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Existentialist Methodology and Perspective: Writing the First Person

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Existentialism is considered by many philosophers to be a part of the history of philosophy, rather than part of its present or future. While phenomenology may lay claim to endure as a living part of the contemporary philosophical landscape, and one that is increasingly in interaction with at least some parts of the putative analytic tradition (cf. Zahavi 2013), existentialism has not been quite so fortunate, despite or perhaps because of its fame around the time of World War Two. Central existential themes have been historicized in a way that has rendered them remnants of a bygone world, notwithstanding that this distinction between phenomenology and existentialism is difficult to render precise.

Without proposing anything quite so grandiose as a return to existentialism, in this chapter we articulate and minimally defend certain core existentialist insights concerning the first-person perspective, the relationship between theory and practice, and the mode of philosophical presentation conducive to best making those points. We do this by considering some of the central methodological objections that have been posed around the role of the first-person perspective and 'lived experience' in the contemporary literature, before providing some neo-existentialist rejoinders. The basic dilemma that contemporary philosophy poses to existentialism, vis-à-vis methodology, is that existentialism is: a) committed to lived experience as some sort of given that might be accessed either introspectively or retrospectively (with empirical science posing *prima facie* obstacles to the veridicality of each); and/or b) it advocates transformative experiences, and the power of philosophy in connection with such experiences, to radically revise our inter-connected web of beliefs. In short, the charge is conservatism on the one hand, radicalism on the other. Each of these concerns will be addressed, utilizing ideas from Kierkegaard (as the source for many existentialist themes, methodological concerns, and formal practices) and from the German and French twentieth century versions of existentialism. Nonetheless, the commitment to lived experience central to existentialist thought brings in train its own difficulties, which in turn motivate a move to very different forms of philosophical discourse – forms which, in contemporary philosophy, appear to have been largely abandoned. Part of the decline in existentialism may therefore turn out to be not simply because its themes have been superseded or exhausted, but because the forms in which they properly find expression have been excluded from philosophy as a professional praxis.

Existentialism and the first-person perspective

Existentialism has no readily agreed definition. Many of those philosophers we think of as its key practitioners resisted the label and denied any continuity in their thinking sufficient to constitute a group or movement. Nonetheless, it is arguably overly hasty to dismiss the idea of any philosophical or methodological unity. Family resemblance style definitions can be adduced (cf. Joseph, Reynolds and Woodward 2011), and

methodological matters arguably play a key role in that regard. The method(s) of phenomenology are important for the twentieth century versions of existentialism in France and Germany, and we also get some methodological clues if we extend our remit further into the beginnings of existentialism, which is often traced to Kierkegaard's philosophy and his opposition to Hegel (or, more precisely, Danish Hegelianism (cf. Stewart 2003)). In both cases, there is concern with existence that focuses predominantly upon our first-personal lived experience of the world. This first-personal dimension is not merely understood as a point about perspective or epistemic limitation, but as an irreducible phenomenal property or aspect of anything that could count as 'experience.' There is, for instance, often claimed to be a basic 'mineness' (*Jeimeinigkeit*) about experience as it is lived, as opposed to described from the outside or a third-person perspective, as with Heidegger's characterization of Dasein's being-in-the-world in *Being in Time*. Likewise, in Sartre's description of 'non-positional consciousness', or non-thetic awareness of awareness, we see a distinctive kind of non-conceptual self-referentiality that is a key aspect of existentialist thought, arguably also going back as far as Kierkegaard (cf. Stokes 2010).

The first-personal givenness of experience, however, is not a uniquely existentialist preoccupation. It also has a place in contemporary phenomenological discussions (e.g. Zahavi 2015), and in some literature in philosophy of mind in the analytic tradition (e.g. Baker 2012), neither of which are usually regarded as 'existential.' What is arguably distinctive is the way in which existentialism indexes that first-personal givenness to a sense of the subject as a concrete, historically and morally situated being. Whereas phenomenology is often thought to 'bracket' all theoretical and practical commitments in order to get at the immanent structure of experience itself, existentialism constantly refers the philosophizing subject back to their emplacement. Renaudie (2013) has argued that we can see this shift at work in Sartre, in the transition between the phenomenological detachment of *Transcendence of the Ego* to the anxious pessimism of *Being and Nothingness* with its all-encompassing concern with the actuality of freedom. The existentialist subject is a subject whose very existence presents itself as a *problem* and *task* for *the subject herself* – and every reader of existential philosophy is constructed by that philosophy as just such a subject.

