Café Philosophy

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EDITORIAL FROM TOM MCGUIRE

EXISTENTIALISM STAND OUT

Somehow a poem can drive deeper into our hearts, delivering its message in a way that doesn’t necessitate thinking and analysing. When Keats says ‘a thing of beauty is a joy forever’, he doesn’t argue the point with a logical syllogism - he just allows the sentiment to present itself to us in a way that can be directly appreciated. A philosopher who tries to express the way people feel, and especially the way philosophers feel, faces a more difficult task.

The philosopher typically tries to lay out a very precise, methodical outline of the subject matter, and this can be hard to digest. When it comes to human experience, what is sometimes called the ‘phenomenal’ realm, most people are too busy experiencing life to sit back and painstakingly think about what’s happening to them in a detached fashion. To understand what authors like Heidegger are trying to say requires stretching one’s mind in quite a different direction than what the normal state of everyday busyness will allow.

One of the most accessible insights found in existentialism is the knowledge of how important our imminent death is to self-awareness. It is an old adage that only humans are capable of being philosophical because, apparently, we are the only species truly aware of being mortal. It is unsettling to reflect on how the term of our earthly existence is limited and its aftermath uncertain. A Buddhist scholar once remarked that he always keeps a skull on his desk to remind him of this fact. I once visited a Franciscan monastery where the bones of long-deceased monks were kept in a special room on display, for much the same purpose.

Travelling rapidly around the world, as I have been doing recently, is one of those experiences that allows you to go beyond the mundane and experience life in a fresh new way. The traveller is always a stranger, encountering things that are different and surprising. The act of staying in one place, being bound to a single locality, means we tend to build up a structure of familiarity that often keeps us stuck in a particular pattern.

Travelling breaks this pattern and invites a flood of new experiences to come hurting in. To the extent that my ‘self’ consists of what I experience, this process really does reshape the self into something different. When people come back from overseas and claim that it made them into a new person, this is probably what they mean.

In moving constantly around the sense of place, of belonging, is being built up a little bit and then shattered each time one moves on. Because so much of what we call our ‘self’ is identified with what is around us, a constant change in outer circumstances calls into question the very nature of who we are. Although disorientating, it can also inspire a self-search which is very beneficial.

Partly what the existentialists seem to be getting at is that human life is, to a great extent, what we make of it. That gives each of us tremendous power but also a daunting level of responsibility. You will see in this issue how angst and anxiety for existentialists is not just the usual kind of worries that inhabit everyday life, but related to awareness about the possibilities we have to shape our world (at least, the part of it called ‘me’) and the feeling of burden this can place upon our shoulders. However, this can also be a positive thing. Rather than cruising through life on autopilot and being completely consumed with all the details, one can step back from the ordinary flow of experiences; to recognise that even if our finite existence is hurting towards an end from which there is no escape, at least we can choose where to steer it in the meantime.

Tom McGuire, Editor

* A modern philosophical movement stressing the importance of personal experience and responsibility and the demands that they make on the individual.

* Humans are grounded in the world, in existence. A human condition, born without seeking to be born, dying without seeking death. We live between birth and death trapped within our body and our reason, unable to conceive of a time in which we were not or a time in which we will not be.

* We have no fixed human nature in the sense of determining who we are or what we may become. Humans first exist and then become something definite. The word “exist” comes from a Latin word meaning “stand out” or “stand forth.” In short we make ourselves what we will be. This is very different from the mode of being of a thing which is what it is as set by its nature. Humans by contrast, first find themselves existing in a certain kind of world and then they decide what they want to do about it.

* All choices are situated: that is they occur within a framework that includes both facticity and freedom. Facticity comprises whatever we can’t change or control: the laws of nature, our biology, our personal heredity, the past, the behaviour of others. For existentialists the situation is the interface between elements of facticity and freedom. What I can do is partially restrained by the past but nevertheless unbound in its possibilities.

* The self or our own self is a process of change an unfolding activity: it is what it does. The story that constitutes each person’s life is only complete at his death, which is an ever-present horizon. Human existence always remains in the realm of incompleteness. For the existentialist, a self or person is a process of creating a unique way of being by means of conscious on-going choices.

* Whether or not there is a God, we are not handed life on a platter, ready-made. There are no certainties or objective moral truths to light the way.

* Human life could be described as a collective experiment in which each of us plays a part, exploring the possibilities open to all, in which we learn from our own experience and that of others. While we may be united by our shared desire to realize freedom we are also alone. No one can live for or through anyone else and in the end each has his own death to face and deal with. Existentialism stands for the demand that we take charge of the human condition as we experience it and of our unique situation at each moment.
WHY MARTIN HEIDEGGER MATTERS

Being and Time is a work of considerable length (437 pages in the German original) and legendary difficulty. The difficulty is caused by the fact that Heidegger himself was a philosopher, exploits the linguistic possibilities of his native language, in his case German. Although Macquarrie and Robinson, in their 1962 Blackwell English edition, produced one of the classics of modern philosophical translation, reading Being and Time and can sometimes feel like wading through a conceptual mud of baroque and unfamiliar concepts.

Heidegger’s name for the human being is Dasein, a term which can be variously translated (dated, but worthwhile rendered as “being-there”). The basic and very simple idea, as we will see in future entries, is that the human being is first and foremost not an isolated subject, cut off from a realm of objects that it wishes to know about. We are rather beings who are always already in the world, outside and alongside a world from which, for the most part, we do not distinguish ourselves.

What goes for Dasein also goes for many of Heidegger’s other concepts. Sometimes this makes Being and Time a very tough read, which is not helped by the fact that Heidegger, more than any other modern philosopher, exploits the linguistic possibilities of his native language, in his case German. Although Macquarrie and Robinson, in their 1962 Blackwell English edition, produced one of the classics of modern philosophical translation, reading Being and Time and can sometimes feel like wading through a conceptual mud of baroque and unfamiliar concepts.

WHY MARTIN HEIDEGGER MATTERS

The basic idea - Being is Time

That said, the basic idea of Being and Time is extremely simple: being is time. That is, what it means for a human being to be is to exist temporally in the stretch between birth and death. Being is time and time is finite, it comes to an end with our death. Therefore, if we want to understand what it means to be an authentic human being, then it is essential that we constantly project our lives onto the horizon of our death, what Heidegger calls “being-towards-death”.

