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"Out, out, Brief Candle!"

What Do You Mean by Existentialism?

> "Let us imagine a number of men in chains, and all condemned to death, where some are killed each day in the sight of the others, and those who remain see their own fate in that of their fellows and wait their turn, looking at each other sorrowfully and without hope. It is an image of the condition of men."[1]
>
> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

Existentialism and free market thinking are not often found together, and so I have met with some disbelief when I have proposed combining them.[2] The strength of the connection between the two depends on the conception of existentialism. The aim of this chapter is thus to articulate my account of existentialism, which is an atheistic and highly individualistic, rather than social, philosophy. I do not seek to defend my account of existentialism or my interpretation of particular existentialists against competing accounts, nor do I attempt to establish the truth of my account. The aim of this chapter is

The Free Market Existentialist: Capitalism without Consumerism, First Edition. William Irwin.

predominantly explanatory, not argumentative. The relevant arguments come in chapters 2 and 3. The existentialist I describe may be a figure in whom you recognize yourself or others, but even if you do not, the description will serve as the foundation for the larger project of this book, namely articulating and defending free market existentialism.

Defining Existentialism

Those who do not appreciate existentialism often seek to dismiss it as a passing fad or a moment in time characteristic of post-war France. This is misguided. Existentialism crystallizes an insight or impulse that has always been with us to recognize the importance of individual, lived, concrete experience. We see this tendency in many places, from the Old Testament books of *Job* and *Ecclesiastes* to elements of Buddhism and stoicism, to Pascal, to Shakespeare, and beyond. In my view, existentialism is expressed hauntingly in Macbeth's musing:

> Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
> Signifying nothing.[3]

Not all existentialists have been as gloomy and pessimistic as Macbeth at that moment, but human beings from any time or place could comprehend the significance of this image: the absurdity, the meaninglessness, the deception, the pointless striving, the anxiety, the despair, the urgency, and the sense of ever-impending death.[4]

Existentialism resists definition because there is nothing essential that the philosophers and artists grouped together as existentialists share in common. Indeed, existentialism is best thought of as a family resemblance concept with an overlapping set of characteristics but no necessary or sufficient conditions.

If there were an existentialist's club, no one would join.[5] Existentialists aren't joiners; they're individualists. And they certainly

don't like labels, including "existentialist." Nearly all the philosophers who are usually considered existentialists did not accept the label at one point. Two of the major figures we will consider, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, pre-date the term and are often referred to as forerunners or fathers or grandfathers of existentialism rather than as existentialists themselves. Martin Heidegger purposely disavowed the existentialist label, and Albert Camus saw himself as being in opposition to existentialism. Jean-Paul Sartre rejected the label at first before later accepting it. Among the big four of existentialism—Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre—only Sartre can unquestionably be called an existentialist. Labeling any of the other three as an existentialist will result in a scholarly fight, and even Sartre's relationship to existentialism is ambiguous. As I will argue in chapter 2, Sartre's adoption of Marxism after the publication of *Being and Nothingness* sits in uncomfortable tension with the existentialism articulated in his *magnum opus*.

Clearly, whatever I claim existentialism is will meet with disagreement. Because my aim is not primarily historical, nor to articulate what is common to the canonical existentialists, but rather to present a view that I want to advance and apply in subsequent chapters, I will start with a definition that I will unpack briefly here and in more detail throughout the chapter. This is a definition that highlights elements of existentialism that I find appealing and that fit with my project of defending the free market. Please note that this definition does not attempt to specify a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Without further ado, here it is: Existentialism is a philosophy that reacts to an apparently absurd or meaningless world by urging the individual to overcome alienation, oppression, and despair through freedom and self-creation in order to become a genuine person.

To say the world is absurd is to say with Camus that it defies our hopes and expectations. Truly speaking, as Camus notes, it is our relationship to the world that is absurd, not the world itself. "The world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and … wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world."[6] We are thus called to make an adjustment, to recognize the world for what it is and to not

expect it to be anything else. The world is not hostile, but the world is meaningless, at least for the atheistic existentialist who sees the world and life itself as being without pre-given meaning.[7]

Existentialism speaks to the individual rather than to the group.[8] Dealing with absurdity and meaninglessness is an individual endeavor. The individual seeks to overcome alienation, the sense of being "other," of being excluded, of being not at home. The existentialist response to alienation is not to join a group but to create the self. The individual seeks to overcome oppression, the feeling that others are keeping you down or controlling you. Again, the existentialist response is not to join the oppressors, nor is it necessarily to join together with others against the oppressors. It is to refuse to be oppressed; it is akin to the stoics' assertion of the freedom of one's own mind.