Hence the first-personal character of existentialist accounts of subjectivity notoriously finds phenomenally distinctive instantiation in various distinctive experiences. For instance, it is the focus of what Karl Jaspers calls 'limit-situations', and which we might say, using the language of Laurie Paul, is a special sort of epistemic situation (cf. Paul 2014: 2): for Kierkegaard the decision to believe, but, for Paul, the transformational decision to become a vampire (or, only slightly less dramatically, a parent). As both Paul and the existentialists make clear, these are choices and decisions for which none of our prior experiences can adequately prepare us and thus justify a decision about what is in our best interests in a future transformed state. In these kinds of transformative situations, our desires, preferences, *and* epistemic judgments about what is in our interests, and indeed who we are, will shift. No reasons internal to the project of becoming a parent or vampire can be adduced for willing such a transformation, as the transformation itself will change what counts as a reason *for us*; the value of a vampiric or parental life will only be fully accessible to us after making the transition. Moreover, no calculation or weighing of pros and cons

can suffice to ameliorate this responsibility, which is revealed via first-personal experiences such as angst, shame, guilt, earnestness, etc., that are argued to be philosophically significant (by virtue of their world-disclosing power) rather than merely of psychological significance alone. The existentialist position, then, is not (contra Russell 1959) to simply lionize particular idiosyncratic psychological experiences, but to show what they reveal about more general structures of lived-experience, in this case that no wholly impersonal discussion of these phenomena is adequate, precisely because their constitutive first-personal dimension is elided. To give one early example, Kierkegaard claims that we only understand certain key human experiences – sin, death – if we approach them in the right mood (anxiety and earnestness, respectively). By their nature, such experiences resist complete objectification: any analysis that aspires to full objectivity, by removing the analyzing subject from its own analysis, will falsify or distort the topic of its inquiry.

One obvious question for the neo-existentialist, then, concerns the claimed irreducibility of this first-personal experience of the world to the third-personal, God's eye view that some scientific naturalists implicitly presuppose. Indeed, it might be protested that first-personal experiences, in general, are not real in any fully-fledged metaphysical sense, however significant they appear to us to be from our situated perspective. It is hard to see what *a priori* argument might rule this out. But the burden of proof arguably resides with the putative eliminator (cf. Baker 2012: 116), and there are also genuine worries concerning performative contradiction and the continuing tacit presupposition of such a perspective within the various naturalist projects of elimination and reduction. We cannot settle such debates here, but it is important to recognize that a range of closely related questions are also associated: is self-knowledge equivalent, in form if not in contingent content, to knowledge of others from an external perspective? Without exception, the existentialists will insist on the asymmetry between these two kinds of knowledge, albeit not necessarily by privileging Cartesian introspection as we will see. Another key question concerns just how much we can universalize on the basis of these 'limit situations' and whether the philosophical value of these experiences can be elucidated without recourse to a problematic romanticism/revisionism in regard to doxastic practice in which the philosopher becomes akin to a prophet unconstrained by common sense[1].

Of course, the answer one gives to these questions betrays one's view of the aim and purpose of philosophy. One answer might be along the lines of that offered by J. L. Austin, who in response to a talk by Gabriel Marcel, and dying of cancer at the time, reputedly stood up and said: 'we all know we have to die, but why do we have to sing songs about it?' (Scarre 2007: 65) Austin's implied question here might be: why should we think that experiences and moods given to us in the first-person perspective reveal anything about metaphysical structures? Cognitive science provokes slightly different questions: why think that such experiences, and our subsequent descriptions of them, are epistemically or methodologically reliable? Haven't the empirical sciences (e.g. psychology, cognitive science, neurology, etc.) shown us that we should distrust such a perspective, which must either be accessed introspectively, or

[1] Paul Jennings published a spoof of Sartre in *The Spectator* in April 1948 under the auspices of the idea of 'resistentialism,' making this kind of point. For Jennings, it was partly about the idea that objects resist us, and are recalcitrant to our purposes, as with *Nausea*'s discussion of Antoine Roquentin's encounter with the oak tree, but it also a spoof about an alleged existentialist resistance to orthodoxy in general.

retrospectively after the experience, approaches which have both been shown to be unreliable? We will attempt to answer these questions, beginning with the role of experience as tribunal for the existentialist.

Erlebnis: Introspection and Retrospection

Existentialism attempts to proffer a philosophy that is adequate to our existential experience, with that experience usually conceived of as 'given' prior to explicit philosophical reflection. Anathema to existential philosophers are any versions of 'high-altitude' thinking, as Merleau-Ponty calls them in *The Visible and the Invisible*, which survey things from above, as well as any empiricist/reductionist program that seeks to comprehend and explain experience by breaking it down in terms of its component parts. The focus is hence on description of said experiences, more than the explanation or analysis of those experiences, but there is also a suggestion that the 'view from above' is, at best, partial, or, at worst, mistaken. While it might be possible to curtail one's existentialism in a metaphysically modest manner that is restricted to the semantics of that which presents itself 'for us', usually there is a broader metaphysical and methodological primacy given to experience. A *sub specie aeternitatis* position is understood as wholly unavailable for beings such as ourselves, and a philosophy with pretentions to such a 'view from nowhere,' like some versions of scientific realism and speculative realism[2], are just to that extent abrogations of the existence they claim to comprehend. As Merleau-Ponty nicely presents the consequences of this line of thought: 'no philosophy can be ignorant of the problem of finitude without thereby being ignorant of itself as philosophy' (Merleau-Ponty 2008: 40).

