CHAPTER 18

EXISTENTIALISM

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Introduction

The existentialist philosophical movement originated in France in the 1930s and 1940s, above all in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, but also in that of Simone de Beauvoir and, despite his denial that he was an existentialist, Albert Camus.[1] At the height of its popularity in the later 1940s, existentialism expanded into a broader movement in art and culture, aided by Sartre, Beauvoir and Camus all writing plays and novels as well as philosophical works. Central to existentialism is the idea that human existence differs fundamentally from the being of natural objects. For Sartre, human existents are unique in that we are radically free, self-creating individuals. Yet this freedom brings with it a daunting level of responsibility, which we try to avoid by deceiving ourselves that we are not free, thereby falling into 'bad faith'. In examining these and other aspects of human existence, Sartre and his co-workers intend to offer not a traditional account of human nature but an analysis of what it is concretely like to have no given nature, to be radically self-creating—an analysis carried out as much in literature, by tracing how fictional individuals respond to the burdens of freedom, as in philosophical theory. This analysis is intended to have lived practical consequences, disclosing to us how our freedom is at work in our lives so that we can incorporate this existentialist insight and live more authentically (Oaklander 1996: 8).

Sartre is a positive atheist: he affirms that there is no God. For Sartre, this affirmation is crucial to existentialism: to appreciate how completely we are abandoned to our own freedom and responsibility, we must deny that God exists. Yet the relations between atheism and existentialism as a whole are complicated and multi-faceted. In the twentieth century there have been Christian as well as atheist existentialists, and of the main nineteenth-century authors whose ideas prefigure existentialism—Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Søren Kierkegaard—the last two are, explicitly, Christians (see

[1] Thanks to Graham Smith for his helpful comments on an earlier draft. Translations are sometimes modified in light of the original French texts without special notice.

below). For Kierkegaard, we realize and acknowledge the radical character of our freedom most fully not by repugning God but by making the leap into religious and Christian faith, affirming God's existence on a basis of passionate decision that is continually renewed.

Even positive atheists such as Sartre and Camus struggle to extricate their existentialism from the legacy of Christianity. Because Sartre and Camus reject traditional European moral frameworks on the grounds that these depend upon belief in God, they have difficulty establishing positive ethical frameworks to guide human action and politics, as they nonetheless wish to do. They both sought to furnish moral grounds for participating in the French Resistance (in which Camus was particularly active, writing for its newspaper *Combat*) and in emancipatory political movements (Sartre supported communism although he never joined the French Communist Party, while Camus championed liberal socialism). Insofar as Sartre and Camus derive these ethical-political prescriptions from their versions of existentialism, arguably they achieve this only by falling back upon aspects of the traditional Christian morality whose framework and foundations they reject.[2] As we will explore, the problem of how to formulate a completely atheist ethics continues to engage contemporary existentialists.

Before proceeding, we should note that the label 'existentialism' is problematic. The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel coined the term to describe the emerging outlook of Sartre and Beauvoir, a description that they initially resisted but then appropriated (de Beauvoir [1963] 1975: 45). Camus, however, denied that he was an existentialist, and Nietzsche, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard wrote before the term was invented. Nevertheless, we may classify these last four authors as existentialists to the extent that they share the ideas, preoccupations and literary-philosophical approach of the most unambiguous existentialist, Sartre. This is true only of parts of Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's work, though; in regarding them as prefiguring existentialism, we should remember that we are concentrating upon only one dimension of their thought.

Atheism and Nineteenth-Century Precursors of Existentialism

(i) Nietzsche

Nietzsche is often numbered amongst nineteenth-century precursors of existentialism. This is partly because of the style and tone of his philosophizing, which he offered

[2] I am not suggesting that Christian beliefs are logically necessary conditions of morality; clearly, moral frameworks exist in various social and cultural settings. But in every case moral frameworks are part of broader frameworks of comprehensive belief, which are often religious and sometimes theistic. In the European context in which existentialism arose and—as in the US—retains currency, the frameworks of belief underpinning morality have, historically, been overwhelmingly Christian. This context shapes how the existentialists frame the issues around religion and morality.

not merely as abstract theorizing but as embodying a way of life in which conceptual problems are lived through with great intensity and experiential difficulty, in a way that transforms the self. Moreover, in his late work Nietzsche endeavours to draw out the full consequences of atheism, anticipating Sartre's statement in *Existentialism and Humanism* that 'Existentialism is nothing else but an attempt to draw the full conclusions from a consistently atheistic position' (Sartre [1946] 2001b: 45).