Crudely stated, for thinkers like St Paul, St Augustine, Luther and Kierkegaard, it is through the relation to God that the self finds itself. For Heidegger, the question of God’s existence or non-existence has no philosophical relevance. The self can only become what it truly is through the confrontation with death, by making a meaning out of our finitude. If our being is finite, then what it means to be human consists in grasping this finitude, in “becoming who one is” in words of Nietzsche’s, that Heidegger liked to cite. We will show how this insight into finitude is deepened in later entries in relation to Heidegger’s concepts of conscience and what he calls “ecstatic temporality”.

Being and Time begins with a long, systematic introduction, followed by two divisions, each containing six chapters. I have just finished teaching the whole book in a 15-week lecture course at the New School for Social Research in New York and I estimate that I spoke for about 2 hours a week. As they say

BEING AND TIME, part 2: ON ‘MINENESS’

For Heidegger, what defines the human being is the capacity to be puzzled by the deepest of questions: why is there something rather than nothing? As Heidegger makes clear from the untitled, opening page with which Being and Time begins, what is at stake in the book is the question of being. This is the question that Aristotle raised in an untitled manuscript written 2500 years ago, but which became known at a later date as the Metaphysics. For Aristotle, there is a science that investigates what he calls “being as such”, without regard to any specific realms of being, e.g. the beings of living things (biology) or the being of the natural world (physics).

Metaphysics is the area of inquiry that Aristotle himself calls “first philosophy” and which comes before anything else. It is the most abstract, universal and indefinable area of philosophy. But it is also the most fundamental.

With admirable arrogance, it is the question of being that Heidegger sets himself the task of inquiring into in Being and Time. He begins with a series of rhetorical questions: Do we have an answer to the question of the meaning of being? Not at all, he answers. But do we even experience any perplexity about this question? Not at all, Heidegger repeats. Therefore, the first and most important task of Heidegger’s book is to recover our perplexity for this question of questions: Hamlet’s “To be or not to be?”

For Heidegger, what defines the human being is this capacity to be perplexed by the deepest and most enigmatic of questions: Why is there something rather than nothing? So, the task of Being and Time is reawakening in us a taste for perplexity, a taste for questioning. Questioning – Heidegger will opine much later in his career – is the piety of thinking.

The first line of the text proper of Being and Time is, “We are ourselves the entities to be analysed”. This is the key to the crucial concept of mineness (Eigenheit), which with the book begins: if I am the being for whom being is a question – “to be or not to be” – then the question of being is mine to be, one way or another.

In what, then, does the being of being human consist? Heidegger’s answer is existence (Existenz). Therefore, the question of being is to be accessed by way of what Heidegger calls “an existential analytic”. But what sort of thing is human existence? It is obviously defined by time: we are creatures with a past, who move through a present and who have available to them a series of possibilities, what Heidegger calls “ways to be”. Heidegger’s point here is wonderfully simple: the human being is not definable by a “what,” like a table or a chair, but by a “who” that is shaped by existence in time. What it means to be human is to exist with a certain past, a personal and cultural history, and by an open series of possibilities that I can seize hold of or not.

This brings us to a very important point: if the being of human being is defined by mineness, then my being is not a matter of indifference to me. A table or chair cannot recite Hamlet’s soliloquy or undergo the experience of self-questioning and self-doubt that such words express. But we can.

This is the kernel of Heidegger’s idea of authenticity (Eigentlichkeit), which more accurately expresses what is proper to the human being, what is its own. For Heidegger, there are two dominant modes of being human:

Furthermore, we have a choice to make between these two modes: the choice is whether to be oneself or not to be oneself, to be author of oneself and self-authenticity vs inauthenticity.

The Key Existentialist Philosophers as per the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy:
- Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)
- Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)
- Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)
- Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)
- Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)
- Albert Camus (1913-1960)

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authorising or not. Heidegger insists, as he will do throughout Being and Time, that inauthenticity does not signify a lower or lesser being, but many readers have had reason to doubt such assurances. Theodor Adorno, famously critical of Heidegger, asks: doesn’t authenticity end up being a jargon that we are better off without? Let’s just say that the point is moot.

Regardless of the twin modes of authenticity and inauthenticity, Heidegger insists early in Being and Time that the human being must first be presented in its indifferent character, prior to any choice to be authentic or not. In words that soon become a mantra in the book, Heidegger seeks to describe the human being as it is presented “most
closely and mostly” (Zumstånd und Zumzeiten).

Note the radical nature of this initial move: philosophy is not some otherworldly speculation as to whether the external world exists or whether the other human-looking creatures around me are really human and not robots or some such. Rather, philosophy begins with the description — what Heidegger calls “phenomenology” — of human beings in their average everyday existence. It seeks to derive certain common structures from that every-day-ness.

But we should note the difficulty of the task that Heidegger has set himself. That which is closest and most obvious to us is fiendishly difficult to describe. Nothing is closer to me than myself in my average, indifferent everyday existence, but how to describe this? Heidegger was fond of quoting St Augustine’s Confessions, when the latter writes, “Assuredly I labour here and I labour within myself; I have become to myself a land of trouble and inordinate sweat.” Heidegger indeed means trouble and one often sweats through these pages. But the moments of revelation are breath-taking in their obviousness.

**BEING AND TIME, part 3:** BEING-IN-THE-WORLD

How Heidegger turned Descartes upside down, so that we are, and only therefore think

I talked in my first article about Heidegger’s attempt to destroy our standard, traditional philosophical vocabulary and replace it with something new. What Heidegger seeks to destroy in particular is a certain picture of the relation between human beings and the world that is widespread in modern philosophy and whose source is Descartes (indeed Descartes is the philosopher who stands most accused in Being and Time). Roughly and readily, this is the idea that there are two sorts of substances in the world: thinking things like us and extended things, like tables, chairs and indeed the entire fabric of space and time.

The relation between thinking things and extended things is one of knowledge and the philosophical and indeed scientific task consists in ensuring that what a later tradition called “subject” might have access to a world of objects. This is what we might call the epistemological construal of the relation between human beings and the world, where epistemology means “theory of knowledge.” Heidegger does not deny the importance of knowledge, he simply denies its primacy. Prior to this dualistic picture of the relation between human beings and the world lies a deeper unity that he tries to capture in the formula “Dasein is being-in-the-world”. What might that mean?