This raises questions about the status of the experience(s) that philosophy is called to attend to. Is this *Erlebnis* just a more holistic version of the 'myth of the given,' not an empiricist sense-datum admittedly of the sort influentially criticized by Wilfrid Sellars, but nonetheless still a brute experience that acts as a philosophical justifier? Perhaps, although that label does not decide the fate of existentialism, since perhaps all versions of the given are not equally mythic; some philosophers have come to take seriously the idea of the 'grip of the given,' for example, in which we cognitively encounter things directly and pre-discursively in an embodied manner, but they have also argued that such a position need not be vulnerable to Sellars' critique of the myth of the given (see (Hanna 2011) and Hubert Dreyfus' debate with John McDowell on related matters in (Scheer 2013)). Certainly existentialism is committed to an anti-intellectualism about emotions, moods, and other world-disclosing experiences, and at least some have taken this to entail a commitment to non-conceptual content (cf. Ratcliffe 2009: 368). Doing philosophy involves concepts, of course, but the existentialists are committed to that about experience that resists being grasped, comprehended, or known, even if it has in some sense been lived-through. This is a live and ongoing debate, and it is not clear the existentialists are on the wrong side of it. It is apparent, however, that these experiences that are of interest to existentialists must be available (i.e. given) to us in the lived-experience itself, and then also in

[2] While it is sometimes disputed how much philosophical unity can be ascribed to so-called 'speculative realism', it is standardly thought to insist on the power of thought to break with any 'correlation' between subject and object. Philosophers like Quentin Meillassoux take phenomenology and existentialism to be problematic philosophies of finitude that, by contrast, tie being to the thinking subject.

philosophical reflection upon that experience, even if the reflective relationship to the 'I' or 'Ego' transforms it. Insofar as existentialism takes seriously our experiences of something like 'limit situations,' and ontologically significant experiences such as anxiety, shame, etc., it cannot embrace a constructivism in which we give up the idea that in limit situations we apprehend – however obscurely or pre-reflectively – at least something of the ontological status of our place in the world, and which a philosophy is more or less faithfully able to capture. The existentialist hence invokes experience in a justificatory way, but also in a way that doesn't always ally with common-sense judgments about experience. It is not, for example, akin to the sort of position that we might associate with G. E. Moore, in which some basic dimensions of experience, supported by common-sense, are envisaged to trump all kinds of philosophical reflection and, most notably, scepticism about the external world. On the contrary, many of these experiences of 'limit situations' reveal both ourselves and the world to be not quite as we usually take them to be.

We will come back to this revisionary dimension shortly, but for now it is important to ask some questions about this experience, and either the self-knowledge or the worldly-knowledge that it makes possible. The dilemma in regard to the primacy that existentialism appears to grant to first-personal experience is that we need an account of our methodological access to the said experience. Indeed, it might be contended that it needs to be accessed via something akin to either introspection or retrospection, with both being said to be problematic empirically. There is, after all, a lot of evidence that suggests that introspective reports are unreliable, often more judgments of plausibility than strict reports (e.g. Nisbett and Wilson 1977; Carruthers 2011: 6). We are prone to frequent confabulation undetectable by the thinker in regard to their own mental states and beliefs, another version of the 'user-illusion' that Benjamin Libet drew our attention to in regard to freedom.

In one sense, this may appear to be no problem for the neo-existentialist who holds that we are often mistaken about ourselves and others, being inevitably liable to bad faith and the stifling and conformist tendencies of what Heidegger calls *Das Man*, and what more broadly we discuss under the headings of conventionalism, reflexive traditionalism etc.[3] They would also maintain that our access to experience is not by peering within and observing ourselves as if from outside, as some introspective accounts of self-knowledge hold. Rather than having an intention pre-existing that we might come to be directly aware of (and perceive from the outside in a manner equivalent to perceiving another), or simply as a memory that we access retrospectively after the Owl of Minerva has flown at dusk, we achieve self-knowledge and self-awareness in the intending and (at least attempted) doing of something in the world. Intention and awareness are co-imbricated together in this kind of adverbial account of consciousness that can be associated with existentialism (cf. Romdenh-Romluc 2011: 373). Indeed, this helps to make perspicuous a feature of *Being and Nothingness* that is too often ignored. While he is rightly known as a philosopher of radical freedom, in the material on action Sartre also argues that situation and motivation for pursuing certain projects are indistinguishable (Sartre 1958: 487). Perhaps Sartre's claim is overly dramatic, since we conceptually can and do distinguish between situation and motivation, but for him any act involves a

[3] Variously translated as the herd, the many, the 'they', the crowd, they-self, and sometimes even 'the one', *das Man* refers to those aspects of our lives that are average and anonymous.

synthetic unity that is partly falsified, when reconstructed in a causal or linear manner that separates a situation, motivation, and end posited. Rather, we pre-reflectively live through such acts in a given emotion or mood, and the authority we have in regard to them – i.e. what they reveal about us and the world – is, at best, fleeting, and subsequently compromised by ratiocination and, often, philosophical reflection itself.