The individual seeks to overcome despair. In Kierkegaardian terms, Hubert Dreyfus says, "Despair is the feeling that life isn't working out for you and, given the kind of person you are, it is impossible for things to work for you; that a life worth living is, in your case, literally impossible."[9] Existentialism does not glorify despair. Rather, it recognizes despair as a common part of the human experience, urging us to overcome it. Again, the key to overcoming is freedom and self-creation. I do not need to be who I have been or who others have defined me as. Instead, I need to be a genuine person, what existentialists call authentic. This means someone who takes responsibility for his or her free actions and the self he or she creates. We will say more about the authentic ideal later.

Inspired by Heidegger, Sartre famously defined existentialism as the doctrine that existence precedes essence.[10] In other words, unlike many things, which have their essence pre-given, human beings construct and create their own essence through their free choices. So, for example, a tree has its essence or nature set by its DNA, and a teapot has its essence or nature set by its manufacturer.[11] According to Sartre, we are radically free because we are unconstrained by an essence. Sartre, though, is too extreme in his denial of a human nature, not properly recognizing the limitations that biology places on human nature. As we will see and discuss in chapter 4, this is a way in which his existentialism needs to be revised and brought into line with science, particularly concerning evolution, which gives humans a loose-fitting nature.

Concrete Individual Existence

Philosophy has a tendency to get caught up in abstract concepts and unlikely thought experiments while forgetting concrete lived existence. Here the existentialist connection with literature and other arts is salutary for its attempt to depict and describe human experience. Existentialism recognizes the validity and importance of first-person experience. Each existing individual experiences the world differently, and the differences can be as important, or more important, than detached, objective, scientific description and analysis. Ironically, in describing what it is like for me to exist as an individual, something universal is communicated, namely the uniqueness of our individual experiences and the sense in which we are ultimately "alone with others."[12] No one can ever know or experience the world the way I do, and I can never know or experience the world the way another person does. We are divided by the gulf of subjectivity between us, and yet, recognizing this, we can feel some solidarity with one another. We are inescapably locked up in ourselves, yet we are social creatures who inevitably interact with others and are concerned with the way others think and feel and the way others perceive us.[13]

Sartre takes "the look" of the other, the way the other makes me a thing with his stare, to be such a strong experience as to erase any doubt as to whether other people have minds like ours; their minds are felt in our experience. The other person attempts to define me, and the other person also attempts to compel me to accept his or her own self-definition. I respond in kind. Hence the nature of interpersonal relationship is conflict: "Hell is other people."[14] Yet we do not want to be completely alone; we want recognition and validation from others. This is one of the many elements of ambivalence in the human condition. Other people—can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em.

Sartre says, "But, given that man is free and that there is no human nature for me to depend on, I can not count on men whom I do not know by relying on human goodness or man's concern for the good of society."[15] This line from the 1946 public lecture "Existentialism Is a Humanism" is aimed at Marxism. Shortly after this, however, Sartre became a Marxist, albeit an unorthodox one, and began to

view the issue of freedom and others differently. In chapter 2 we will examine Sartre's changes in detail.

Kierkegaard's greatest contribution to existentialism was his recognition that philosophy had become so abstract as to lose sight of the existing individual. A map posted in a park that doesn't have a locator saying "you are here" can be practically useless. Likewise, an abstract metaphysical system that does not locate the existing individual is useless. Along these lines, existentialism validates the archetypal storyline of the hero's journey of self-discovery. The individual finds the confines of her upbringing to be constricting or absurd. With some level of awakening or realization, she must leave or reject what was familiar to her and face new challenges. In the process she discovers or creates her true identity, and ultimately she returns home to tell those she left what she has discovered. Thus Kierkegaard both loves and hates his native Copenhagen. He finds its institutional Christianity to be stifling and un-Christian. In the course of his journey of self-discovery he enters a deeply personal and paradoxical relationship with the divine and breaks his engagement with Regine Olsen. Although he leaves Copenhagen for a short time, he returns and taunts his fellow citizens as a gadfly.

The self-discovery is not enough; it must be shared. Nietzsche too, despite his solitary lifestyle, wrote to be read, wrote to provoke. So although the individual is paramount, there is an inescapable desire to communicate individuality to others, not so that they will imitate one's own individuality but so that they will seek individuality for themselves. In this way, the existentialists are *provocateurs par excellence*, and in many cases they write to be read by regular people, not just professors. Most are not dry and dusty, but, at their best, vivid and vital.

Kierkegaard reacted most directly to Hegel, but his point applies to much of Western philosophy. It had begun with Socrates among the people, ultimately facing his own execution, but from Plato onward philosophy became more and more a matter of abstract metaphysical speculation. Socratic philosophy begins with the question "What should I do?" To answer the question, it finds that it must answer the questions "What is real?" and "How can I know?" But these questions of metaphysics and epistemology become ends in themselves rather than means to the end of answering the question

"What should I do?" And answers to the question "What should I do?" are actually given as answers to the question "What should *we* do?" or "What would or should *the ideal person* do?" Kierkegaard draws us back to the very personal and individual way of answering the question "What should I do?" The answer for me will not be exactly the same as the answer for you, because we are all unique individuals who find ourselves in unique circumstances.

