Existentialism / Biography / Being in the World

By Walter Cummins

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

One reason Sarah Bakewell's *The Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails* is such an engaging read was her decision to organize her examination of philosophy around the lives of the central thinkers, with tantalizing tidbits about their friendships and fallings out, their wives and lovers, their personal tensions over evolving and conflicting theories. But her approach offers far more than revelations of inside gossip—who said what and did what, who turned against whom, who felt betrayed. Biography is inseparable from existentialist thinking: the ways we live, choose, and shape our lives are fundamental to our understanding of the nature of human existence.

In many ways, the Existentialists remade the approach to philosophy by personalizing it so profoundly. For them, philosophical systems are not a set of theories "out there," like mathematical formulas, to be grasped by intellects independent of personal experience, detached from the emotions and behaviors of the person grasping. Instead, the Existentialists believed, philosophies are revealed in our interactions with the world around us. Rather than being "out there," philosophies come from within, inseparable from our actions and our choices.

Basically, one need not be a "professional philosopher" to develop explanations of what matters most to our human existence, to our being in the world, to what we can know about the world, to our choices in such a world, and to our capacity for making all we can of our lives. That existentialism emerged amid the cataclysm of World War II is no accident. These thinkers did not enjoy the luxury of quiet contemplation, not when actions and decisions could literally be matters life and death. If not a gun to their heads, a pounding on the door could signal doom. They had to take stands, make vital decisions at times of crisis.

Because some of the best-known Existentialists—e.g., Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus— wrote novels, stories, plays, biographies, and others revealed instincts for the poetic, they saw human lives in terms of narratives based on character creation, dramatic questions, and the reactions of characters to those questions. Whether or not those characters were aware of existentialist ideas, they could not help but demonstrate them in their actions—like all of us.

Sarah Bakewell as writer

Bakewell is not a philosopher, but, like her existentialist subjects, primarily a writer. Although reading Martin Heidegger led her to enter a Ph.D. program, she dropped out to become a writer and now teaches creative writing at Kellogg College in Oxford. Her career has been that of a nonfiction author after a background of working in bookstores and as a library curator. Her first book, *The Smart*, told the story of an eighteenth-century forgery trial. Then she wrote biographical studies of Danish revolutionary and explorer Jorgen Jorgenson and Montaigne. She received the National Book Critics Circle Award for the latter: *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne. The Existentialist Café*, her most recent book (2016), takes a biographical approach to a philosophical movement, in this case through multiple biographies of the key players.

On her website she describes how she chose her career:

> I came to writing via a long route which began with being born in Bournemouth, on the south coast of England, and almost immediately being taken travelling all over the world by my parents. They used to bundle me into a well-padded drawer and load me into the back seat of the car, then head off to Switzerland or Russia. Each evening, they took the drawer out and carried it up to the hotel bedroom, and the next morning they carried it down again. This has left me with an attitude to life that can best be described as cheerful resignation combined with a desire to think outside the box.

Such a desire explains much of her inclination toward the existentialists, a group who thought outside the normal philosophical box. She discovered her own existentialist inclinations when, at sixteen, she chose to spend birthday present money on a copy of Sartre's *Nausea* because a blurb described it as, "a novel of the alienation of personality and the mystery of being." Although she didn't know what alienation meant, she found the novel capturing her young state of being, leading her to decide to study philosophy. She includes this incident in the book and reiterates it in a *Guardian* book section essay. While admitting there's no firm definition of existentialism because of the disagreements of the thinkers grouped into that category, she argues, "I am convinced that existentialism should be seen as more than a fad, however, and that it still has something to offer us today."

She concludes that essay with, "They [the Existentialists] remind us that existence is difficult and that people behave appallingly, but at the same time they point out how vast our human possibilities are. That is why we might pick up some inspiring ideas from reading them again—and why we might even try being just a little more existentialist ourselves."

Bakewell and the critics of existentialism

As someone who has felt a lifelong affinity for existentialism, I'm pleased by the existence of Bakewell's book and the acclaim it has received because other recent opinions about existentialism have been dismissive. For example on "Philosophy Bites," an online series of brief discussions that address various philosophers, Dame Mary Warnock of the Oxford faculty, while praising Sartre for opening our eyes to the fact that moral philosophy could be an exciting and totally relevant subject," dismisses him as "not an original thinker" and a bad writer who was just "a minor offshoot of German phenomenology." Both Warnock and the philosopher-turned novelist Iris Murdoch criticized Sartre for presenting his arguments via descriptions rather than logic.