Famously, Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science* that modern Europeans live after 'the event that "God is dead"', defined as the event 'that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable' (Nietzsche [1887] 2001: 199). That is, modernity has been marked by diminishing belief in God, induced by the Enlightenment rejection of authority, faith, revelation, scripture, and tradition as sources of knowledge. The death of God, Nietzsche holds, has left our traditional moral frameworks and values in disarray—values of pity, compassion, kindness, altruism, humility, charity; moral precepts to turn the other cheek, love thy neighbour, do as you would be done by; the ten commandments; and so on. We are left, Nietzsche concludes, in a time marked by the end of absolutes and certainty, and in a condition of ethical emptiness that he calls nihilism.

Nietzsche believed that few if any of his contemporaries appreciated the full extent of the religious and moral crisis of their times. He dramatizes this in *The Gay Science* in his parable of the madman who rushes around a marketplace declaring with horror that God is dead ([1887] 2001: 119–20). Those around him are nonplussed: in their view, we all know nowadays that God doesn't exist; what is the madman so upset about? For Nietzsche, these people have failed to grasp that without God, their traditional moral framework—by which they continue to live—has actually lost its basis. Like those who went on venerating the Buddha's shadow after his death (ibid.: 109), these people adhere to a residual Christian moral framework although its religious foundations have slipped away.

In contrast, Nietzsche insists that the hollowness of these inherited values must be exposed and their residues rooted out and destroyed. This destructive effort clears the ground for the creation of *new* values for which Nietzsche hopes. He regards nihilism as not only the greatest danger, then, but also the greatest opportunity, potentially liberating us from Christian restrictions to exercise our creative agency. Here he prefigures Sartre, who stresses in *Existentialism and Humanism* that human individuals must create values through their own choices, in the absence of God. But while Nietzsche, like Sartre, is a positive atheist, Nietzsche emphasizes the *difficulty* of consistently being an atheist. Consistent atheism requires the destruction of the entire ethical edifice deriving from Christianity and the creation of an entire new table of evaluations in its place. Until these highly demanding tasks are completed, we remain amidst the remains of Christian morality, so that in practice no Europeans yet *can* be complete, consistent atheists.

Central amongst the residues of Christian morality, Nietzsche contends, is the assumption that *truth* is of absolute value, an assumption that pervades modern societies because it is fundamental to modern science: 'science, too, rests on a faith; … The question whether *truth* is necessary must get an answer in advance, the answer "yes"' ([1887] 2001: 200). Scientists aim to discover the truth about the world for its own

sake; illusions might well be more useful for human beings than truth, but nonetheless scientists value the latter. This assumption that truth has absolute value is a legacy of Christianity, Nietzsche claims (ibid.: 201; see also 1994: 118–19). In the Christian worldview, spiritual realities—God, the afterlife, our immortal souls—lie beyond the earthly, everyday, perceptible world, and spiritual reality is ultimately *more* real than the everyday physical world (Nietzsche [????] 1998: 50). This Christian worldview incorporates and builds on the Platonic view that ideal forms, and ultimately the form of the Good, lie beyond, underpin, and are more ultimately real than the changing perceptible world. Because the spiritual world is ultimately real, we should seek knowledge about it—both for Plato and in the traditional Christian worldview—so as to learn the ultimate purpose of our lives and therefore how to live virtuously. Thus, in this worldview, we have a moral duty to seek the truth about the spiritual world. Modern scientists have inherited from this earlier worldview the idea that things appear one way to our senses but that there is also an underlying real structure to the world which differs from appearances (Nietzsche [1887] 2001: 201), a real structure about which we need to know—but this is not, any longer, because this structure specifies the purpose of our lives; rather, in the project of modern science it is simply assumed that knowledge of underlying reality has value. For Nietzsche, this exemplifies how Christian values, in this case truth, live on in modernity despite having lost their original underpinnings.

(ii) Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard

Two other nineteenth-century authors who are often regarded as proto-existentialists are the Russian novelist Dostoevsky and the Danish religious thinker Kierkegaard. Unlike Nietzsche, they ally their forms of proto-existentialism with defences of Christianity, although not as abstract doctrine but as a lived form of experience.

Dostoevsky asks: if we no longer believe in the Christian God, then what grounds do we have for acting morally? None, he concludes in a note from 1880; 'we are *all nihilists*' today (quoted in Frank 2010: 914). Famously, in his 1879 novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, the self-professed nihilist and atheist Ivan Karamazov states (or more accurately, is reported to have stated) that 'if you were to destroy in mankind the belief in immortality [and its faith], not only love but every living force maintaining the life of the world would at once be dried up. Moreover, nothing then would be immoral, everything would be lawful, even cannibalism' (Dostoevsky [1879] 2009: 81). Since there is indeed no God, Ivan continues, we must actively violate Christian moral teachings, for instance by always acting egoistically. These teachings, appropriated by Ivan's half-brother Smerdyakov, apparently legitimate him in murdering their father (ibid.: 813). Here Dostoevsky dramatizes what he saw as the disastrous moral consequences of the atheism that was widespread in radical political circles in mid-nineteenth-century Russia.