Although the modern age has seen the rise of individualism, it has also paradoxically seen the rise of mass society and mass culture. The result is that the individual gets swallowed up; even ways of "acting out" individually fit templates and become clichés of rebellion. Existentialism seeks to counteract that, to make a place for unique individuals. The crowd tries to suck you in. There is no grand conspiracy to obtain your conformity, but the pressure of the crowd is great nonetheless. And this is one reason why we should resist thinking of ourselves as part of a group.

God

Nathaniel Hawthorne said of Herman Melville, "He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other."[16] To the extent that he fits this description, Melville is an existentialist. Existing in a state of doubt, uncertainty, and ambivalence about the existence of God marks his honest individual appraisal of life. An existentialist refuses to accept easy answers from a group and refuses to pretend there are no unpleasant consequences from decisions or conclusions; an existentialist recognizes undeniable personal responsibility.

Anyone who does not occasionally worry that he may be a fraud almost certainly is. Nor does the worry absolve one from the charge; one may still be a fraud, just one who rightly worries about it on occasion. Likewise, anyone who does not occasionally worry that he is wrong about the existence or non-existence of God likely has a fraudulent belief. Worry can make the belief or unbelief genuine, but alas it cannot make it correct.

Existentialists do not usually produce formal arguments for or against the existence of God. Kierkegaard had faith in the God of Christianity, but this faith was not the kind of belief that results

from careful rational analysis or a weighing of the arguments for and against the existence of God. No, for Kierkegaard faith was separate from, and even opposed to, reason. Obviously, reason could not conclusively prove the existence of God. So what? According to Kierkegaard, God is not known through reason but through faith. Viewed through the lens of reason, the story of covenants, atonement, and salvation is absurd: an eternal being who is both God and man somehow enters time and space to save humanity. Of course that doesn't make sense through reason, but nonetheless it can and should be believed through faith according to Kierkegaard. Faith—not some received doctrine, but an active passionate belief—tells us it is true.

Still, despite the importance of what Kierkegaard would call the subjective *how of truth*, we need to be concerned with the objective *what of truth* as well. The problem with focusing on the subjective "how of truth" is that it seems to give us permission to believe whatever we want. This is dangerous. So while I agree that it is often important to find something that one can be deeply, personally committed to, I think it is even more important to be committed to the objective *what of truth*. Without an objective orientation we will not make decisions based on accurate information. And though some objective information may seem trivial and mundane, it is crucial for making bigger, more profound decisions. That is why I part company with Kierkegaard on God.

Nietzsche and Sartre focus on the subjective sense in which we feel forlorn with the loss of God. Perhaps the day will come when people will not feel forlorn; perhaps it has even come now for some who have been raised without God or religion. But for those of us who were raised to believe in God and religion, the loss is immense. By comparison, the loss felt upon discovery that there is no Santa Claus is trivial. This is something that the New Atheists have missed. Not only does the loss of God have huge implications for morality, as we will discuss in chapter 4, but there is a great sadness that comes as well, like the sadness we feel at the death of a friend or family member. We must grieve the loss, and we will perhaps never fully overcome it.

Nietzsche and Sartre drew out the implications of the death of God, making clear that without God we are without a source of objective values. As opposed to the New Atheists like Dawkins and

Dennett, the Good Old Atheists like Nietzsche and Sartre (at least some of the time) saw the loss of God as disturbing and challenging. We cannot just pretend that life goes on in the same way without God. Values can no longer be found or discovered; without God, they have to be invented and created. Indeed, the question of what values to invent and create is a prime issue in subsequent chapters of this book.

Meaning

We can distinguish between the meaning *of* life and meaning *in* life.[17] Of course, in many cases the two are directly connected. Most religions will tell you what the meaning *of* life is (e.g., to serve God) and they will also tell you how to have meaning *in* life (e.g., how best to serve God). From my existentialist perspective, without God there is no meaning of life, but there can still be meaning in life. That is, there is no pre-given purpose to life, but there can still be things to do that make the experience of life fulfilling, rewarding, and purposeful. So, without God, life is meaningless in one sense but not necessarily in another.