While such points are important, they do not rule out the sort of challenge that Carruthers and other philosophers indebted to cognitive science are liable to make. Carruthers (2011), for example, takes the findings about introspection to preclude any kind of transparent, non-behaviourally mediated access to first-person experience; that is not just a claim about introspection narrowly construed but a more general point about any philosophical reliance upon the so-called 'essential indexical' (cf. also Cappelen and Dever 2013). In short, on such views our first-personal experiences are unreliable in themselves, but perhaps especially when we attempt to describe them or articulate them retrospectively, and hence are not the sort of thing that any cognitive science might admit. As Dennett puts a related point, 'we are remarkably gullible theorisers' (Dennett 1991: 68), tending to confuse description of our lived-experiences with theorizing. As has already been noted, the existentialist 'family' is in a complex position here. No existentialist will think judgments about our own beliefs are epistemically reliable, since we tend to be self-deluded, or at least conformist in our reflections upon our own experiences, and in this respect they inherit a lot from the so-called masters of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. But their suspicion about the role of first-personal experience and description of it in philosophical theorizing doesn't go all the way down. On the contrary, the claim is that our judgments and *ad hoc* theorizing on the fly are conditioned by experiences of another sort, experiences that are not themselves judgments but pre-judicative states or experiences, which are said to depend on certain structures of experience *per se* (such as the structures of temporal experience as elucidated by Husserl in his theory of internal time-consciousness (cf. Zahavi 2005)), but also more characteristically existential pre-judicative experiences like anxiety, dread, shame, etc.. Such experiences are said to reveal something that our after the fact interpretations and hypothesizing about them frequently confabulates about. Data from psychology about this, then, will not strictly contradict existentialism, but it still raises questions about the methods through which the existentialist themselves is able to ascertain to the truth of the matter, to see through our procrustean existence to its essential conditions. For the existentialist there is some special or distinctive epistemic significance to at least some of our own experiences, but in attempting to know of them, reflect upon them, or even systematize them, we are liable to betray the said experiences.

Here the methodological naturalist will press back against the existentialist, wanting an account of how the access to brute experience, which serves as a philosophical justifier, might be understood as veridical (or not). If it is not about introspection but rather something that we adverbially live-through, how do we distinguish living-through it veridically (i.e. in an ontologically revelatory way) and living-through it in, say, a deceptive way, or even just in the ontologically superficial way that is characteristic of what Heidegger calls 'average everydayness'? Moreover, if in the activity of philosophizing we are no longer at one, or coinciding with the subject of the said experience, which is playing a justificatory role, the existentialist also seems to need to confront the fragility and permeability of retrospection and memory. And empirical studies regarding the reliability of memory are at least as serious a problem

as are those regarding our introspective capacities. The existentialist is likely to respond here that *qua* philosopher it is not a matter of representing a strictly faithful memory of an experience in a 'limit situation', but of promulgating a philosophy that is as adequate as possible to that situation, and taking cognisance of the gap between experience as lived and experience as known. To comprehend or be mindful of the gap, however, presupposes an ability to compare the limit-situation that has been lived through (perhaps in the past), and the philosophical reflection upon it after the said event/experience. Hence this doesn't seem to solve the dilemma of retrospection.

But another way to think about it is to take the existentialist as committed to experience as a justifier, and thus they must endeavour to create this experience for the reader, and thereby enable the reader to remember and imagine related experiences (hence the frequent use of literary techniques, as we will see below). In a way, then, even though we have attempted to present some of the philosophical reasoning behind existentialism, there is a tantalizing and frustrating sense (for the academic philosopher, at least) in which the proof is in the pudding. It works – if it works – by calling upon the reader to imagine, enact, reflect, and remember their own experiences as lived. Avowedly a philosophy of finitude, as we saw Merleau-Ponty note, it also asks the reader to perform a 'situated thought' themselves (cf. Sacks 2005); this is the inter-subjective tribunal that the existentialist appeals to. Can the method be neutrally judged from outside? No. Does that mean it embraces some sort of question-begging dogma in which alternative experiences and reasons cannot count against the philosophy in question? Not necessarily, but it does require one to have a first-personal experience, even if induced by a description or example (hence the ironic manner of dealing with the reader, in, say, Kierkegaard). So, we may dispute the use that Sartre makes of his descriptions of shame, or bad faith, etc., and think that certain conclusions do not follow. First though, we must attempt to reconstruct the said experience, either one related to what we have previously experienced, or using techniques like imaginative variation, or perhaps even engage in a kind of experimental philosophy in the true sense of the word in which we are confronted by limit-situations. Of course, engaging in such matters with a philosophical agenda, to seek to confirm a given description as adequate, is in a way already to corrupt or betray that experience, since there is a sense in which *qua* philosophers one is also always partly withdrawn from the flux of experience on this view. But perhaps that doesn't mean that such experiences can't be engendered adequately in the reader, so much as that the existentialist philosopher is something of a sacrifice on behalf of the reader, alienating herself from her own direct experience in order to bring her reader into a desired encounter with that experiential content.