To escape these consequences, Dostoevsky believes, we must return to Christian faith with its values of humility, selflessness, and compassion and love for all humanity (qualities personified by Ivan's brother Alyosha). Yet we find it difficult, in the wake of the

Enlightenment emphasis upon reason, to make this return. Once we allow ourselves to believe only in what we understand rationally, then intellectual difficulties with the Christian God become insuperable (such as the problem of evil: surely an all-powerful and supremely good God cannot exist, for he would tolerate so much evil and suffering). To regain faith, Dostoevsky concludes, we must set reason aside and acknowledge, in feeling, the divinity on which we depend. By doing so, we can reconnect with our spontaneous, felt moral responses to others—responses of kindness, compassion, and selflessness—all rooted in felt Christian acknowledgement of the dependency and limited nature of the individual self.

Dostoevsky prefigures existentialism in several ways. He shares in the existentialist recognition that the 'death of God' has undermined our accepted moral framework, although in response Dostoevsky advocates not creating new, non-Christian values (as Nietzsche does) but returning to Christianity. Also prefiguring the existentialist emphasis on free decision, Dostoevsky suggests that to make this return we must set reason aside, committing ourselves to God on an uncertain and passionate basis. Dostoevsky explores these ideas in literary form, by tracing in his novels how his characters wrestle with the religious and moral difficulties of the modern age. This, again, prefigures the existentialist use of literature (by Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus) to explore the diverse ways in which fictional characters respond to their existential situation.

In the 1840s, Kierkegaard elaborated similar ideas to Dostoevsky's in more philosophical depth. In Kierkegaard's view, each human individual is passionately concerned about his or her own life; as such human individuals do not merely have being but exist in 'the essential meaning of existing' ([1846] 1992: 204). The verb 'exist' derives from the Latin *existere*, to stand out from; thus, to exist is to stand back from, be concerned about and evaluate the state of one's self. With existence, then, comes the freedom continually to re-evaluate and re-orient oneself: to decide how to live. This freedom of decision, for Kierkegaard, is most fully realized in religious faith, described as 'the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and [. . .] objective uncertainty' (ibid.: 204). To have faith is to continually renew the movement of passionately committing oneself to belief in God despite being uncertain of his existence from the perspective of objective truth. The uncertainty is 'precisely what intensifies the daring passion of inwardness' (ibid.: 203): genuine faith depends upon objective uncertainty. In religious faith one most fully realizes one's existential freedom, then, because faith involves constant felt awareness of *committing* oneself in the face of uncertainty.

For Kierkegaard, Christian faith most fully realizes this feature of all religious faith because Christianity rests on a paradox: it holds that God came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ, yet that God is beyond time, embodiment, and death, so that no-one can rationally understand how God entered the world (ibid.: 213). To be a genuine Christian (something Kierkegaard thought was beyond him and his contemporaries) one can only choose to believe that God became Christ, *against* reason—acknowledging not merely the objective uncertainty but the objective irrationality of this belief, which intensifies further the passion of this religious commitment.

Already in the nineteenth century, then, existentialism was emerging in atheistic and Christian forms. In the twentieth century, when existentialism crystallized as a definite and distinctive philosophical approach, it again assumed both atheistic and Christian forms: Gabriel Marcel, for instance, was a Christian existentialist. But it was the atheist existentialists—Sartre and, to a lesser extent, Camus—who most captured the twentieth-century imagination, and to whom I now turn.

(iii) Twentieth-century Atheist Existentialists: Sartre and Camus

Sartre makes (positive) atheism central to existentialism in *Existentialism and Humanism*, an essay that originated as a public lecture given in 1945 and which has become the defining statement of Sartrean existentialism. Although Sartre came to regret this, the essay remains an important and influential statement of his position, including the links between existentialism and atheism, which we cannot ignore.