In "Pyrrhus and Cineas," Simone de Beauvoir retells a story from Plutarch in which Pyrrhus is asked by his advisor Cineas what he will do after he conquers the world. Pyrrhus replies that he will rest. Cineas then asks him: why not rest now?[18] This little exchange nicely frames the existentialist approach to the meaning of life. If life has no pre-given meaning, we can only give it meaning through our own chosen goals and projects. But what is the payoff for achieving and completing those goals and projects? Presumably, satisfaction. But why not just be satisfied now? Why not "rest" content now? Perhaps some people can. Good for them. For most of us, though, a rest only feels good after exertion. It is pleasant to be tired and fall asleep at night after a hard day's work, but a day of idleness may conclude with tossing and turning in trying to fall asleep. So satisfaction does not come with the flip of a switch or as a result of changing one's mind. Satisfaction typically comes after struggle and striving. This is the existentialist answer to the meaning of life: it is whatever you choose it to be, but choosing something that forces you to struggle and grow will likely produce a greater satisfaction in its

accomplishment. Struggle and effort do not convey meaning and value, but they make it easier to appreciate the meaning and value that one places on one's goals and achievements.

Nietzsche's concept of the will to power sheds light on why we do not want to rest now, rather than conquer the world first. The process matters more than the product. Even if we conquer the world we will not rest long before looking for the next challenge—perhaps the next world to conquer. Maybe it makes sense that we do not want to rest now, since we are mistaken in thinking that we will want to rest later. To be sure, we will probably rest for a moment, but it will not be long before the restlessness will stir us to action again. We do not have to buy Nietzsche's concept of the will to power in order to see this. Perhaps, though, this incessant striving itself is something to be overcome; perhaps we even need to struggle to overcome it.[19]

Free Will

Just as God and the meaning of life are subjects of concern for existentialism, so is free will.[20] If we assume a materialist worldview, then freedom of the will as traditionally conceived appears to be impossible. There is no place in the causal chain of physical things for the will to act in an uncaused way. What people have traditionally thought of as freedom of the will is impossible unless there is a non-physical soul or a non-physical mind that somehow interacts with the material universe and is itself uncaused. This view of the soul (or mind) and the will was put forward by Augustine and it was affirmed centuries later by Descartes. To this day, it is the natural assumption of most Christians. Of course, it may turn out to be correct, but everything we know about the brain suggests that it performs all the functions that were formerly attributed to the non-physical soul or mind.[21] This puts the existentialist in a strange position, for the overriding assumption of existentialism is freedom of the will.[22] It will not work to adopt a compatibilist solution, according to which the will is caused and determined and yet can be regarded as free so long as it plays a role and is not subject to coercion and constraint. This is not what has traditionally been meant by freedom of the will, and it is not the kind of freedom that

experience tells us we have. Rather, experience suggests that we are ultimately free in making decisions and choices.

Most of us do not experience our "selves" as caused; we experience our selves as radically free. We find ourselves in a situation in which circumstances provide reasons for acting one way, but we remain completely free to act in another way. Sartre is not a materialist.[23] According to Sartre, the self is not caused to do anything, because the self is a no-thing and only things are within the causal chain. While we might want to take issue with Sartre's ontology and reasoning, his insight fits the phenomenology of freedom. Most of us do not experience ourselves as algorithmic in our choices, as input-output functions. We experience ourselves as free to make even the most unlikely choices in all circumstances.

Strangely, even if we become convinced by the argument against freedom of the will, most of us cannot help but feel as though we nonetheless have freedom of the will. Upon reflection we may conclude that we probably have no freedom of the will, but we may still find it impossible to believe this in a way that translates into action or non-action. So, because freedom of the will is at least possible, and for the sake of remaining true to lived experience, I will assume in this book that we do have freedom of the will as traditionally understood. Pascal's Wager addresses the issue of whether or not it makes sense to bet on belief in God. We need a kind of "Pascal's Wager on Free Will." Along those lines, William James famously remarked that his first act of free will would be to believe in free will.[24] Because we cannot conclusively establish the negative conclusion that we have no freedom of the will, the door is left open to believing and acting as if we do have freedom of the will.

What would it mean to act as though one had become convinced that there is no free will? Some people imagine that the result would be to sit idly and slothfully by as the world turns. But there is no reason to think you would act that way if you did not have free will. In fact, that kind of non-action would be more indicative of a free choice to do nothing. Really, without free will you would simply act in the way that you were pre-determined to act, and that would probably not be to sit idly by. On the other hand, if you became convinced that there was no free will and you were wrong, you might freely choose to sit idly by for the most part. And that would likely be regrettable.

A fictionalist approach to free will is probably unavoidable and involuntary for most people who have become convinced that free will is impossible. Following a fictionalist account of free will, we would *accept* free will while *not believing* in free will. The upshot would be that in almost all situations we would act as if we have free will, but when we were pushed to give our answer to the theoretical, philosophical question of whether we have free will, we would respond that "no, we probably do not have free will." Yet our lack of belief would not manifest itself in action or attitude in the next moment. We would go right back to acting as if we had free will. In this sense, free-will fictionalism may be like Humean cause-and-effect fictionalism. The Humean is convinced by the arguments against cause and effect, yet she accepts cause and effect in daily life. It is only when she considers the philosophical question of whether there is cause and effect that she says "no, I don't believe there is." Right after giving this answer she returns to living as if there is cause and effect. To recap, the working assumption of this book will be that we do have free will. Free will is worth betting on despite the odds against it. For my part, even at times when I am inclined to bet against free will theoretically I find myself involuntarily engaging in free-will fictionalism.