If the human being is really being-in-the-world, then this entails that the world itself is part of the fundamental constitutive of what it means to be human. That is to say, I am not a floating self or ego facing a world of objects that stands over against me. Rather, for Heidegger:

*I am my world*

The world is part and parcel of my being, of the fabric of my existence. We might capture the sense of Heidegger’s thought here by thinking of Dasein not as a subject distinct from a world of objects, but as an experience of open ended-ness where my being and that of the world are not distinguished for the most part. I am completely fascinated and absorbed by my world, not cut off from it in some sort of “mind” or what Heidegger calls “the cabinet of consciousness”. Heidegger’s major claim in his discussion of world in Being and Time is that the world announces itself most closely and mostly as a handy or useful world, the world of common, average everyday experience. My proximal encounter with the table on which I am writing these words is not as an object made of a certain definable substance (wood and iron, say) existing in a geometrically ordered space-time continuum. Rather, this is just the table that I use to write and which is useful for arranging my papers, my laptop and my coffee cup. Heidegger insists that we have to “thrust aside our interpretative tendencies” which cover over our everyday experience of the world and attend much more closely to that which shows itself.

The world is full of handy things that hang together as a whole and which are meaningful to me. In even more basic terms, the world is a whole load of stuff that is related together: my laptop sits on my desk, my spectacles sit on my nose, the desk sits on the floor, and I can look over to the window at the garden and hear the quiet hum of traffic and police sirens that make up life in this city. This is what Heidegger calls “environment” (Umwelt), where he is trying to describe the world that surrounds the human being and in which it is completely immersed for the most part. Heidegger insists that this lived experience of the world is missed or overlooked by scientific inquiry or indeed through a standard philosophy of mind, which presupposes a dualistic distinction between mind and reality. What is required is a phenomenology of our lived experience of the world that tries to be true to what shows itself first and foremost in our experience. To translate this into another idiom, we might say that Heidegger is inverting the usual distinction between theory and practice. My primary encounter with the world is not theoretical; it is not the experience of some spectator gazing out at a world stripped of value. Rather, I first apprehend the world practically as a world of things which are useful and handy and which are imbued with human significance and value. The theoretical or scientific vision of things that we find in a thinker like Descartes is founded on a practical insight that is fascinated and concerned with things.

Heidegger introduces a distinction between two ways of approaching the world: the present-at-hand (Vorhandenheit) and the ready-to-hand (Zuhandenheit). Present-at-hand refers to our theoretical apprehension of a world made up of objects. It is the conception of the world from which science begins. The ready-to-hand describes our practical relation to things that are handy or useful. Heidegger’s basic claim is that practice precedes theory, and that the ready-to-hand is prior to the present-at-hand. The problem with most philosophy after Descartes is that it conceives of the world theoretically and thus imagines, like Descartes, that I can doubt the existence of the external world and even the reality of the persons that fill it — who knows, they might be robots! For Heidegger, by contrast, who we are as human beings is inextricably bound up and bound together with the complex web of social practices that make up my world.

*The world is part of who I am*

For Heidegger, to cut oneself off from the world, like Descartes, is to miss the point entirely: the fabric of our open ended-ness to the world is one piece. And that piece should not be cut up. Furthermore, the world is not simply full of handy, familiar meaningful things. It is also full of persons. If I am fundamentally with my world, then that world is a common world that is experienced together with others. This is what Heidegger calls “being-with” (Mitsein).

**BEING AND TIME, part 4:** THROWN INTO THIS WORLD

How do we find ourselves in the world, and how can we find our freedom here?
BEING AND TIME, part 5

THROWN INTO THIS WORLD

As I already tried to show, Heidegger seeks to reawaken people’s question of being, the basic issue of metaphysics. In Being and Time, he pursues this question through an analysis of the human being or what he calls Dasein. The being of Dasein is existence, understood as average everyday existence or our life in the world, discussed in the last entry. But how might we give some more content to this rather formal idea of existence?

Heidegger gives us a strong clue in Division 1, Chapter 5 of Being and Time, which is a long, difficult, but immensely rewarding chapter and where things really begin to get interesting. The central claim of this chapter - which is developed in the remainder of Being and Time - is that Dasein is a thrown projection (Dasein ist geworfenwerter Entwurf). Let me try and unravel this thought.

Heidegger tends to advance his investigation in concept clusters. One cluster contains three concepts: state of mind, mood and thrown-ness. State of mind is a rather questionable rendering of Befindlichkeit, which William Richardson nicely translates as ‘already-having-found oneself-there-ness’. Okay, it’s not particularly elegant, but the thought is the human being is always already found or disclosed somewhere, namely in the ‘there’ of its being-in-the-world. This ‘there’ is the Da of Dasein. Furthermore, I am always found in a mood, a Stimmung. This is mood in the strong Aristotelian sense of pathos, a passion of the soul or an affect, something befalls us and in which we find ourselves. The passions are not, for Heidegger, psychological colouring for an essentially rational agent. They are rather the fundamental ways in which we are attuned to the world. Indeed, musically, Stimmung is linked to tuning and pitch: one intoned many decades ago, ‘Into this world we’re thrown’. Thrown-ness (Geworfenheit) is the simple awareness that we always find ourselves somewhere, namely delivered over to a world with which we are fascinated; a world we share with others. We are always caught up in our everyday life in the world, in the throw of various moods,

BEING AND TIME, part 5

ANXIETY

whether fear, boredom, excitement or – as we will see in the next entry – anxiety.

But, Heidegger insists, Dasein is not just thrown into the world. Because it – we – are capable of understanding, we can also throw off our thrown condition. Understanding is, for Heidegger, a conception of activity. It is always understanding how to do something or how to operate something. Understanding is the possession of an ability (etwas können) and the authentic human is characterised by the ability or potentiality to be (Seinkönnen).

So, the human being is not just a being defined by being thrown into the world. It is also one who can throw off that thrown condition in a movement where it siezes hold of its possibilities, where it acts in a concrete situation. This movement is what Heidegger calls projection (Entwurf) and it is the very experience of what Heidegger will call, later in Being and Time, freedom. Freedom is not an abstract philosophical concept. It is the experience of the human being demonstrating its potential through acting in the world. To act in such a way is to be authentic.

Anxiety is the philosophical mood par excellence, the experience of detachment from which I can begin to think freely for myself.

Anxiety makes its appearance in Division 1, Chapter 6, where Heidegger is seeking to define the being of Dasein as what he calls ‘care’ (Sorge). It would take far more time than I have at my disposal to lay out in adequate detail the structure and meaning of care. But we can get more than a hint by looking at anxiety.

Dasein is being-in-the-world. Our everyday existence is characterised by complete immersion in the ways of the world. The world fascinates us and my life is completely caught up in its rhythms and activities. The question Heidegger asks in Chapter 6 is: how is the being-in-the-world as a whole to be disclosed? Is there an experience where the world as such and as a whole is revealed to us? Is there a mood in which we pull back from the world and see it as something distinct from us? Heidegger’s claim is that being-in-the-world as a whole is disclosed in anxiety and is then defined as care. As such, anxiety has an important methodological function in the argument of Being and Time.