Human individuals, Sartre maintains in this essay, are radically free: throughout our lives we are continually making choices, even though we are often unaware of doing so. For example, Mathieu Delarue in Sartre's novel *The Age of Reason* ([1945] 2001a) strives desperately to obtain money for his pregnant mistress Marcelle to have an abortion, only belatedly realizing that he is doing so because he has been making an ongoing *commitment* (*engagement*), a choice, not to marry her: 'In all this affair I have been nothing but refusal and negation' (ibid.: 299). One might think that we generally make particular choices in light of deeper-held values—for instance, that Mathieu has been choosing not to marry Marcelle because he does not love her. This is what she insists. Sartre, and Mathieu, construe matters differently. For Sartre, we choose our deepest-held values *by* committing ourselves to them over time, which in turn we do by making the many particular choices that embody this commitment. Thus, Mathieu has over time been choosing not to love Marcelle by his everyday activities, above all that of seeking the money for her abortion. It is this deeper level of free commitment—his 'prior and more spontaneous decision [*choix plus originel*]' (ibid.: 29)—of which Mathieu only retrospectively becomes aware, finally reflecting that everything he has done, he has 'done *for nothing*' (ibid.: 299). Most fundamentally, he has acted 'for nothing' in that he has even chosen what values are to govern his everyday choices, as Sartre famously illustrates with the student who must choose whether to care for his infirm mother or fight for the French resistance, and who cannot choose on the basis of any higher-level values since he has simultaneously to choose *which* values—family or political activity—he ranks as decisive and highest (Sartre [1946] 2001b: 33–4).

For Sartre, we are radically free because our 'existence precedes our essence' (ibid.: 27): we have no inherent nature determining what choices and valuations we make. But since we have no nature, Sartre argues, we cannot have been created by God in light of any divine plan, in the way that a knife is created by a craftsperson in light of

her idea of its function, for then that plan would specify our nature. Since we are radically free, we cannot be God's creations. Furthermore, since we do not make choices on the basis of pre-existing values but assign values only *by* making choices, we are *creating* value through these choices (Sartre argues), introducing value where it was previously absent. This would be impossible if the world were divinely created or infused with value by God, for then values would pre-exist us as God's creations. Therefore, since we are radically free, the world cannot be divinely created: 'there is no God and no design' (ibid.: 35). Sartre therefore believes that once we recognize our radical freedom, we must, consistently, endorse positive atheism—hence existentialism, if it is thought through coherently, must be atheistic (ibid.: 28).

Moreover, Sartre claims, existentialism *is* atheism taken to its full consequences: if there is no God then human individuals cannot have essences and must be radically free to create themselves, and they must be the creators of value since without God no divinely created values can objectively exist in the world (ibid.: 28; see also Sartre [1947–8] 1992: 12–13, 17). However, we might wonder why Sartre thinks that values and essences could only exist independently of human choice if God created them. Why could they not exist objectively in the world independently of human choice *and* of divine creation?[3] An answer is provided in Sartre's previous writings, especially his major early work *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre [1943] 1956).

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre elaborates an ontology (an account of the fundamental make-up of reality) that leaves no room for God or for a cosmos ordered or invested with meaning and value by God or, indeed, for a world populated by objective values or essences. In this ontology, there is an exhaustive divide between two regions of being: being-for-itself (*l'être-pour-soi*)—namely, free human existence—and being-in-itself (*l'être-en-soi*)—reality as it is independently of human existence, as brute being, an undifferentiated continuum with no intrinsic structure or qualities. But the concept of God, Sartre claims, is that of an 'in-itself-for-itself', the first cause or prime mover that brings itself into being, and which thus at the same time absolutely is *and* exercises pure creativity. Sartre insists, though, that being-in-itself and being-for-itself are antithetical and cannot be combined, so that 'the idea of God is contradictory' and he cannot exist (Sartre 1956: 615).

How does Sartre reach these conclusions? His root notion is that of intentionality, namely that all consciousness (*conscience*) is directed upon objects—which, Sartre insists, are not intra-mental ideas but are really in the world outside consciousness (ibid.: xxvii). Consequently, consciousness is entirely empty and translucent, a pure openness onto objects outside it. It consists merely in a series of intentional acts, ways of directing itself upon outer reality, with no substantial core or essence. As a pure series of

[3] Glenn Braddock (2006: esp. 93, 96) objects that although atheism follows from Sartre's existentialism, his existentialism does not directly follow from atheism, because even if there is no creator God there could still be objective essences (such as natural kinds) and values (as for some moral realists).

acts, consciousness is an absolute 'spontaneity' (ibid.: xxxv): each of its acts is absolutely free, for it has no essence to cause these acts to occur.

