to personal response in its communications, existentialism has always been closely associated with the fine arts. In fact, both Camus and Sartre were offered the Nobel Prize for Literature (which Sartre declined). Kierkegaard was a kind of poet who used pseudonyms, parables, and other forms of 'indirect communication' to enlist our personal involvement in the matter at hand. Nietzsche was one of the great prose artists of the German language and his allegory of a religious prophet, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, like Sartre's *Nausea*, is a model of philosophical dramatization. The novels of Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86), too, are expressions of her philosophical insights. Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) wrote philosophy in a meditative manner that he once said was perhaps better exhibited in his 30 published plays. Among the philosophers we are discussing, perhaps only Heidegger, Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61) fit least appropriately in this category. Yet, with the exception of Jaspers, even they wrote significant studies in aesthetics and all three employed the phenomenological method that valorizes argument by example. Each insisted that the artist, especially the poet in Heidegger's case, and the visual artist for Merleau-Ponty, anticipates and often more adequately expresses what the philosopher is trying to conceptualize. So strong is the influence of existentialist ideas in the fine arts that, as we have seen, some would prefer to describe existentialism as a literary movement. Certainly, authors like Dostoevsky and Kafka, playwrights like Beckett and Ionesco, and artists like Giacometti and Picasso exemplify many of the defining characteristics of existentialist thought.

The concept of commitment to social and moral reform that characterizes all of these writers finds its most apt expression in what came to be called their use of 'indirect communication' to transmit

their ideas. The term denotes a rhetorical move that conceals the philosopher's authorial identity in order to invite the reader's identification with the characters of the work by suspension of their disbelief. Thus Kierkegaard could write in the voices of different pseudonymous authors, each conveying a certain viewpoint associated with that persona and not precisely with the philosopher himself. Nietzsche was able to parody scriptural prophecy even as he undermined religious belief in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Even his aphorisms, though enunciated in his own name, carry the rhetorical force of a blow to the head, despite one's occasional misgivings about where it came from, that is, what kind of 'argument' stands behind it. Similarly, de Beauvoir, Sartre, Camus, and Marcel could write novels and plays that conveyed their ideas in concrete fashion to an audience that, for the moment at least, had suspended its critical distance. Once asked why he presented his plays in the bourgeois quarters of the city rather than in its working-class sections, Sartre replied that no bourgeois could witness a performance of one of his plays without having entertained thoughts 'traitorous to his class'. Such is the power of art to convey a philosophical invitation to a way of life.

Husserl and the phenomenological method

Though the phenomenological method developed by Edmund Husserl in the first third of the 20th century was adopted in one form or another by the existentialists of that same period, many, perhaps most, phenomenologists are not existentialists. But all accept the best-known and most significant claim of this approach, namely that all consciousness is consciousness *of* an other-than-consciousness. In other words, it is the very nature of consciousness to aim towards (to 'intend') an other. Even when it is directed towards itself in reflection, consciousness is directed as towards an 'other'. This is called the principle of intentionality. In this context, 'intentional' has nothing to do with 'on purpose'. It is a technical term for what is unique about our mental acts: they extend beyond themselves towards an other.



3. Edmund Husserl, founder of the phenomenological movement

Edmund Husserl (1859–1938)

Born in Prossnitz, in the Czech Republic, he earned a doctorate in mathematics before turning to philosophy. He taught in Göttingen in Germany from 1901 to 1916, and in Freiburg im Breisgau from 1916 until his retirement in 1928. The founder of phenomenology, Husserl played a seminal role in European philosophy in the 20th century. Martin Heidegger was his most famous pupil and succeeded him at Freiburg. Of Jewish origin, his last years were marred by the rise of National Socialism. At his death in Freiburg, a Belgian priest friend transported his widow and his manuscripts to the University of Louvain before they could be destroyed by the Nazis.

The significance of this principle is twofold. It overcomes the problem of the 'bridge' between ideas 'in' the mind and the external world which they are supposed to resemble. We have no 'third eye' to compare what's in the mind with what's outside so as to confirm our claim to know the external world. This problem was the legacy of the father of modern philosophy, René Descartes (1596–1650), and his followers. In his quest for certitude against sceptical doubt, Descartes concluded that he could be certain of one thing, namely that he was a thinker since doubting was a form of thinking. This seemed to justify his intuitive claim: 'I think therefore I am' (*Cogito ergo sum*). But this hard-won certitude was a Pyrrhic victory, for it left him trapped 'inside' his mind, facing the problem of 'bridging' the gap between inner and outer reality. How could he extend this certainty to the 'external' world?

According to the principle of intentionality, this was a false problem, for there is no inside/outside for consciousness. Every

conscious act ‘intends’ (is intentionally related to) an object that is already ‘in’ the world. Our manner of ‘intending’ these objects will differ as we perceive, conceive, imagine, or recollect them, for example, or are related to them in an emotive manner. But in every case, being conscious is a way of being in the world.

Consider our images, for example. As Sartre pointed out in an early study, images are not miniatures ‘in the mind’ to be projected onto the external world, raising the problem of the correspondence between the inner and the outer once more. Rather, imaging consciousness is a way of ‘derealizing’ the world of our perceptions that manifests its distinctive features to careful phenomenological description. If we imagine an apple that we previously perceived, for instance, a careful description of the experience will reveal how the imagining differs from the perceiving of the same apple. For one thing, unlike the perceived apple, the imagined one has only those features that we choose to give it. Images as such teach us nothing. And so it is with our other conscious acts. Each reveals its distinctive features to phenomenological description.