But the existential resonance of anxiety is much more than methodological. The first thing to grasp is that anxiety does not mean ceaselessly fretting or fitfully worrying about something or other. On the contrary, Heidegger says that anxiety is a rare and subtle mood and in one place he even compares it to a feeling of calm or peace. It is in anxiety that the free, authentic self first comes into existence. It was, of course, the mood that launched a thousand existentialist novels, most famously Sartre’s Nausea and Camus’s The Outsider (although Heidegger was very critical of existentialism). In order to understand what Heidegger means by anxiety, we have to distinguish it from another mood he examines: fear. Heidegger gives a phenomenology of fear earlier in Being and Time. His claim is that fear is always fear of something threatening, some particular thing in the world. Let’s say that I am fearful of a particular car being stolen and when that object is removed, I am no longer fearful. I see a spider in the bath and I am suddenly frightened. My non-sniper fearing friend removes the offending arachnid, I am no longer fearful.

Matters are very different with anxiety. If fear is fearful of something particular and determinate, then anxiety is anxious about nothing in particular and is indeterminate. If fear is directed towards some distinct thing in the world, spiders or whatever, then anxiety is anxious about being-in-the-world as such. Anxiety is experienced in the face of something completely indefinite. It is, Heidegger insists, “nothing and nowhere”.

But let’s back up for a moment here. Heidegger’s claim earlier in Division 1 of Being and Time (discussed in blog 3), is that the human being finds itself in a world that is richly meaningful and with which it is fascinated. In other words, the world is homely (heimlich), cozy even. In anxiety, all of this changes. Suddenly, I am overtaken by the mood of anxiety that renders the world meaningless. It appears to me as an inauthentic spectacle, a kind of tranquilled and pointless bustle of activity. In anxiety, the everyday world slips away and disappears. Everyday, I am2 fascinated. In other words, the world is homely (heimlich), strange to me. From being a player in the game of life that I loved, I become an observer of a game that I no longer see the point in playing.

What is first glimpsed in anxiety is the authentic self. As the world slips away, we obrudate. I like to think about this in maritime terms. Inauthentic life in the world is completely bound up with things and other people in a kind of “groundless floating” – the phrase is Heidegger’s. Everyday life in the world is like being immersed in the sea and drowned by the world’s structures. In anxiety, I am fascinated. In other words, the world is subjected to the tide going out, the seawater draining away, revealing a self stranded on the strand, as it were. Anxiety is that basic mood when the self first distinguishes itself from the world and becomes self-aware. Anxiety does not need darkness, despair and night sweats. It can arise in the most innocuous of situations: sitting in the subway distractedly reading a book and overhearing conversations, one is suddenly seized by the feeling of meaninglessness, by the radical distinction between yourself and the world in which you find yourself. With this experience of anxiety, Heidegger says, Dasein is individualised and becomes self-aware.

Anxiety is the first experience of our freedom, as a freedom from things and other people. It is a freedom to begin to become myself. Anxiety is perhaps the philosophical mood par excellence, it is the experience
of detachment from things and from others where I can begin to think freely for myself. Yet, as Heidegger was very well aware, anxiety is also a mood that is powerfully analysed in the Christian tradition, from Augustine to Kierkegaard, where it describes the self’s effort to turn itself, to undergo a kind of conversion. Heidegger’s difference with Christianity is that the self’s conversion is not undertaken with reference to God, but only in relation to death.

**DEATH**

Far from being morbid, Heidegger’s conception of living in the knowledge of death is a liberating one. As I said in my first article on Heidegger, the basic idea in Being and Time is very simple: being is time and time is finite. For human beings, time comes to an end with our death. Therefore, if we wish to understand what it means to be an authentic human being, then it is essential that we constantly project our lives onto the horizon of our death. This is what Heidegger famously calls “being-towards-death.” Although death is finite, then an authentic human life can only be found by confronting finitude and trying to make a meaning out of the fact of our death. Heidegger subscribes to the ancient maxim that “to philosophise is to learn how to die.”

Mortality is that in relation to which we shape and fashion our selfhood. There are four rather formal criteria in Heidegger’s conception of being-towards-death: it is non-relational, certain, indefinite and not to be outstripped.

Firstly, death is non-relational in the sense that, in standing before death one has cut off all relations to others. Death cannot be experienced through the deaths of others, but only through my relation to my death. I will contest this criterion below.

Secondly, it is certain that we are going to die. Although one might evade or run away from the fact, no one doubts that life comes to an end in death. Thirdly, death is indefinite in the sense that although death is certain, we do not know when it is going to happen. Most people desire a long and full life, but we can never know when the grim reaper is going to knock at our door.

Fourthly, to say that death is not to be outstripped (unüberholbar) simply means that death is pretty damned important. There’s no way of trumping it and it outstrips all the possibilities that my power of free projection possesses. This is the idea behind Heidegger’s famously paradoxically statement that death is the “possibility of impossibility.” Death is that limit against which my potentiality-for-being (Seinkönnen) is to be measured. It is that essential impotence against which the potency of my freedom shatters itself. At the end of the introduction to Being and Time, Heidegger writes, “Higher than actuality stands possibility.” Being and Time is a long hymn of praise to possibility and it finds its highest expression in being-towards-death. Heidegger makes a distinction between anticipation (Vorlaufen) and expectation or awaiting (Erwarten). His claim is that the awaiting of death still contains too much of the actual, where death would be the actualisation of possibility. Such would be a gloomy philosophy of morbidity. On the contrary, for Heidegger, anticipation does not passively await death, but mobilises mortality as the condition for free action in the world. This results in a hugely important and seemingly paradoxical thought: freedom is not the absence of necessity, in the form of death. On the contrary, freedom consists in the affirmation of the necessity of one’s mortality. It is only in being-towards-death that one can become the person who one truly is. Concealed in the idea of death as the possibility of impossibility is the acceptance on one’s mortal limitation as the basis for an affirmation of one’s life.

So, there is nothing morbid about being-towards-death. Heidegger’s thought is that being-towards-death pulls Dasein out of its immersion in inauthentic everyday life and allows it come into its own. It is only in relation to being-towards-death that I become passionately aware of my freedom.