Moreover, whatever objects a consciousness intends, it necessarily has some immediate, pre-reflective awareness of carrying out this intentional act and thus also of itself as distinct from its objects (ibid.: xxviii). Insofar as consciousness is always immediately self-aware, it never coincides with but always differs, however minimally, from itself (the aware self from the self of which it is aware). This again renders consciousness radically free: whatever actual features it has, whatever current situation it is in, it always is-not those features and situation. Consequently, they never determine or exhaust what consciousness is. I may feel depressed, but I must decide what attitude to adopt towards this mood: to succumb, resist, even embrace it. Even a slave, Sartre controversially claims, remains free to decide what attitude to take to their condition and slave-master (ibid.: 550). This is because human freedom, being rooted in the fundamental structure of our existence, does not and cannot come in degrees: 'Man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all' (ibid.: 441). So we each have 'infinite possibilities of choice' in every situation (ibid.: 522): even though some of these situations are *prima facie* oppressive, they can never diminish anyone's freedom but merely provide varying contexts in which freedom is exercised.

Turning to being-in-itself, consciousness's relation to the outer objects of its awareness is a relation of negativity (or nothingness, *le néant*), in that consciousness is always tacitly aware of not-being these objects. Because it is consciousness that brings negativity to the world, the world just in itself, independent of consciousness, can contain no negativity, Sartre (rather dubiously) reasons. The outer reality upon which consciousness directs itself must therefore be pure, brute being. It can have no internal joints, divisions or structure, because distinctions between kinds of thing depend upon things not-being one another, but not-being is possible only through consciousness, the *'being by which nothingness* [*le néant*] *comes to things*' (ibid.: 22). Distinctions and order are brought to being-in-itself by consciousness and do not pre-exist it.

Brute being *versus* radically free consciousness: this ontology leaves no room for the Christian God. Having no divisions, order or structure, being-in-itself cannot have been created, designed or ordered by God. How then has belief in God arisen? For Sartre, human individuals cannot attain lasting happiness, for we can never simply be what we are but inevitably exist beyond our present states, thus being condemned to perpetual restlessness. We therefore form an ideal of being 'in-itself-for-itself', of attaining an imagined (and impossible, self-contradictory) mode of being in which we would retain our freedom yet also enjoy the tranquil inertia of being-in-itself. Unable to achieve this impossible condition, we project it outside ourselves as an external ideal: God. For Sartre, God is merely a human projection that encapsulates our deepest existential longings (ibid.: 90, 724).

Camus sketches a related picture of the human condition in his essay the *Myth of Sisyphus*. For Camus, the human condition is absurd insofar as we invariably seek meaning in the cosmos where none is to be found: 'The world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and

the passionate longing for clarity whose call reaches to the depths of the human heart' (Camus [1942] 1975: 26). In itself, the world outside us has no meaning or value and yields no answer to our question 'Why?'. In constantly asking that question nonetheless, we are 'condemned without reprieve to the lot of Sisyphus, hopelessly rolling a stone that always falls back to its starting point' (Jeanson [1965] 1980: 25). Like Sartre, then, Camus rejects traditional Christian views of a meaningful and ordered cosmos and asserts that value and meaning can arise only insofar as we create them. We may react to the discovery that the world is intrinsically meaningless by committing suicide. But ideally, Camus claims, we will instead choose to create value and meaning in a spirit of revolt: defiantly acknowledging that, indifferent as the world is, I *shall* introduce value into it anyway, without losing sight of its real indifference.

Have Sartre or Camus conclusively established that existentialism must be atheistic? I think not. Kierkegaard could still reply that our existential, creative freedom can be fully realized only if we embrace rather than reject the Christian God. Moreover, insofar as Sartre and Camus seek to establish an ethics on the basis of their existentialism, they are pushed back towards elements of the Christian moral framework that they profess to reject—or so I will now suggest.

The Problem of Existentialist Ethics

Sartre insists that traditional moral frameworks deriving from Christianity cannot honestly be retained without their religious underpinnings. He therefore confronts the problem: what moral framework is available to Europeans today? It might seem that, for Sartre, we may act however we choose. For if we each choose the values by which we live, and if no prior values objectively exist to guide our choices, then it seems that any and every choice must be equally legitimate. No choice may be judged better or worse than any other, for there is no external standard by which to make such judgements. Indeed, Sartre appears at times to embrace this conclusion. In *Being and Nothingness* he declares that 'all human activities are equivalent [...] it amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or is a leader of nations' (1956: 627), and in *Existentialism and Humanism* he endorses Karamazov's statement that since God is dead, everything is permitted ([1946] 2001b: 32).