Freedom, Responsibility, and Excuses

We live in an excuse culture. Not only are we inclined to make excuses for ourselves, but others are inclined to accept them and sometimes even make them for us. Of course, life is not easy and there are factors that provide the context for bad decisions and actions. But the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of not holding ourselves and others responsible. Because the extent to which mitigating factors are relevant is a matter we can only truly know of ourselves, responsibility needs to begin with ourselves. We may want to be kind in offering someone else the benefit of the doubt and we may want to forgive ourselves when we act regrettably, but we need to take responsibility for ourselves. We lead by example that way.

At the risk of sounding cliché, some of what is most attractive about existentialism for me is its attitude of "no excuses."[25] Other

people who adopt free-will fictionalism may have a quite different reaction to the "no excuses" attitude. For me, betting on the existence of free will makes sense because there is nothing to lose and much to gain from the wager. With its uncompromising insistence on the ever-presence of freedom, the heroic view of existentialism is the freedom to say "no" even at the point of a gun. Circumstances may be difficult and conspire against us, but we always have responsibility and we never have excuses, because we are always ultimately free. Only two options are needed for freedom, and there are always at least two options. As we will discuss in greater detail in chapter 2, for Sartre freedom, in the ontological sense, does not come in degrees; there is never a decrease in ontological freedom, just an increase in the difficulty of circumstances. Having fewer good options does not make you less free in the ontological sense, only in the practical sense. It is this ontological sense of freedom that I am willing to bet on despite the case against it.

"The environment can act on the subject only to the exact extent that he comprehends it; that is, transforms it into a situation."[26] Here we see Sartre's stoicism. Of course, some circumstances give us more favorable material to work with than others, but it is still up to us to construct what we will and determine the situation we are in. We are always completely free ontologically, but our circumstances are sometimes unfortunate and act as limits to our practical freedom. Sartre thus characterizes his existentialism as a philosophy of "optimistic toughness."[27] It is a stoicism without quietism. We are not doomed or determined by our circumstances, and though life is difficult, we can make of our lives what we will.

The stoicism of existentialism is actually best encapsulated by an insight from the pragmatist William James: "My experience is what I agree to attend to."[28] We create and construct our situation by interpreting our circumstances. Of course some circumstances will force themselves on our attention like the scream of a siren, but with effort and practice we can come to choose what we will give our attention to and how we will conceive it. This is not easy, of course, but the world is one of our making, first in our minds and later in our actions that can transform the reality outside our minds. This is not to say we are unlimited in such power, but rather just to suggest that we often leave such power largely untapped.

The matter of what we agree to attend to resonates with the stoic Epictetus' judgment that it is not the man who reviles or strikes you who harms you but your own judgment that harms you.[29] Epictetus is likely sincere even if he is overstated. Likewise, so are James and Sartre. Still, it is usually better to err on the side of overestimating the extent to which we determine our own experience than to underestimate it and see ourselves as victims of a world outside our control.

Sometimes excuses take the form of a false honesty, as when a person admits with a what-can-you-do attitude that he is lazy or cowardly or impatient or whatever. Sartre argues, though, that no one is any of those things in a fixed sense, and we all have the freedom to change ourselves and act against the tendencies we have developed. In fact, however, most people don't want freedom. As Dostoevsky brilliantly illustrated in his story of "The Grand Inquisitor" in *The Brothers Karamazov*, people would prefer to have most decisions made for them; they want simple rules to obey. People want to pretend that they have roles to play that bind them. They engage in Sartrean bad faith, acting as if they really were a teacher, student, waiter, or bus driver in the way a rock is a rock. It is a subtle self-deception by which they focus on an undeniable aspect of themselves, namely that they are in the role of teacher, waiter, or what-have-you while conveniently ignoring the fact that they are not just that role. They ignore the fact they are free and can make choices not in conformity with the expectations for the role they are playing.

We are, as Sartre says, "condemned to be free."[30] We have a purpose or plan only to the extent that we give it to ourselves. This can all be too much to bear. We would often like to hide from or deny our freedom, and in bad faith this is precisely what we do. To be clear, this is different from involuntary free-will fictionalism in which the fictionalism is not consciously chosen. Even when there is a conscious choice to hide from freedom in bad faith, it is a free choice; we can never escape it. Freedom is something to be sought and celebrated, but it is also a heavy burden.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir nicely observes that we are all free, but some of us, perhaps most of us, do not fully recognize and act on our freedom. We hide from our freedom to one extent or another. The existentialist ideal is to recognize our full freedom,

choose a goal or project, and struggle to achieve it. While political action may be important and helpful in securing for people practical freedom from the oppression of others, it is also important to wake people up to the freedom they already have in all circumstances, the freedom to choose and to act.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir famously says that "One is not born, but rather becomes woman."[31] With the passage of time and social progress, this has become obvious, but it continues to express the fundamental existentialist insight that existence precedes essence. No one can force you to be or live a certain way based on the genitalia you are born with. Society, though, will try to force you, however gently or subtly, into certain roles. Here, it is possible to resist. The temptation may be to drift along with what is expected of you, but you remain free to make yourself, to create your essence through your own free choices.