Despite its baroque linguistic garb, Heidegger’s analysis of being-towards-death is exceptionally direct and powerful. However, it is open to the following objection. Heidegger argues that the only authentic death is one’s own. To die for another person, he writes, would simply be to “sacrifice oneself”. To that extent, for Heidegger, the deaths of others are secondary to my death, which is primary. In my view (and this criticism is first advanced by Edith Stein and Emmanuel Levinas), such a conception of death is both false and morally pernicious. On the contrary, I think that death comes into our world through the deaths of others, whether as close as a parent, partner or child or as far as the unknown victim of a distant famine or war. The relation to death is not first and foremost my own fear for my own demise, but my sense of being undone by the experience of grief and mourning.
HEIDEGGER'S BEING AND TIME, part 7
TEMPORALITY

Time should be grasped in and of itself as the unity of the three dimensions of future, past and present.

To try and compress 437 dense pages of Being and Time into eight brief articles was obviously a difficult exercise from the start. But, I must admit, this was also part of the attraction. Despite the limits of this virtual medium, I hope that something of the book has been conveyed in a way that might encourage people to read more and further. Being and Time is extraordinarily rich, difficult and systematic work of philosophy that repays careful reading and rereading.

That Heidegger continues to arouse controversy and heated misunderstanding is evidenced by some of the responses to these articles. All I would ask is that Heidegger’s detractors (you know, the “this is terminally difficult” brigade) take the trouble to read his work with a little care and to pause before reacting.

Although there is so much more we could say about division two of Being and Time, there is one final topic that I’d briefly like to explore and which some readers think is the climax of the book: temporality. Let me begin by describing what Heidegger is trying to avoid in his discussion of time.

Firstly, he is trying to criticise the idea of time as a uniform, linear and infinite series of “now-points”. On this model, which derives ultimately from Aristotle’s Physics, the future is the not-yet-now, the past is the no-longer-now, and the present is the now that flows from future to past at each passing moment. This is what Heidegger calls the “vulgar” or ordinary conception of time where priority is always given to the present. Heidegger thinks that this Aristotelian conception of time has dominated philosophical inquiries into time from the ancient Greeks to Hegel and even up to his near contemporary Bergson. Secondly, he is trying to avoid any conception of time that begins with a distinction between time and eternity. On this understanding of time, classically expressed in Augustine’s Confessions, temporality is derived from a higher non-temporal state of eternity, which is extensive with the infinite and eternal now of God.

In order to understand what Heidegger means by temporality, we have to set it in the context of the existential analytic of Dasein that I have sought to describe. The discussion of being-towards-death in part six led to the idea of anticipation, namely that the human being is always running ahead towards its end. For Heidegger, the primary phenomenon of time is the future that is revealed to me in my being-towards-death. Heidegger makes play of the link between the future (Zukunft) and to come towards itself. The human is not confined in the present, but always projects towards the future.

But what Dasein takes over in the future is its basic ontological indebtedness, its guilt, as discussed in the previous blog. There is a tricky but compelling thought at work here: in anticipation, I project towards the future, but what comes out of the future is my past, my personal and cultural baggage, what Heidegger calls my “having-been-ness” (Gewesenheit). But this does not mean that I am somehow condemned to my past. On the contrary, I can make a decision to take over the fact of who I am in a free action. This is what Heidegger calls “resoluteness”.

This brings us to the present. For Heidegger, the present is not some endless series of now points that I watch flowing by. Rather, the present is something that I can seize hold of and resolutely make my own. What is opened in the anticipation of the future is the fact of our having-been which releases itself into the present moment of action.

This is what Heidegger calls “the moment of vision” (Augenblick, literally “glance of the eye”). This term, borrowed from Kierkegaard and Luther, can be approached as a translation of the Greek kairos, the right or opportune moment. Within Christian theology, the kairos was the fulfillment or redemption of time that occurred with the appearance of Christ. Heidegger’s difference with Christian theology is that he wants to hang on to the idea of the moment of vision, but to do so without any reference to God. What appears in the moment of vision is authentic Dasein. To put the matter mildly, it is a moot point whether Heidegger can inhabit these Christian forms without accepting or at least aping their content.

The key to Heidegger’s understanding of time is that it is neither simply reducible to the vulgar experience of time, nor does it originate in distinction from eternity. Time should be grasped in and of itself as the unity of the three dimensions – what Heidegger calls “ecstases” – of future, past and present. This is what he calls “primordial” or “original” time and he insists that it is finite. It comes to an end in death.

For Heidegger, we are time. Temporality is a process with three dimensions which form a unity. The task that Heidegger sets himself in Being and Time is a description of the movement of human finitude. As many readers have pointed out and Heidegger himself acknowledged, Being and Time is unfinished. The question that he leaves hanging at the end of the book is the issue that began the whole enterprise, namely the question of being as such. We have been given an answer to the question what it means to be human, but no sense of how we might answer the question of being as such. The task that Heidegger set himself, from the publication of Being and Time in 1927 to his death nearly a half-century later in 1976, was the elucidation of that question.

*By Simon Critchley and first published in the Guardian on 8 June 2009.*
In his essay Existentialism is a Humanism, Jean-Paul Sartre defines what existentialism is. He begins by identifying that the key starting point for existentialism is that: Human existence precedes human essence (p. 314).

There is no a priori human nature formulated by God. After we reject the idea of a God exists, Sartre follows Heideggerian thinking by stating that there can only be one being for whom existence precedes essence. This “human reality” (Heidegger’s terminology p.315) arrives first, then defines himself.

… man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself.

The starting point for man then is subjectivity, in that he defines his essence on his own terms and has the freedom to choose whatever he wants. This knowledge that we are free from any objective morality places a great responsibility on man. The anguish that Sartre says comes from a knowledge of how free we actually are is most important because it forces us to make decisions for ourselves (p.316). Sartre rejects that notion that it is possible not to choose because, in not choosing, you are making a choice. He says that we cannot escape our freedom and cannot blame deterministic excuses, but must take responsibility for our actions (p.323). There are no general ethics to guide man in making the right decision but only man’s interpretation of what he does. This means that the emotions ascribed to a particular action are preceded by the action itself (p.320). Therefore, it is the subjective interpretation of actions that gives them value.