Camus appears, at first sight, to endorse a similar moral relativism in *The Outsider* (*L'Étranger*), his novel published in 1942 with *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the play *Caligula* as a trilogy of the absurd. The protagonist Meursault admits the indifference of the world around him. Refusing to pretend that any events or objects in it have inherent value or disvalue, he constantly describes them as bare, brute occurrences and items without emotional significance—as in the novel's well-known opening lines: 'Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday. I don't know. I had a telegram from the home: "Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely." That doesn't mean anything. It may have been

yesterday' ([1942] 1982: 9). Meursault is often morally neutral about events that we might expect to arouse his moral repugnance or remorse. He shoots an Arab man whom he perceives to have been threatening him and his friends, committing the murder apparently without motive: his only explanation is that he did it because of the glare and heat of the sun. He then fires four more times at the dead body; after all, this does not have the intrinsic meaning of desecrating the corpse, for no intrinsic meanings exist.

Meursault's actions might seem to illustrate the dangerous consequences of the existentialist idea that values depend entirely upon creative human choice. For Meursault recognizes that objects, people and events in the world have value only insofar as he chooses to project value onto them. Yet he refuses to make any such projections, and lets the world remain valueless—leaving him apparently free to do whatever he pleases, even to commit murder at whim, for there are no objective moral grounds on which to condemn him. Indeed, when he is condemned to death as punishment for the murder, Meursault greets his own impending death with the same indifference, feeling profound calm in his awareness of the ultimate insignificance of his death.

In fact, though, Camus was concerned—and became increasingly so during and after the Second World War—to avoid the position that anything goes. This concern culminated in his 1951 essay *The Rebel (L'Homme révolté)*, in which he distances himself from his earlier view that 'The sense of the absurd, when one first undertakes to deduce a rule of action from it, makes murder a matter of indifference, hence, permissible' ([1951] 1971: 13). Camus now argues that if one revolts against the absurd and affirms life anyway, then one is tacitly affirming that one's own life is good. But 'the moment life is recognized as a necessary good, it becomes so for all men' (ibid.: 14). In recognizing that life has value for each person, we also apprehend that murder is wrong (ibid.: 15). Moreover, anyone who rebels against her oppression does so in recognition of the value of her life, and here she is recognizing this *universal* value—life. Thus rebels are always, more or less explicitly, pursuing the universal, common human good, not acting merely egoistically (ibid.: 22–3).

Sartre, too, seeks to defend existentialism against the charge that it legitimates any and every course of action and to generate an existentialist account of human solidarity in the struggle against oppression. Although he produced extensive notes towards a treatise on ethics in the later 1940s, posthumously published as *Notebooks for an Ethics* ([1947–8] 1992), his best-known published statement of an existentialist ethics is in *Existentialism and Humanism*. Here he argues that there is one thing on which each of us ought to choose to confer value, namely one's own freedom (on this basis he subsequently argues that we each ought to value the freedom of others as well). Whatever else I choose to value, I must first *be* free to be able to confer value upon it; I must therefore value my freedom. 'Freedom [. . .] can have no other aim but that of willing itself; and when once a man has seen that he creates values . . . he can will only one thing, and that is freedom [*la liberté*] as the foundation [*fondement*] of all values' ([1946] 2001b: 43). The detail of this argument is uncertain and much debated by Sartre scholars (Anderson 1993; Bell 1989). But, however it is construed, Sartre's argument appears to presuppose that being consistent has value: whatever I choose to value, I must be free to value it; therefore I should, *to be consistent*, also value my freedom.

But why ought I to be consistent? Sartre presumes that consistency—or more broadly reason—has inherent value, rather than having value only if I choose to confer value upon it.

Perhaps we can construe Sartre's argument differently, such that freedom is the reality of the human condition and the real source from which we create value; this being human reality, one ought to recognize and admit it. To fail to recognize the reality of one's freedom, in contrast, is to fall into bad faith (*mauvaise foi*). In bad faith, I deny my freedom, pretending that my actions are determined by my nature or role or that I am akin to a non-conscious object, as in Sartre's famous example of the cafe waiter who acts out his role as if it really determined his every move (1956: 59). Sartre objects that bad faith is self-deception or lying to oneself (ibid.: 48): I pretend I am not free even though, necessarily, I am immediately aware of my spontaneous activity (as we saw earlier). Why should I not lie to myself? Is this, again, because it is inconsistent to do so, insofar as 'I must know as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me as deceived' (ibid.: 49)? But 'in Sartre's ontology, one may freely choose to value irrationality and inconsistency, for neither they nor their opposites possess any intrinsic or objective value' (Anderson 1993: 62). Indeed, in *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre claims that self-deception is a logical but not a moral error ([1946] 2002b: 42). However, he then immediately claims that this logical fault *is* also a moral fault because it rests on a cowardly retreat from the reality of freedom (ibid.: 43).