Compared to Sartre and Beauvoir, Heidegger is much more constrained in his view of freedom, depicting us as thrown into a world that constricts our possibilities. In *The Jerk*, Steve Martin's title character tells us, "I was born a poor black child." Well, he was born poor, but much to his dismay it turns out that he is not black, never was, never will be. There are things about us that we cannot change; our race is one example. Likewise, some possibilities are closed off to us. Given my age, height, and lack of athletic ability, it is not a genuine possibility that I may some day play in the NBA. Nor will I ever be a court jester—since no such jobs are available in our day and age. Sartre believes we have the *freedom to try*, though not the *freedom to succeed*. So I do have the freedom to try to become an NBA player even though I have no real chance of succeeding; likewise, I have the freedom to jump out the window and flap my arms in an attempt to fly. My ontological freedom is unlimited no matter how limited my practical freedom is. Despite his hyperbole, Sartre is closer to the truth and certainly more inspiring than Heidegger. The temptation is great to rule out possibilities based on circumstances. Think of the young person who lacks the confidence to pursue a career in medicine. No short, unathletic, middle-aged man needs to be told that he will not succeed in making it to the NBA, and no sane person needs to be told that he will not succeed if he tries to fly from the window by flapping his arms. But many young people may need to

be told that they can make a career in medicine (or some other field) if they apply themselves and persevere.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty criticized Sartre for his conception of absolute freedom, which suggests that even physical disabilities do not limit our freedom. Of course, in a way they do. They limit our practical freedom, though not our ontological freedom. No blind person is ever going to play major league baseball, but Sartre would respond that blind people are still free to try. For Sartre, we are limited by our facticity, the sum of all facts that are true of us. But we remain free to interpret our facticity and thus construct the situation in which we find ourselves. It is along these lines that Sartre hyperbolically says that "the slave in chains is as free as his master."[32] And it is in this way that existentialism is a kind of empowered stoicism. Rather than counseling resignation and acceptance à la stoicism, existentialism à la Sartre urges us to be bold and to refuse to see our facticity as limiting, as much as it is enabling, calling for us to react to life's pain and difficulty with creativity. Nietzsche likewise argues that Greek tragedy resulted, in part, from the reaction to life's pain and difficulty. The response is not one of despair or resignation but rather of creativity, as the oyster makes a pearl in response to irritation and infection. Certainly this is a more optimistic and more welcome message than we get from the recognition of limitations in Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

In addition to "no excuses," another resonant existentialist maxim is "get over it." Existentialism is a philosophy of action, not of wallowing in despair. For the existentialist, there is always something to complain about and bemoan, but there is no value in despair, only in overcoming despair. "Get over it" is not a mere platitude. Implicit in the injunction is acceptance that life is not fair. "That's not fair" is one of the first complaints that children learn to make, but of course, life really is not fair, as reflected in the retort "Whoever told you that life was fair?" We may struggle to make things as fair as possible but we will never succeed fully. Life is what you make of what you have in the place that you are. It is not about what you could have done if you had different assets or opportunities in a different situation. What did you actually do? That is all that matters. As Sartre says, "A man is involved in life, leaves his impress on it, and outside of that there is nothing."[33]

Anguish

Choices made today will have effects long after tomorrow, and most significant choices cannot be made with certainty of their effects. In fact many choices must be made in the midst of deep uncertainty as to their long-term effects. It is partly for this reason that existentialism puts a premium on the subjective quality of one's beliefs. It's not that truth is subjective, but that things worth believing, choosing, and risking require some passion.

Sartre conceives of consciousness as nothingness, implying the dictum that "existence precedes essence." The self does not pre-exist but must be created, an idea intimately tied to Sartre's radical freedom. My actions do not result from decisions of a self in the cause and effect fashion of objects in the world. For Sartre, there are never motives *in* consciousness, but only *for* consciousness.[34] This means that consciousness can choose to act on those motives or not; it is not driven or caused by them. Anguish starts with consciousness of this freedom. I am in anguish when I recognize that the decision and action I am about to make and initiate is not caused or determined by my past. Hence we get Sartre's famous example of the gambler in anguish. He has resolved to gamble no more, but when he is confronted with the gambling table he realizes that the past resolution has no binding or causal power. He must freely decide again to gamble or not.[35] Sartre's other paradigmatic example of anguish involves the realization that I am free to fling myself from the precipice on which I am walking. I fear that the precipice may crumble and so I may fall, but I have anguish concerning what I may do with my own freedom.[36] Anguish, therefore, is not just consciousness of my freedom but fear of what I may do with it.