Anguish is a term used in philosophy, often as a translation from the Latin for angst. It is a paramount feature of subjective interpretation of actions that gives them value. Therefore, it is the means that the emotions ascribed to a particular action are preceded by the action itself (p.320). So, to take an example Sartre uses, if I choose to marry and to have children I therefore commit not only myself but the whole of humanity to the practice of this form of monogamy. This is in many ways reminiscent of Immanuel Kant’s concept of universalizability: the view that if something is morally right for one person to do, it must also be morally right for anyone in relevantly similar circumstances. Sartre labels the experience of this extended responsibility ‘anguish’ (which he takes to be an unavoidable aspect of the human condition) to the feeling of responsibility experienced by a military leader whose decisions have possibly grave consequences for the soldiers under his command. – in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility. There are many, indeed, who show no such anxiety. But we affirm that they are merely disguising their anguish or are in flight from it.”

Existentialism is a Humanism. 1946.

Angst is a German word which means simply anxiety or fear, but in existential philosophy it has acquired the more specific sense of having anxiety or fear as a result of the paradoxical implications of human freedom. We face an uncertain future, and we must fill our lives with our own choices. The dual problems of constant choices and the responsibility for those choices can produce angst in us. However it is conceived, it is treated as a universal condition of human existence, underlying everything about us.

Existentialism Is a Humanism. 1946.

Angst is an important, original and relevant. There are a number of peculiarities that can account for this, but an important one is that Existentialism is a state of mind as much as it is a collection of ideas. As Kierkegaard’s ‘esthetic’ works, and the novels and plays of Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus and Unamuno demonstrate, the communication of this form of philosophy benefits from being indirect. To appreciate its significance you have to be there, in amongst the detailed stories, rolling critiques and inspirational prose; you have to catch a dose of it through its resonance with your own unarticulated fears and aspirations. Along these lines I am offering a new way in: a hook in the form of an analogy with a movement in pop and rock music. Existentialism. I want to claim, is the Punk rock of philosophy.

Punk rock I’m characterizing as nihilistic, extreme, passionate, liberating, inclusive, amateur and violent. It had precursors and it still exists, but Malcolm McLaren, the Sex Pistols and all that they catalysed in the mid-70s, are its original and most important moment of impact. Punk was a wake-up snarl to an atrophied society, an explosion of fear and disillusion of the point. Punk music is an ‘outsider aesthetic’, but it’s still an aesthetic. Since it’s necessary to the medium, Existentialism must recognize a place for reflective rational discourse, but part of its agenda is to identify the limits of such discourse, and in so doing redirect us to what this perspective marginalizes and represses. It will rail against the possibility of absolute knowledge, universal moral codes, an ultimate meaning of life, a final harmony between individual and state, or between the self and its possibilities. It will, in short, point to the limits of rational enquiry, and accordingly the limits of the rational mind’s jurisdiction over emotion, desire and the body. Hegel was the Prog Rock of philosophy.
THE FILTH AND THE FURY: Passion
BABYLON’S BURNING: Inclusive

THE FILTH AND THE FURY: PASSION

to inspire its reader to wake up and take responsibility. It is inclusive. Punk attitude is ‘reacting from your own self, your own spirit ... and not accepting what’s supposed to be established’. We can all live authentically. Anyone can start a band. Sid Vicious became the whole point of the Sex Pistols and couldn’t even play his instrument. Kafka wanted to ‘shake us awake’. Kierkegaard described his life as an ‘epigram calculated to make people aware’, and Sartre stressed that existentialism is a philosophy of action, not quietism. We are all the philosophers of our own lives.

OH BONDAGE UP YOURS: LIBERATION

Nihilism – that ‘desperate stubborn refusal of the world’ - is not an end point but a rite of passage, a temporary descent into the underworld. Existentialism isn’t just a reaction to rational or academic excess, it also promotes passion, self-creation, and the value of spontaneity. Malcolm McLaren’s mantra was ‘get a life and do something with it’. His stepson recalls how ‘he made up the best bedtime stories, but they always stopped in the middle and you had to finish them yourself.’ Punk shouldn’t be listened to like other music, and even dancing isn’t enough. It’s about a mood that needs full commitment; not just appreciation of grooves and tunes, but the total attunement of one’s rebellious, absurd self. To dwell too soberly on Dostoyevsky’s Notes from Underground or Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra misses the point. They are designed to capture and create aderalized moments with the escape velocity to inspire life-changing self awareness.

DO IT YOURSELF: AMATEUR

A high proportion of philosophers classed as existentialist have had tenuous relationships with the university establishment. This doesn’t necessarily make their output amateur in the pejorative sense (though Camus was accused of this), but it does in the sense of placing them outside of peer-reviewed professionalism. The result can be a freedom and spontaneity in their ideas, and a perspective on life less tainted by the analytical gaze of academia. Kafka wanted to ‘shake us awake’; Kierkegaard described his life as an ‘epigram calculated to make people aware’; and Sartre stressed that existentialism is a philosophy of action, not quietism. We are all the philosophers of our own lives.

WHITE RIOT: VIOLENT

There is good violence like violence against oppression, or violence serving as a metaphor for the ostensibly harmless expression of frustration. Most Punk is good violence. But of course there is bad violence, and Punk has a truly nasty neo-Nazi wing. Nietzsche and Heidegger were violent philosophers; they challenged the entire canon of Western Philosophy and with it the infrastructure of civilized values. But to apply a cultural enema is to run risks. You can’t be sure of what will inhabit the cleansed space. It might be ‘well to power’, but it might equally be powerful willies (never mind the bollocks). Moreover, how can you be sure it’s cleansed? How can you be sure if cleansing’s even possible? By philosophizing with a hammer Nietzsche courted misappropriation. Heidegger was for a while Existentialism’s Punk Front.

I have attempted here an indirect and partial illumination of the well-known-but-little-understood philosophy that is Existentialism. It’s not the whole picture for sure; the Punk analogy can’t encompass its gentler claims about the mysteries of the human condition and its more harmonious ties to the academic establishment via phenomenology, hermeneutics, psychotherapy, and virtue theory. Nevertheless, more than other Western philosophies it’s one to be inhaled with keen personal awareness and exhaled in the living moment. For this reason its proper force must be communicated indirectly. Punk, says Jon Savage, was ‘the most powerful when impossible to define’. There is something about vitality that precludes satisfying definitions or manifests, and so all the time Existentialism defies clear categorization there’s reason to believe it’s alive and well.