For Sarah Bakewell, it's precisely this reliance on descriptions—the narratives of our human interactions with the world—that makes existentialism so appealing. Formal logic may be lacking, but experience is faced head on.

In her discussion of Kierkegaard, she uses his rejection of what is considered an archetype of philosophical logic—Descartes' "*Cogito ergo sum*: I think; therefore, I am"—to make her point:

> 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 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.

The reversal is more than: "I am; therefore, I think." Beyond that shorthand, it's: *I am; therefore, I act and make choices, and those choices manifest what I think. Often it's the acting and choosing that reveal to me what I think.*

But what is existentialism?

Despite their differences, the various Existentialists engage with the everyday, the tangible world around us and our connections with the world, including other people, without reliance on abstractions and fixed systems of understanding. They emphasize the pressures of constant decision making, our imperative to make choices, what Sartre called "dreadful freedom."

I realize that fundamental questions about free will enter the picture. Do our genes predetermine our decisions? Are we merely performers embodying steps in the design of some higher power? But, even if unknowingly we have no option but to make the choices we make, we still stew and agonize over many of those choices. In effect, we live as if we do have to decide among options and possibilities, as if we do have free will. Otherwise, we'd just let things happen. But we rarely can. Life forces one decision after another.

While existentialism can be delineated into various branches, with minor and major differences, such as atheist and Christian versions, the essential core may lie in Heidegger's concept of "throwness." While disagreement over the meaning of the term exists, Bakewell explains it this way: "We do not hover above the great rich tangle of the world, gazing down from on high. We are already in the world and involved in it—we are 'thrown' here. And 'throwness' must be our starting point."

Heidegger's "throwness"

In our Being-in-the-world, Heidegger says, we engage with all that is around us, busily doing something—for example, using a hammer to build something rather than merely contemplating its existence. But things can go wrong—the nail bend or the hammerhead fly off. (Or a Presidential election shock the world.) Then, in Bakewell's explanation, "No longer is the world a smoothly humming machine. It is a mass of stubborn things refusing to cooperate, and here I am in the middle of it, flummoxed and disoriented." Usually, "the connections knit together again." But such disorientation can "make everything feel awkward, questionable and uncomfortable." And here is the appeal of Heidegger's version of existentialism:

> This was the sort of powerful, personal stuff that people craved from philosophy in troubled times […] His [Heidegger's] starting point was reality in its everyday clothes, yet he also spoke in Kierkegaardian tones about the strangest experiences in life, the moments when it all goes horribly wrong—and even the moments when we confront the greatest wrongness of all, which is the prospect of death.

Camus "throwness"

Other Existentialists interpreted "throwness" with a fundamental difference, mainly that the world lacked preexisting connections we could knit together again after an upheaval. Albert Camus is one who based his understanding of our human place in the world this way. For him, we are launched into a plethora of meaningless phenomena, and it's up to us to find our own moorings by trying to make some sense out of all that "stuff," something to grab onto. We can't rely on a set of givens to do that work for us, no predetermined set of beliefs or values of which to guide our lives. While we may borrow from the "norms" around us, we create ourselves by making choices, which shape, inevitably, who we are and will become. The need for such crucial choosing is forced upon us by situations and circumstances, for example pulling a trigger when sun-blinded on a beach.

This concept of throwness is inseparable from Camus' central belief in the Absurd, which is so important in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The term Absurd is often interpreted as meaning the world outside of us is meaningless. But Camus states that we can't and don't

know enough about the world to come to such a conclusion. The Absurd refers to a human predicament, yearning to understand the world around us—the phenomena—but finding no satisfactory answers. The world *may be* teeming with meaning, but—if so—such meaning is not accessible to us. Theologians, philosophers, and scientists have attempted explanations, but they are just groping like the rest of us. We humans have no choice but to create our own individual realities because we can't exist without some assumption of order, even though that assumption is only a functional heuristic, a crutch to help us maneuver.

But that heuristic can be knocked out from under us. Bakewell finds such a conclusion in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *In Praise of Philosophy*, which she summarizes as, "We can never move definitely from ignorance to certainty, for the thread of the inquiry will constantly lead us back to ignorance again."

Camus vs. Sartre over certainty

Yet some of the Existentialists were drawn to hoped-for certainties, some relief from condemnation to meaninglessness. Christian existentialists, while adhering to the essential nature of individual decision making and the despair of living in a seemingly meaningless world, found an answer stemming from Kierkegaard's notion that existential despair can lead an individual to an awareness of God's infinite nature. Camus called such hope a leap of faith.