In the terms of Richard Moran, the general point is to remind us of the philosophical irreducibility of the first-person perspective in regard to the lived-experience. For Moran (who invokes Sartre positively in this context), in choosing, deciding, being responsible, the situated fact that I am choosing, 'cannot be for me a set of data for which I must simply make room in my deliberations, as I may have to accommodate the empirical fact of other people's beliefs and desires' (Moran 2004: 164). As Moran goes on to add:

> the attitudes that I bring with me into the situation may well be said to 'frame' the problem for me, but in a given case I may also be obliged to bring them out of the frame and install them within the scope of the problem itself, on the

> negotiating table, and there my relation to them is unlike anyone else's. Hence they cannot enter into my thinking as the fixed beliefs and desires of someone who just happens to be me. (Moran 2004: 164)

This, of course, is precisely what many sciences aim for, in bracketing my situation away and considering oneself as another, but it is also the kind of position presupposed by the philosopher who denies distinctions between self-knowledge and other-knowledge, and between the lived and the known. Whether or not there is a rationalism in Moran's work of a sort that the existentialists deny, they concur with him in rejecting any sort of impersonalism as a moral evasion. For the existentialist, there is an enduring gap or non-coincidence between the lived and the known, and between the first and third-person perspectives. It is typically dramatized by the existentialists in evocative accounts of dread, shame, etc., as we have seen, but it also arguably pertains to less radical but still potentially transformative experiences.

Consider John Drummond's interesting characterization of doubt, which aims to show that the act of doubting presupposes some connection with both the action and pre-reflective self-awareness that is not itself bracketed or doubted. This living of doubt (and shame, dread, etc.), he argues, cannot be captured/reconstructed from a third-person perspective alone or bracketed as a mere modal possibility:

> One can, of course, explain this experience of doubt from a purely third-person perspective, but such an explanation will fail to capture the experience of doubt as it is lived and, in particular, the manner in which this experience (1) moves away from the simple belief certainty characteristic of perception to a wavering between possibilities exclusive of one another; and (2) at the same time, oscillates between the straightforwardly experienced object, on the one hand, and, on the other, its appearance or sense or meaning, terms that I shall for present purposes consider largely equivalent; and (3) resolves itself in a contrastive apprehension. This movement, oscillation, and resolution characterize the experience as lived, and they have their correlates in the intentional content in the changes in belief modality from actual to possible and back to actual (Drummond 2007: 34).

In related fashion, Kierkegaard (1985), in the persona of Johannes Climacus, likewise cites doubt as an experience that discloses the structure of consciousness. He identifies consciousness with 'interest' (*interesse*) and plays on the Latin roots of this word, *inter esse*: between being, or being-in-between, caught self-reflexively between the components of ideality and actuality that constitute existence and whose non-coincidence generates the possibility of doubt. He goes on to link subjectivity foundationally with 'infinite, passionate interest in eternal happiness/blessedness [*salighed*], such that the dispassionate, disinterested objectivity of contemporary philosophy is not an achievement of thought, but its perversion (Kierkegaard 1992). We might also say, with Merleau-Ponty, that for the existentialist we are 'condemned to meaning' (2008, *xix*). This is to rule out a position outside of meaning (even a naturalistic explanation of meaning), and to insist on this aspect of our lives as ineliminable. If existentialism is right, it thus presents an obstacle to many programs in scientific naturalism, especially as concerns each of the 4Ms sometimes thought to be the key research programs for scientific naturalism: Mind, Meaning, Morals, and Modality (Price 2004). Might we give a naturalistic account of meaning and morality,

for example, that will be adequate to meaning and morality? Again, the existentialist will say no on this score, much as we have seen Drummond and Kierkegaard offer reasons for thinking the experience of doubt to be irreducibly first-personal in a related way. We have not settled this dispute here, of course, but we have suggested that there are at least some reasons to think that existentialism can navigate the charges of introspection and retrospection and the empirical difficulties for each and continues to warrant our philosophical interest.