Ultimately, then, Sartre appears to presuppose that truth has value, so that even if illusion or self-deception is more useful to us we ought nonetheless to admit the truth (of our fundamental freedom) and orient our actions by this truth. This recalls the Christian view of truth as Nietzsche identified it, on which the ultimate reality is that of spirit, lying beyond the physical world—likewise, for Sartre, the ultimate human reality is that of the fundamental spontaneity of consciousness. Moreover, because spiritual reality is ultimately real, we must know about it and orientate our lives by it (on the Christian view)—or, for Sartre, we must admit our freedom and orientate our actions around it by recognizing its overriding value. Sartre's ethical argument thus relies on presuppositions that are a Christian inheritance. The same remains true if we read Sartre as presupposing that reason and consistency, instead of truth, have intrinsic value.[4] In the traditional Christian-Platonic worldview that Nietzsche describes, reason was valued as the way to gain knowledge about spiritual reality *qua* spiritual. If Sartre presupposes that rational consistency has value in itself, this is presumably because he has inherited this traditional Christian evaluation of reason.

This hidden reliance on evaluative presuppositions inherited from Christianity continues in *Existentialism and Humanism*'s subsequent arguments. Sartre maintains that if I value my own freedom then I must also value and defend the freedom of others, and so must act to further universal human liberation. Here Sartre anticipates Camus's

[4] The idea that Sartre seeks to ground an ethics on reason is surprising, since existentialism is often identified by its *rejection* of reason as the ground of ethics in favour of free choice. Anderson (1993: 63–4) therefore suggests that, for Sartre, reason can only guide our choices if we first choose to value reason. But this would again leave Sartre unable to condemn those who choose the inconsistent course of advancing their own freedom while violating that of others. Without taking reason as an absolute value, Sartre cannot avoid moral relativism.

argument in *The Rebel* that, since I value my own life, I must also value the lives of others and must fight against their oppression. In *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre argues:

> Obviously, freedom as the definition of a man does not depend upon others, but as soon as there is a commitment, I am obliged to will at the same time as my liberty the liberty of others. . . . [W]hen I recognise . . . that man is a . . . free being who cannot, in any circumstances, but will his freedom, at the same time I recognise that I cannot but will the freedom of others. ([1946] 2002b: 43)

Various reconstructions of this argument are possible. One is that, whatever I choose to value, I thereby assert its value not only in my eyes but absolutely, so that I am effectively asserting that everyone ought to recognize the same value (ibid.: 30). But since I need others to be free to embrace this value, I must therefore value their freedom. An alternative reconstruction is that, when I value my own freedom, nothing about this freedom is peculiar to me, for freedom is (in Sartre's ontology) a purely impersonal spontaneity; thus I am actually valuing freedom per se. I therefore ought to value freedom universally, for there is no relevant difference between my freedom and anyone else's. However we interpret him, Sartre again appears to presuppose that there is intrinsic value either in being consistent—consistently, if I value my freedom then I must also value yours—or in recognizing truth—since freedom in reality is impersonal, to be true to my freedom I must recognize and value it *qua* impersonal and universal. Once again, following Nietzsche, these presuppositions are plausibly seen as a Christian legacy.

Insofar as Sartre goes some way to deriving a moral framework from his existentialism—a framework centred on universal human emancipation—he achieves this only by relying upon the assumption that truth and/or reason have value independently of individual choices. But this assumption has Christian roots. To escape moral relativism, Sartre has had to reintroduce elements of Christian tradition.

The same is true of Camus, despite his hostility to Christianity. In *The Outsider*, Meursault is tried and condemned to death for killing the unnamed Arab. Throughout his trial Meursault's allegedly heartless, callous state of mind, shown in his failure to cry at his mother's funeral and his lack of remorse for the murder, is used as evidence against him. Nonetheless, Meursault refuses to help his case by professing emotions he lacks. For this Camus praises him as a hero in a 1955 interview. Meursault, he writes, is 'driven by a tenacious and . . . profound passion, the passion for the absolute and for truth'; he 'agrees to die for the truth' (Camus 1982: 118–9). This truth is that no objective, God-given meanings and values await our discovery: the world is a godless, indifferent place. Insofar he recognizes this truth, Meursault also recognizes that there is nothing inherently, objectively wrong in his feeling neither sadness about his mother nor remorse about his crime.

Even as Camus and Meursault affirm that no absolute values exist, Camus and Meursault identify *truth* as an absolute value. For Camus, Meursault is morally superior to those around him—despite his crime—because he recognizes the truth of the human condition and insists on this truth despite the punishment he thereby incurs.