The militantly atheistic Sartre broke with Camus over another kind of certainty. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Sartre concluded that life did have purpose and meaning, though that meaning differs with the individual experience. As Bakewell relates, in reviewing Camus' *L' Étranger (The Stranger)*, Sartre argued that, "basic phenomenological principles show that experience comes to us already charged with significance," perhaps like Heidegger's hammer, which is not just a raw object but rather a functional tool. As humans we can engage in activities that are really purposeful, and in doing so become really free.

Sartre and Camus went though a more fundamental break over Soviet Communism and the actions excused to achieve a purposeful goal. The Second World War and the Nazi occupation of France became the epitome of an existential crisis with the agonizing choices thrust on those living through the events. Both Sartre and Camus were actively involved in the Resistance. It was the aftermath of war that led to their split because of Sartre's commitment, and for some years, his hope Soviet style Communism would lead to a better world. He excused the Stalinist brutalities as an unavoidable means to a better end, the need to get one's hands dirty. But for Camus the ends did not justify the means. He rejected any actions that would harm innocent bystanders and was well known for his opposition to the death penalty.

A scene in Camus' essay collection *The Rebel* has always stayed with me. He expresses approval of the Russian revolutionaries who—after having made extensive plans to throw a bomb at the carriage of an official guilty of many terrible abuses but who called off their act

when they saw the man had his grandchildren with him the appointed day. For a time Sartre considered "injustice against one person" no longer an issue, but eventually he agonized over the question of moral compromises.

Camus never considered anything like a path to future progress. For him the struggle against forms of evil was not a step to ongoing betterment, but rather just another example of pushing a rock up a mountain again and again and never reading the peak. He speaks through Dr. Rieux, the narrator of *La Peste* (*The Plague)*, who says of the struggle against a fictional plague in Oran, that there can "never be a final victory." All humans can do is refuse "to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers." Camus' plague was taken, at least initially, to be an analogy for the Nazi occupation of France, and the commitment to the Resistance a refusal to bow down. Yet, for Camus, a Nazi defeat did not mean an end of tyranny. There will be more plagues, again and again.

This inability to believe in actual victory is for Camus not fatalism but rather clear-eyed acceptance of how things are. What had Dr. Rieux won? his narrator asks after the plague had receded.

> All he gained was to have known the plague and to remember it, to have known affection, and to have one day to remember it. All than a man could win in the game of plague and life was knowledge and memory. . . . [I]f that is what it meant to win the game, how hard it must be to live only with what one knows and what one remembers, deprived of what one hopes.

The Existentialist in us all

In many senses, whether we believe in hope or the Absurd, how can we not be somewhat existentialist, unless we retreat into what Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness* called "*mauvaise foi*" (bad faith). He uses the example of a waiter gliding through a dining room fully absorbed in the act of being a waiter; that is, playing a role that meant leaving his own identity behind. Of course, some bad faith is necessary to function in the world, at least to hold down a job and interact with a sales clerk. But to do so constantly is to deny one's essential freedom and fail to truly live—going though life without questioning why one is doing what one does or considering other possibilities. Instead, we should face painful realities, seek to be authentic, and think big.

In the book Bakewell elaborates on the continuing significance of existentialism, acknowledging that the central figures and even their philosophies were "hopelessly flawed" because of their complex and troubled beings and because "their ideas were rooted in a dark, morally compromised century." But for her, they demand rereading to face "the questions about freedom and being that we constantly try to forget" amid the turmoil of our current century. Even if we try to escape into bad faith, nails will bend, hammers break, bombs fall on hospitals. Our actions in the face of these disruptions, the choices we make, become the core of our basic biographies.

More than any other modern philosophy, Bakewell proposes, existentialism "helped to change the basis of our existence in fundamental ways." As I interpret that statement, we—or many of us—have become aware that real meaning emerges from our actions and our choices, especially what we do in periods of personal or societal crisis (like the one we are living through after the U.S. election of 2106). In her youth, when Bakewell first read the people she considers in *The Existentialist Café*, she believed ideas were central to our understanding of the world. But three decades later, she has come to believe the opposite: "Ideas are interesting, but people are vastly more so." In this book she demonstrates that point—people and their actions are the roots of ideas.

Sources

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

———. **"Think big, be free, have sex … 10 reasons to be an existentialist."** *The Guardian*, March 4, 2016.

John Gerassi. "The Second Death of Jean Paul Sartre" in *Sartre's Life, Time and Vision du Monde,* William L McBride, editor. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1997.

Albert Camus. *The Plague*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert. New York: Viking Books, 2012.

Mary Warnock. ***Philosophy Bites***. September 17, 2007.