Choices are inevitable, as even the failure to choose is tantamount to a choice. So to avoid the anguish that comes with the inevitability of choice we adopt conventional morality and develop habits. Both routes allow us to operate on automatic pilot and pretend that there is no choice to be made. Habit is particularly powerful when built into a routine, which is described by the character Odintsova in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* as being indispensable for life in the country.[37] Habit and routine allow one to pretend that certain things simply have to be done, thus avoiding anguish by concealing choice. Likewise, conventional morality and manners tell our id

and impulses that our desires are simply unacceptable, out of the question, and thus easily dismissed. Take away conventional morality and manners, and we are left confronting our own freedom and worrying that we may make a choice that will bring pleasure in the moment but bring pain in the long run.

This desire to avoid anguish can also be seen in the desire to construct a fixed and stable identity. If I can simply tell myself that I am a father and a father takes care of his children, then certain temptations are disqualified. But, of course, Sartre's reply is that I am not a father, not in the way a pen is a pen. I have no fixed and stable nature; I simply pretend to for the sake of minimizing anguish. Thankfully we are not always in a state of anguish. We sometimes avoid anguish through bad faith in which we deny our freedom and conceive of ourselves as things with a fixed and stable nature. But more often we are not in anguish because we are absorbed in the world. We are not self-reflectively aware. In Sartre's example, no self inhabits my experience of running to catch a streetcar. My consciousness is simply absorbed by the streetcar and the task of catching it.[38] We will say more about absorption shortly.

Authenticity

Authenticity is a kind of genuineness, a taking responsibility for oneself and one's actions; it is being the real thing. But because there is no such thing as the real thing, authenticity is particularly difficult. To feel comfortable in one's genuineness or authenticity is almost certainly to lack it. Rather, it exists in a perpetually uneasy state. In fact, recognizing our own limitations and shortcomings with regard to self-knowledge is part of being authentic. Much of our decision making is unconscious and is just rationalized after the fact by consciousness. There is more to us beneath the surface than above, but we can make and tame the self. The self never becomes a fixed and stable entity, but it can become a creation, a useful subjective creation like values.

Authenticity is aided by having a good nose for the truth and for authenticity in others. Being authentic is no easy task. One can easily take it too far and use authenticity as an excuse for saying or doing whatever one wants. But that is not authenticity as much as it

is ugly self-centeredness. Authenticity requires that you be yourself. For some people that may mean being vulgar, uncensored, and unrefined. But simply imitating such people because they are authentic in their vulgarity is not necessarily authentic in its own right; in fact it most likely is inauthentic. Authenticity involves being, and making yourself a person who is true to herself. In Nietzsche's terms, the authentic person makes herself a work of art, not by performing to meet some image of herself but by becoming who she is and giving style to her character.[39] In that sense, authenticity is a matter of dignity and integrity in facing the facts about life and the world and resolving to take responsibility and make the best of the situation. It is about resisting the constant temptation to deceive ourselves and hide the truth.

Absorption

In his famous retelling of the myth of Sisyphus, Camus concludes by instructing us to imagine Sisyphus happy. This perplexes many readers. After all, Camus has just described Sisyphus as being subject to the gods' pointless punishment of rolling a rock up a hill every day only to have it roll back down again. There is no greater purpose served by rolling the rock up the hill. Like the child's punishment of writing lines on the blackboard, part of the punishment is its pointlessness. And unlike the child's punishment, this one can never be completed. Nor is there any great satisfaction to take in a job well done. So how can Sisyphus be happy? Camus tells us that "the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart."[40] That he has a task, that he has something to do, even if it is not profound or objectively purposeful, is all that Sisyphus needs to get started. Sisyphus has an activity to commit to and to re-conceive as meaningful. And if anything is characteristic of existentialism it is the importance of our ability to re-conceive our circumstances and make our situations meaningful. We imagine not that Sisyphus tricks himself into thinking that he is doing something grand or elevated in rolling the rock but rather that he finds the activity absorbing. The existentialist must find the proper balance of reflection and absorption.[41]

One must reflect on life because "the unexamined life is not worth living," but one cannot reflect on life all the time because the constantly examined life is unlivable. One must discover activities that one finds absorbing. Having a commitment to a God, political party, or basketball team can be helpful in becoming so focused on a certain activity that one becomes absorbed in the activity and loses sight of oneself. That kind of experience of flow, or "being in the zone," is not itself pleasurable but it is rewarding and gratifying. Indeed, it is a large part of what makes life worth living.