In elevating truth to the supreme value, more valuable even than his life, Meursault acts heroically in Camus's eyes. But why does Camus think that truth has such value? He has inherited the Christian assumption that (spiritual) truth has greater value than (physical) life. Camus wishes to reject this worldview that counts truth and spirit as more enduring, real, and valuable than the finite material world, declaring that the truth for which Meursault dies is purely this-worldly, a 'truth of living and feeling'. Even so, Camus's praise for Meursault, and the moral message of *The Outsider*, remain indebted to key elements of the Christian worldview that elevates spiritual truth over material appearances.

Existentialism and Atheism Today

From the 1960s onwards existentialism declined in popularity. Camus died prematurely in 1960, while Sartre moved away from his classic existentialism to synthesize it with Marxism, above all in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* of 1960. Sartre turned to Marxism in the effort to conceptualize how social structures and institutions constrain and limit individual freedom. The rise of French post-structuralism (in Foucault, Derrida, Lacan and others) in the 1960s reinforced this intellectual turn away from individual subjectivity towards social structures that precondition individuals. These developments have inclined many recent continental philosophers away from existentialism, whilst Anglo-American philosophers have often regarded existentialism, especially that of Sartre, as unnecessarily obscure and metaphysically excessive.

Nonetheless, some contemporary thinkers pursue lines of thought opened up by Sartre and his co-workers. Amongst them, Ronald Aronson, a leading interpreter of Sartre, has intervened into the New Atheism debates with his *Living Without God* (2008). Aronson aims to provide a coherent secular account of how we ought to live, based—apparently contrary to Sartre—not on our autonomy but on our *dependence* on others. We today, Aronson holds, depend upon and enjoy the inherited benefits of a long historical and ongoing process of human self-development. We therefore owe gratitude to past and present generations and their labours, and to the natural ecosystemic and evolutionary preconditions of these labours (Aronson 2008: 63). Yet the benefits of this vast historical process are very unequally distributed. This obligates me to try to distribute its benefits more fully to those who currently share unequally in them, and to work for institutional social changes that would further equality. Although I have not chosen to benefit disproportionately from history, if this is my situation it nonetheless generates obligations that I ought to take up, Aronson argues—agreeing with Sartre that, unchosen as my situation invariably is, I cannot evade my responsibility for what I make of it (ibid.: 111–13). But what hope can I have, with no God to guarantee that justice will eventually be realized at the end of history, to think that universal human equality can ever be achieved? Insofar as I do act with others in pursuit of social justice, Aronson argues, I gain increased confidence in our collective powers to advance equality and

I can legitimately hope that we—humanity unaided by God—will eventually achieve collective emancipation (to which Sartre also aspired; see Sartre [1947–8] 1992: 207).

Aronson hopes to have greater success than Sartre in establishing this wholly secular ethic of human emancipation by starting from dependency rather than autonomy. But it is not clear that Aronson's ethic can be disentangled, any more than Sartre's could, from Christian moral sources. A hidden reliance on these sources surfaces in not only Aronson's explicit commitment to the absolute value of truth (Aronson 2008: 125) but also his fundamental commitment to equality. If I recognize that I benefit disproportionately from the historical process, why should I not simply feel fortunate and cling on to my benefits? Aronson's answer is that I have obligations to share these benefits more equally with others because human beings are all equal (ibid.: 80–2). But this principle that we are all equal is arguably a Christian legacy—as Hegel maintained in his lectures on world history of the 1820s:

> The Germanic [northern European] nations, with the rise of Christianity, were the first to recognise that humanity is by nature free [...] This consciousness first dawned in religion [...] but to incorporate the same principle into secular existence was a further problem, [fundamental to] the long process of [...] history itself. (Hegel 1975: 54)

For Hegel, the principle expressed in Christianity (although not only Christianity) that all souls are equal before God is the ultimate source of the reigning European principle of universal moral and political equality—and so, ultimately, of the collective human emancipation and equality championed by Aronson and, before him, by Camus and Sartre.

In pointing out how Sartre's, Camus's and Aronson's existentialist ethics depend on assumptions inherited from Christianity, I mean not to discredit existentialist ethics but to suggest that existentialists could best proceed by openly acknowledging their dependency on Christian ethical sources. Acknowledging dependency need not mean uncritical acceptance, but can form a starting-point for re-evaluating and re-interpreting these sources—deciding how to take forward our moral-religious inheritance. To recognize our dependency on the collective historical process as Aronson recommends, we should also recognize our ethical dependency on the evaluative horizons of Christianity.

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