Revisionism and 'Resistentialism'

Even if that were so, however, there may be another concern about existentialism in terms of its methodology, which is that rather than being overly invested in experience as 'given', it is in fact too disjunct from everyday experience and the manifest image. This is the charge that Philip Pettit (2004) brings in an essay that seeks to navigate between the errors that he takes to be the Scylla and Charybdis of existentialism and scientism. Pettit suggests that existentialism, like scientific naturalism, is overly radical in relation to doxa and practice, allowing for the philosophically-inspired to throw off received ideas and practice-bound habits, and live differently. Of course, something like this view is one reason for existentialism's enduring non-academic popularity, but just how committed are the existentialists to this romantic vision in which philosophical considerations are able to trump all other sorts of belief and practice? Is Pettit right to say that the existentialist is committed to the view that 'there is no limit to how far philosophy may lead us to reconstruct ourselves' (2004: 305)? Experience is in fact one limit, as we have seen. Likewise, the contrast between first and third-person perspectives is another limit. As Sartre points out, we may want to be God but this is not possible. Indeed, we have seen that the ostensible 'authority' of the first-person perspective is of a peculiar sort: hard won, but also not something that endures and grounds certainty thereafter or even a philosophical system or program (despite the tract that is *Being and Nothingness*). Rather, it is contingent, fallible, difficult to access, prone to ratiocinations and bad faith (cf. Renaudie 2015: 219-20). The authority is largely a negative one, insisting on the inability of a high-altitude perspective to be complete or totalizing. Can we reject the self-deceptive ideas of the folk and simply be authentic? No, since that would be to misunderstand our situated existence. Existentialism may be famously associated with the French resistance in World War Two, but the 'resistentialism' idea is not right. It is far more pessimistic (e.g. there are limits to self-knowledge, there is gap between self and other-knowledge, our being-for-others is always finally beyond our control) than the endorsing of the capacity of a philosophical idea to suddenly transform all platitudes and doxa[4]. Indeed, as Sartre remarks in *Being and Nothingness*, 'voluntary deliberation is always a deception' (Sartre 1958: 488). Sartre means this primarily in regards to choosing what we ought to do with our lives, considering the choice to have been made pre-judicatively, but it applies to the relationship between philosophical reflection and our lives too.

There is hence a case that Pettit presents a 'straw man' version of existentialism and its meta-philosophical commitments. In particular, his understanding of the

[4] We cannot just remake ourselves *ex nihilo*. While a footnote in *Being and Nothingness* talks about the possibility of an ethics of radical conversion, Sartre never makes good on this promise. As such, we have to accept a pessimism about existentialism, not a utopianism about us being able to convert our lives and embrace authenticity *tout court*.

relationship between belief and practice in existentialism is misleading, claiming that 'the direction of determination must run from beliefs to practices' (Pettit 2004: 319). Contrary to such a view, he argues that 'we must reject any easy existentialist optimism about the capacity of philosophy to undo and reform our received practice bound ideas' (Pettit 2004: 320). But optimism is too strong a term here, as anyone familiar with *Fear and Trembling*, *Either/Or*, *Nausea*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* would note. There is no authority for either the first or third-person perspective for Sartre, but there is an irreducibility of each to the other, a gap that cannot be overcome even if one admits of encroachments in ways that Sartre's dualisms sometimes downplay (cf. Renaudie 2013; Merleau-Ponty 2008). While the existentialist will certainly contend (and call upon the reader to recognize) that there are experiences that we have that might undo and reform our practice-bound ideas, no existentialist thinks they entail that we can remake ourselves *ex nihilo* in accord with an idea. Even Sartre's discussion of bad faith makes it clear that we cannot change the socially-mediated meanings of our choices and actions, whatever choices we might make in relation to them for ourselves. As such, the existentialist claim is less that philosophy undoes our received, practice-bound ideas as Pettit claims, but that life and experience do, and the question is then whether – and indeed how, as we will see – a philosophy can attest to that. It holds that our experience (of norms, of agency, of other people) is not quite as smooth as Pettit might contend. And it appeals to the reader to judge whether or not this is so, whether or not there is anything inflated or grandiose about the descriptions of the said experiences, or whether they capture something fundamental to freedom, agency, normativity; indeed, potentially dimensions of these experiences that are neglected in political philosophy of Pettit's kind. The key question that we have returned to, then, is about the richness of the category of experience, and just how recalcitrant or divergent it is in relation to belief and knowledge. Do, for example, experiences remain separable from beliefs formed on the basis of these experiences? This distinction may be one Pettit is unlikely to draw, but it is one that existentialists will insist on. Whether doxastic or even philosophically well supported, beliefs, understood as propositional and formed at a certain reflective remove, are thought to miss something fundamental about the richness of experience, the actuality of existence; that doesn't mean they don't get at something too, but they are not exhaustive. Existentialism is thus pessimistic about any 'final vocabulary.' Human experience transcends and resists such accounts. Existence always exceeds thought, as both Kierkegaard and Jaspers argued, and the self, as Sartre puts it, is always-already beyond itself whenever it makes itself an object for itself. Versions of this insight about non-self-coincidence crop up in surprising places in contemporary philosophy, in quarters one would not typically think of as neo-existentialist – such as Parfit's (1984) discussions of self-alienation or Galen Strawson's (2009) claim that the self he experiences himself as being right now isn't identical with the person 'GS.'