In a life without obstacles to overcome through struggle, we would become soft and unhappy. A test of skill focuses attention and produces absorption in the task at hand. While Nietzsche emphasizes this need for obstacles and struggle, he can be balanced by Camus' insight that we need to come to accept "the gentle indifference of the world."[42] In truth, the world is not out to get us, not trying to throw obstacles in our way. The world is not absurd; it only appears to be. Rather, our interaction with the world is absurd—and only when we make demands and place expectations upon it. So there is subjective value in the struggle, and Camus' Sisyphus testifies to this in his happy rolling of the rock. We do ourselves a disservice when we see the world as alien and hostile. Our struggles are often of our own making, but we need our struggles. Sisyphus cannot be happy through resignation, but only through engagement and absorption.

Conclusion

This chapter began with my definition of existentialism as a philosophy that reacts to an apparently absurd or meaningless world by urging the individual to overcome alienation, oppression, and despair through freedom and self-creation in order to become a genuine person. Individual responsibility was highlighted throughout the discussion that followed. This account of existentialism will serve as the basis for the arguments of subsequent chapters, beginning in chapter 2 with the argument that individualistic existentialism does not fit well with Marxism.

Notes

1 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. W.F. Trotter (New York: Modern Library, 1941), section 199.
2 To her credit, Hazel E. Barnes considers Ayn Rand's objectivism at length and notes some of the parallels with existentialism in *An Existentialist Ethics* (New York: Vintage, 1967), pp. 124–49.
3 *Macbeth*, act 5, scene 5.
4 David Detmer rejects this gloomy and pessimistic view of existentialism in *Sartre Explained: From Bad Faith to Authenticity* (Chicago: Open Court, 2008), pp. 55–7.
5 I owe this line to Jeremy Wisnewski.
6 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays,* trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991), p. 21.
7 This is Sartre's position in some places but not in others. See Detmer, pp. 7–9.
8 Here and throughout this chapter I do not mean the technical sense in which the later Sartre uses "group" as opposed to "series," which we will discuss in chapter 2.
9 Hubert Dreyfus, "'What a Monster then Is Man': Pascal and Kierkegaard on Being a Contradictory Self and What to Do about It," in Steven Crowell, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 102.
10 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), p. 15.
11 Sartre acknowledges that there are Christian existentialists and atheistic existentialists, but the definition he gives would not fit all Christian existentialists comfortably. Some Christian existentialists would believe that God gives human beings their essence—an essence that would include free will.
12 I borrow this phrase from Stephen Batchelor, *Alone with Others: An Existential Approach to Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1983).
13 The account in this paragraph would be true for some existentialists but probably not for Sartre at all times. See Detmer, pp. 181–5.
14 Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 45. Strictly speaking, it is the character Garcin who says this, but on my interpretation the view fits pretty well with Sartre's view of interpersonal relationships. For a different interpretation see Detmer, pp. 149–53.
15 Sartre, *Existentialism*, p. 36.
16 George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 17.

17 Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), pp. 217–19. Actually, Haidt's terms are "purpose of life" and "purpose within life."
18 Simone de Beauvoir, "Pyrrhus and Cineas," in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Margaret A. Simons and Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 90.
19 Thus, on a Buddhist interpretation of existentialism, meaning in life is not a matter of getting a sudden revelation or epiphany but of working hard to discipline oneself so that one no longer craves or desires, and so no longer becomes attached, and so no longer suffers. And inasmuch as Nietzsche respects the achievements of saints and ascetics, perhaps this interpretation is appropriate.
20 Even though concepts of the will vary and Sartre avoided the term "free will."
21 David Kyle Johnson, "Do Souls Exist?" *Think* 35 (2013): 61–75.
22 Nietzsche is an important exception. See, among other places, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Vintage, 1989), section 21.
23 For a different view, see Hazel E. Barnes, "Sartre as Materialist," in Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1981), pp. 661–84.
24 William James, from an entry in his diary for April 30, 1870, quoted by Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, "Briefer Version," (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), p. 121.
25 Sartre, *Existentialism*, p. 27.
26 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), p. 731 (hereafter BN).
27 Sartre, *Existentialism*, p. 40.
28 William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1890), p. 402.
29 Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, chapter 20.
30 Sartre, *Existentialism*, p. 27.
31 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), p. 283.
32 BN, p. 703.
33 Sartre, *Existentialism*, p. 39.
34 BN, p. 71.
35 BN, pp. 69–70.
36 Cf. BN, pp. 65–8.
37 Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, trans. Richard Freeborn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 90.
38 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), pp. 48–9.

39 *The Gay Science,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), section 290.
40 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays,* p. 123.
41 This is roughly the theme of Robert C. Solomon's *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts: Experience and Reflection in Camus and Sartre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
42 *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 120.