But because consciousness ‘intends’ its objects in such different ways, we can employ the method of phenomenological description called ‘eidetic reduction’ or the ‘free imaginative variation of examples’ to arrive at the intelligible contour or essence of any of these diverse conscious experiences. And this imaginative task of rigorous description of what is ‘given’ to consciousness in its various modes of ‘givenness’ is what the existentialists favour in mounting their concrete arguments. As Husserl once said, the point of phenomenological method is not to explain (by finding causes) but to get us to see (by presenting essences or intelligible contours).

Consider a couple of examples. A forensic artist might sketch an image of a criminal for an eyewitness to identify. As she adds or subtracts aspects of the image, the witness will agree or disagree with the likeness until, optimally, the person says ‘yes, that’s the fellow; that’s what he looked like’. This is a homely analogy of an

eidetic description that uses the free imaginative variation of examples to achieve an insight, an immediate grasp of the object intended.

Let us take for our second example a famous phenomenological ‘argument’ from Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, which I take to be a less technical form of eidetic reduction. A voyeur is looking through a keyhole at a couple when suddenly he hears what he takes to be footsteps behind him. In one and the same act, he experiences his body ‘objectified’ by another consciousness. His mounting embarrassment, his reddening face, is the equivalent of a twofold argument for the existence of other minds (an old philosophical conundrum) and for his body as vulnerable to objectification in a manner over which he has no control. Even if the voyeur were mistaken (the sound was made by the wind in the curtains before the open window), still the experience has justified our belief in other minds far more immediately and with a greater degree of certainty than any argument from analogy, which is the standard empiricist’s proof. This is the force of a successful ‘eidetic reduction’. It captures the essence or intelligible contour of the experience of another subject as subject and not simply as an object.

The strength and potential weakness of such arguments from phenomenological description or the free imaginative variation of examples is that they home in on what I have been calling an ‘intelligible contour’. This is a kind of immediate grasp of the presence of the ‘thing itself’, as Husserl said. It resembles the ‘aha!’ experience at the end of a mathematical or logical demonstration (Husserl’s doctorate was in mathematics). The assumption is that if the description is mounted rigorously, the inquirer will simply see for himself. The potential weakness, of course, is that, in response to the claim ‘I don’t see it’, the phenomenologist can merely reply, ‘well, look more closely’. But, in fact, we often do get the point; we succeed in seeing the invariant ‘essence’ through the numerous variations. And such arguments by example not only provide the existentialist with the concrete way of reasoning that he is seeking,

they almost beg for embodiment in imaginative literature, films, and plays.

I mentioned that many phenomenologists are not existentialists. The converse is also true: while 20th-century existentialists accepted Husserl's concept of intentionality because it opened a wide field for their descriptive method, they resisted another feature of his later thought as being incompatible with what existentialism is all about, namely his project of 'bracketing' existence. Husserl spoke of the natural attitude, which might be described as pre-philosophical and naive in its uncritical acceptance of the real world of everyday experience. In his drive to make phenomenology a strict science synonymous with philosophy itself, Husserl insisted that one should suspend the naive realism of the natural attitude and disregard, or bracket, the question of the existence or being of the objects of phenomenological description. Husserl called this a

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'phenomenological reduction', or *epochē*, and he thought it could short-circuit sceptical objections to which the natural attitude was liable. He admitted that one could perform an 'eidetic reduction' in the natural attitude and achieve a kind of 'eidetic' psychology. But he later argued that this left unresolved the sceptical question, 'Does what you're describing hold true in the real world?' Husserl's point was that if you produce this additional reduction and bracket the 'being question' of the objects of your inquiry (setting aside the question whether they exist 'in reality' or merely 'in the mind'), you disarm the sceptic who doubts you can ever attain 'reality' with your descriptions. The point of the phenomenological reduction is to leave everything as grist for the phenomenologist's mill *except* the being of the 'reduced' objects, now called 'phenomena'. When you suspend the being question, you retain all of the experiences and their respective objects that you had before (perceptions, images, memories, and the rest), but now as consciousness-relative, that is, as phenomena. In a sense, you have the same tune as in the natural attitude but now in a different key. Inoculated against sceptical doubt – which has been a negative force driving philosophy since the Greeks – you can now undertake rigorous descriptive analyses

of any phenomenon whatsoever. The descriptions themselves will sort out the difference between an apple that is perceived, for example, and one that is merely imagined. This seems to be an ingenious way of marginalizing the philosophical sceptic and assuring our certain knowledge of the world. That was Husserl's dream.

The existentialists offer two reasons for rejecting Husserl's phenomenological reduction. First, it makes our basic relationship to the world theoretical rather than practical, as if we were born theoreticians and later learned about practice. Husserl's student, Martin Heidegger, on the contrary, insisted that we were originally 'in the world' instrumentally by means of our practical concerns and that philosophy should analyse this 'pre-theoretical' awareness in order to gain access to being. Similarly, Sartre, as we saw, insisted that all knowledge was 'committed'. And Merleau-Ponty spoke of a certain 'operative intentionality' of our lived bodies that interacted with the world prior to our reflective conceptualization. Even Husserl, later in life, seemed to acknowledge these claims by introducing the concept of the 'lifeworld' as the pre-theoretical basis of our theoretical reflection.

But the major existentialist objection is that being itself is not an 'essence' subject to reduction and, as Merleau-Ponty famously phrased it, 'a complete [phenomenological] reduction is impossible' because you cannot 'reduce' the existing 'reducer'. The existing individual is more than his or her 'definition' such as one might hope to capture in a theoretical concept. As Sartre argues, there are 'phenomena of being', such as our experience of nausea, that reveal that we are and that we need not be (our 'contingency'). But such an experience is not cognitive. Rather, it is a matter of feeling or emotional consciousness – the stuff of arresting descriptions and novels.