Pettit's objection, at bottom, is that existentialism asks us to live radically differently, but without being able to give reasons. But recalling L. A. Paul's vampire scenario (Paul 2014: 2), the question remains of how might one choose to be a vampire, or even a parent, rationally, or choose between caring for a sick and dying grand parent or joining the resistance, in Sartre's scenario. We cannot do so in an exhaustive manner, since the experience of being a vampire, a parent, or in love, is transformative, in both an epistemic and personal sense with respect to one's desires, preferences, etc.. None of this means that we cannot give third-personally couched

reasons for becoming or not becoming a vampire or a parent, and probabilistic considerations may be adduced (maybe the social sciences contend that all non-parents rate themselves as happier than parents, or that all vampires attest to being happier in such a post-human state), but this cannot settle the matter 'for us.' Is this an irrationalism in which reason is rendered nothing but the epiphenomenal ratiocination of a blind leap? Sometimes it admittedly appears that way, but there is a more sober side to existentialism that just reminds us of the gap.

Existentialism and the Forms of Philosophy

The foregoing discussion has given us grounds for thinking that existentialism can overcome at least some of the key difficulties associated with its emphasis on the first-personal, particularly insofar as this might be taken to rely on introspective and retrospective forms of cognition. However, existentialism's appeal to pre-judicative experience creates another problem, already gestured to above: that of non-coincidence. As soon as the subject attempts to catch sight of itself, so to speak, it is already beyond the subject it tries to see; in making itself an object for itself, consciousness always fails to coincide with its object.

Existentialism, as noted, places analysis of certain aspects of experience at the centre of subjectivity's attempt to understand itself. However, the very act of theorizing such experiences already puts us at a distance from the content of experience. This is a problem classical existentialists were not merely aware of, but embraced. In the mid-1930s Jaspers was already insisting that, 'In our research we move about within the encompassing that we are by making our existence into an object for ourselves, acting upon it and manipulating it; but as we do this it must at the same time let us know that we never have it in hand' (Jaspers 1971: 22). The very act of reflection, let alone writing about and then reading about such reflection, opens up a gulf between the subjectivity existentialism aims to capture and its very activity *qua* theorization. Existentialism rejects a 'view from nowhen,' but threatens a retreat to just such a position of subjective suspension precisely at the point where it attempts to articulate the experience it tries to encompass. In a sense, the non-coincidence of the subject with itself that Sartre describes is here reduplicated in the very attempt to philosophize existentially *about* topics including that gulf.

While existentialists generally see some form of non-self-coincidence as an inevitable result of the intentional structure of consciousness, this does create a problem for a philosophy that aims to take the existence *of the philosophizing subject herself* as its object. Existentialism refuses both the *sub specie aeternitatis* view of Hegelianism and the 'view from nowhere' of contemporary scientific naturalism and its fellow-travellers in Anglophone metaphysics. But as we've seen, it also rejects the situationally suspended position inherent in at least some construals of the *epoché*; existentialists do not bracket *themselves* as an existing, embodied, temporally, socially, and ethically emplaced subjects. The methodological challenge of existentialist philosophy – if that phrase is to avoid being an oxymoron – is to find a way of philosophizing that does not implicitly evacuate its listener, causing them to implicitly view themselves as an abstract, bodiless, ahistorical locus of pure thought. Hence the usual modes of philosophical production, which position the reader as a passive listener, need to be subverted. Equally, though, overtly stating 'the content of this book concerns you as a concrete, free, existing being' is liable to decay

immediately into just another proposition for passive, selfless reception, liable to provoke precisely the same sort of world-suspension as the standard modes. Hence the requirement for what Kierkegaard called *indirect communication*, in which the text is calculated to bring the reader into a certain kind of subjective relation to the text – requiring a certain amount of artistic skill on the part of the communicator.

This has implications for the ways in which existentialist philosophy is presented: trying to bring the subject back to a confrontation with the relevant experience (and what it discloses) *itself* rather than simply talking *about* that experience from a place that notionally suspends existence in order to talk about it. Existentialism presupposes, and attempts to engender, a particular subjective orientation on the part of the addressee, without which communication of existential understanding cannot occur. Closely related to this is the problem generated by existentialism's reliance on certain key experiences such as angst, shame, and so on. What is disclosive in such experiences can't be gotten across purely through outlining these terms as concepts, but through conceptual elaboration of something implicit in our direct acquaintance with these phenomena. To get any philosophical purchase the existentialist philosopher must assume her reader has had such experiences, in some way or another, or perhaps that a sufficiently vivid description can provide the occasion for direct acquaintance via imagination. Hence the existentialist author needs to be able to *evoke*, not merely to describe, particular subjective states.