Glossary

- no future
- Sex Pistols
- song from Never Mind the Bollocks, Here’s the Sex Pistols
- ‘Right Guard will not help you here’
- A line from U.S Punk outfit Dead Kennedys’ song Holiday in Cambodia.
- ‘The Fifth and the Fury
- The name of the film biopic of the Sex Pistols
- ‘Oh Bondage Up Yours’
- A song by X-Ray Spex
- ‘Babylon’s Burning’
- A song by The Ruts
- ‘Do It Yourself’
- An album by Ian Dury and the Blockheads
- ‘White Riot’
- A song by The Clash

This article is a slightly extended and amended version of one published by Café Philosophy in 2010.
HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE AND HELL IS ON EARTH

By Sophie van der Linden

Existentialism is a philosophy concerned with the lives of human beings, challenging what is valuable and why. Through existentialism we learn that everything in our lives is our own choosing. While alive we realize life is absurd and meaningless, we are battling with hell and then all progress is erased by death. This ultimately is a frightening thought but defended by Jean Paul Sartre as humanistic and liberally life-affirming. Sartre demands we live freely as culprits to every exploit and answerable to every aspect of life. Although we all bear symptoms of the same condition Sartre believes we can never achieve community with other people, as they enhance our hellish existence by posing dangerous threats to our ever-sought freedom.

Sartre proclaims the existence of man and of the world as meaningless. There is a fissure, a discrepancy within humans, for they embody both subject and object, incapable of consoling either. There is also a discrepancy between man and the world. Man seeks to call the world home, to master it, to understand it and become one with it but Sartre renders this impossible as man is the only being on earth that is ‘more’ than what he is. The world is perpetually menacing to man. He is not born anything except human and free, the rest is up to him and him only. Sartre states in Being and Nothingness ‘man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards defines himself’. “It is because at first he is nothing… only afterwards will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be”. He is ever evolving and deciding at every instant what he is and what he can be. To recall the catch phrase of existentialism, his existence precedes his essence. This is what makes his being unique in the world, as the world has no interior value, no self-awareness nor hidden meanings. It is purely its sheer, unadulterated physicality. The world is meaningless for Sartre since it is uncreated and it lacks an inside. There is no divine structuring or purpose for things for there are no gods and no masters. The world has no reason for being there, to put it simply, it just is.

Sartre’s entire philosophy is moved by the crucial imminence of man’s total freedom while alive. Because life has no meaning man is awarded absolute control. Nietzsche killed God for Sartre, leaving man abandoned, the master of his fate and the sole creator of his essence. This situates every heaven and every hell here on earth. Every man is condemned to freedom, he does not choose it, but is born with the sole responsibility for his life. There is nothing that man ought to be, there is no given meaning in life, no ethical code prewritten into the fabric of the universe. We have no moral compass to guide us, leaving us with the decision of right and wrong. Sartre adds another layer to this terrifying freedom, saying that in choosing for oneself, one chooses for the entirety of mankind. In acting, we project an image of what we think is meaningful, asserting our action as permissible, therefore appropriate for fellow man. Freedom is far from easy and responsibility involves immense commitment and strength of character. We cannot escape choosing, as failing to choose is a choice in itself. We must either choose at all times or have our lives chosen for us, renouncing of responsibility as a choice in itself which we are still responsible for. For Sartre the best living is autonomous and self-governing living.

Any free, autonomous and authentic existence must commence from facing-up to the darkness, devastating nothingness, and meaninglessness that permeate life. The existential man finds himself meandering around in arbitrary and capricious senselessness, walking sightless for he is bound to nothing. He is a visitor to the world with no destination, for when he leaves it he will be gone. Regardless of his earthly goals and devotions, he is living in a world through the power of freedom, one can make the most of being alive and create intensely personal meaning that is special. Sartre believes this kind of living alleviates existential nausea, removes the feeling of guilt, excuse, regret, despair and misery. Sartre demands we continually exercise our freedom and that choice only ceases at death. This awesome, splendid and terrifying freedom that he discussed on every man and the whole of every life is a struggle with it, but for good consequence. Decisions are made by referring to nothing except an intensely personal mind.

Inhabitants of the world are perpetually caught up in affairs, but Sartre demands that they recognize the futility of life. Sartre holds that many men reside and live entirely in bad faith, in a refusal to take responsibility or feel the weight of their powerful freedom. Men sink into the superficial, phony, artificial, insincere, false comforts of bad faith, failing to realize the liability for their actions and choosing to let outside factors mediate or justify their existence. They become a product of their situation as others have laid it out, blaming outside factors for the way they are. Trying to identify or validate our actions or thoughts in adherence to objectives, Sartre sees bad faith as making statements such as “I wouldn’t do that, I’m a good person” or “I’m a writer.” A lot of people dissolve into bad faith and most people live a pseudo-life, not in keeping with the heart of genuine existence. Failing to live responsibly, thoughtlessly seeking solace from the hostile barrenness and hollowness of modern life. Bad faith is betraying one freedom by acting as if he is an object, treating himself as part of the causal chain and that he has no choice.

Sartre’s freedom is unlimited, but far from easy or unrestricted. For Sartre other people are hugely detrimental to our efforts to behave authentically and exist freely. In the eternal facing of the hellishness of life, other people shake up our ability to act freely and take away our autonomy. Once we overcome and learn to deal with the hellishness of life, realizing that hell is only where we make it, we see that other people are also hell by endangering our freedom and inauthenticity. In No Exit Sartre blatantly announces “hell is other people”. Human relationships are always discordant because they necessarily involve objectification and objectification is bad faith. Other people cause us to be a lot more reflective and conscious of our behavior. This is either the renouncing of one’s own freedom in becoming object for the other, or robbing someone else’s freedom by objectifying them.

Experiences with other people are necessarily tense, conflict ridden and competitive experiences. Others
implement objective qualities upon us, which in our free states we try to avoid. They remove our freedom by defining and stabilizing us, locking us into particular ways of being seen. While at our heart, we are dynamic, changing and complex individuals. They cause us to be more reflective, appropriating our behavior as we think we want to be seen. When we are alone acting freely and become aware of being watched, the shudder of nervousness, self-consciousness and shame resonates through our bodies without any warning, changing our natural behavior. Sartre uses the example of somebody spying on a situation through a keyhole, inspired by vice, boredom or curiosity. He is bound up by the moment with no projection of a ‘self’ or an image, involved totally in what he is witnessing. He then hears footsteps behind him and is instantly embodied and aware of his physicality, from here on mediating his behavior through the gaze of the Other. Sartre sees this as acting in a way that is not in accord with true freedom. By the mere presence of an Other one is forced into bad faith, judging himself and treating himself wrongly as object.