Seen in this light, the existentialist emphasis on non-traditional philosophical forms (with the caveat that the formal features of 'traditional' forms are themselves relatively recent, while older forms such as philosophical dialogue have been almost entirely abandoned) is no mere stylistic affectation. Rather, it embodies a vital link between a distinctive philosophical *method* and a corresponding philosophical *form*. While existentialists certainly left behind no shortage of 'traditional' philosophical tomes – dense writings aimed at educated readers and specialists – they also utilized a much wider authorial palate than their philosophical contemporaries. Kierkegaard wrote largely under pseudonyms, and pursued his philosophical and theological project across a range of genres: books, book reviews, newspaper articles, aesthetic essays on the theatre, pamphlets, sermon-like 'edifying' discourses, and texts that subvert the very genres they purport to belong to e.g. *Prefaces*, a book composed entirely of prefaces to other, non-existent books. Sartre wrote not only hefty volumes such as *Being and Nothingness* but also plays, novels, memoires, and newspaper pieces – not least those in which he performed his dramatic break with Camus, another existentialist whose philosophical output was predominantly literary rather than expositive in character. This diversity of forms is no accident. Rather, the use of literary forms gives the existentialist the necessary scope to produce a specific relationship between the reader and the text.

Consider the authorial strategy employed in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, his first major publication, and one that is thematically concerned with a number of canonically existentialist concerns: boredom, temporality, choice, decision, etc. Yet instead of presenting a treatise on these topics, Kierkegaard stages a confrontation between two radically different voices: a jaded young aesthete, 'A,' and his older friend, Judge Wilhelm, who provides a long encomium on the ethically integrating effects of choosing commitments such as marriage. This is no simple statement of the primacy of the ethical over the aesthetic: the reader feels the attraction of A's aesthetic life

even as we are repulsed by the nihilistic disaffection with which he pursues it. By articulating these life-views from within the well-developed and differently-likeable personas of A and Wilhelm, Kierkegaard problematizes the position of the reader herself. She is confronted with two radically different forms of life, and must decide where she stands in relation to what is presented. Moreover, Kierkegaard *himself* will be of no help here, just as Sartre was of no help for principled reasons when he recounts a student coming to him asking whether they ought to join the resistance or care for their dying grandparent. Kierkegaard's work is presented as the papers of A and Wilhelm, though 'The Seducer's Diary' may well be the work of another hand again, while the final chapter is a sermon by a Jutland pastor that Wilhelm presents without, it seems, entirely understanding it. Kierkegaard is not even listed as the editor; that honor falls to one 'Hilarious Bookbinder,' whose preface describes in some detail how he came to find A and Wilhelm's correspondence hidden inside a piece of second-hand furniture. Kierkegaard is nowhere to be found in this constellation of pseudonymous voices. These nested deferrals of authorial authority serve to throw the reader back onto their own resources. We cannot simply lose ourselves in a detached understanding of 'what Kierkegaard says,' but are instead called to situate ourselves in relation to the disparate voices of the text. The very form of the work calls the reader back to existential engagement, to their own position *qua* existing subject – precisely the position Kierkegaard took the 'objectifying' nineteenth century and its philosophical articulators to be effacing, using the abstracting power of theorizing in a self-defeating attempt to dissolve the existing subject altogether.

It is hard to imagine a book like *Either/Or* finding its way into the review pages of philosophy journals or university syllabi today (or, to be fair, a book like *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* either). That may seem like a mere point about philosophical style or contemporary tastes. Philosophers do still communicate in non-traditional forms today – the blog, the podcast, the 'think piece' – but these largely retain the expository character of the journal article and the academic monograph, albeit with a different tone and level of sophistication. But it may also suggest that the conditions which allowed these earlier forms of philosophical production simply don't hold any longer. For one thing, the existentialists were writing for very specific audiences: not (always) professional philosophers, but a philosophically sophisticated educated public. Such a public still exists, but it is not clear that they would be prepared to be confounded by the sorts of genre-defying texts Kierkegaard produced or the sort of philosophically-suffused literature of a Sartre or a Camus. Hence the circumstances of the material production of philosophical texts perhaps presents a difficulty for neo-existentialists today. This difficulty needn't be fatal. But it does pose a challenge nonetheless: to connect existentially with subjects where the only available vehicles for philosophical writing pull against that subjectivising project. Perhaps, in time, new forms will emerge. If existentialism taught us anything, after all, it is to remain open to radical possibility.

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