Altering ones behaviour in the presence of the Other indicates the acknowledgment of them and the acknowledgment of their objectification. Self-constructed fields of meaning are upset; one feels self-conscious, insecure and unsure. One becomes apprehensive, scared, dangerous and exposed, objectifying and judging themselves. It makes freedom feel restricted as ones behaviour is mediated through something else. Sartre sees objectification as inherently problematic, as it disrespects of one’s subjectivity and freedom. In the presence of an Other, one also realizes that they are the way the other sees him. The recognition that what others see me is different to how I see myself adds another level to my self-alienation. I cannot coincide my subjectivity with my objectivity and how others see me is fundamentally inaccessible to me as I can never fuse my mind with that of another. According to Sartre, as long as I am object for the other my freedom is put in chains.

As much fear and discomfort the gaze of the other person can cause, other people's conceptions of us can approach as a way to see ourselves more objectively and totally. In feeling shame or pride in coming into contact with another, we realize that we are the way they see us but that aspect of our identity is ever inaccessible to us. In other words we cannot coincide what we are for-others and what we are for the other, but each is constituent of identity. We all want to know how we are seen so we seek community with others to learn what we are for them and what they see in us. Getting into the conscious minds in order to become subjects. Sartre says we’re born as free subjects and other minds continuously torture that. I think Sartre says we literally have to go through hell if we are to make our lives truly authentic and meaningful. I concede that existentialism, as did Sartre, is a philosophy that allows life to begin. Sartre demands man to fight immensely hard for what he believes in, to search extensively for meaning, to step up to his roles in life and live hard, to the fullest extent, remaining constantly challenged and inspired.

November 2013 marks the centennial of the birth of Albert Camus. A native of French Algeria, Camus became an influential wartime journalist before embarking on a creative writing career. He would become a titan of French literature and a leading voice of the existentialist philosophy that dominated the post-WWII intellectual climate in France. Alba Amoia says in her biography that Camus became "the moral conscience of his generation." Ironically, this spokesman for the absurdity of the human condition came across as a pretty regular guy; in fact, he possessed an easy charm, excelling at endevours social, athletic or literary. At age 46, who writes often reach the apex of their powers, he died in a car wreck. An Italian newspaper once claimed that the fatal crash was part of a Soviet plot, but Camus himself would likely say that his abrupt death was a random event – one of many in a world without any inherent meaning.

He was born on November 7, 1913, into a largely illiterate family, and raised in the slums of Algiers. Albert’s mother, Catherine Sintès came from a poor family that had migrated to Algeria from the Balearic Islands of Spain. His father, Lucien Camus, was a native French-Algerian who labored as a farmhand, belonging to a class of agricultural workers know as pieds-noirs for their muddy feet. Alba Amoia tells how despite his later overwhelming success, Camus held an aversion to what he perceived as the “pretensions of the Paris literary scene and remained emotionally rooted in the North African soil of his boyhood.”

Camus’ father perished in 1914 in the Battle of the Marne, shortly after being drafted into the Algerian-based French infantry corps. This created further hardship for young Camus’ mother, a “passive and seemingly indifferent woman” who spent an inordinate amount of time staring at the floor. She was for the most part deaf, and had a speech impediment. Her world of virtual silence was consolidated by her work as a cleaning woman.

When even this stark lifestyle became untenable, Albert and his mother were forced to move into a three-bedroom apartment in Algiers, where he joined his grandmother and two uncles, all of whom were illiterate. In this setting, without running water or electricity, the indigent young Albert suffered from malnourishment and ongoing physical abuse from his “brutal, authoritarian grandmother.” Her tyrannical personality might well have influenced his later crusade against totalitarian regimes. However, it was not all misery for young Albert Camus. He found his own enjoyment “in the bright sun and colourful beaches of Algiers. Sunbathing and swimming never failed to fill him with joy and sensuous delight.” He would become acutely aware of the “contrast between the poverty in which he lived and the splendour of the Mediterranean at his doorstep.”

While attending the local boy’s school, Albert received encouragement from one of his more discerning teachers, who could see the disadvantaged boy’s exceptional intelligence. He helped the apt pupil resist his grandmother’s demands that he renounce education and head to work, and aided young Albert in obtaining a scholarship to secondary school. During his time there, he grew obsessed with soccer, at which he excelled as a goalkeeper. However, he was forced to quit the sport in 1930, when symptoms surfaced of
exchanged ideas “over cups of tea garnished with floating mint leaves and pine seeds.” By age twenty he was contributing articles, literary commentary, art criticism, and long pieces of devotion to the Mediterranean Sea, to a local magazine.

At this time he entered the University of Algiers. He also entered into marriage with Simone Hé, an attractive but mentally imbalanced girl with a morphine addiction. Camus’ family was thoroughly against this union, but lack of money led him away from this path. He was not yet ready for a career in academia, but a combination of illness and financial success. Amidst murder on an industrial scale in WWII the value of a human life had been dramatically cheapened, and many asked what sort of God could create a world of such carnage. Russia and United States, who had allied over the Nazi threat, now mistrusted each other. The trauma of world war and widespread genocide, and the growing spectre of nuclear annihilation, had brought forth a culture of despair.

On the outbreak of WWII Camus tried to join the army, but was rejected for health reasons. So he headed to Paris, where he wrote for the Paris-Soir newspaper. When the Germans took Paris, the newspaper was forced to relocate to unoccupied Lyons – a venue of which Camus was less than fond. Perhaps looking to distract himself, he entered into a second marriage, with Francine Faure, a mathematician from Oran, Algeria. Less than a month into his marriage, Camus’ position at the newspaper was terminated. He and his wife returned to Algeria, where they found teaching jobs in Oran.

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France for medical reasons in 1942, Camus was cut off from his wife by the Allied invasion of North Africa and the resulting German occupation of Vichy France. Stranded, he moved to Paris where he befriended Jean-Paul Sartre and Simon de Beauvoir a the premiere of one of Sartre’s plays. Camus then joined the Resistance and its underground newspaper, Combat, becoming Editor in 1943. The paper’s writers included Sartre and other philosophers including Raymond Aron and André Malraux.

After the war, Camus would use Oran as the setting for his novel The Plague (1947). This novel’s publication brought him financial success. Amidst murder on an industrial scale in WWII the value of a human life had been dramatically cheapened, and many asked what sort of God could create a world of such carnage. Russia and United States, who had allied over the Nazi threat, now mistrusted each other. The point of paranoia and mutually assured destruction. The trauma of world war and widespread genocide, and the growing spectre of nuclear annihilation, had brought forth a culture of despair. In the face of such far-reaching misery, the concepts of absolute values had dissipated like those hellish clouds of smoke emerging from the chimneys of Treblinka. Camus’ writing of the intrinsic absurdity of life resonated with numerous thinking people, who in their trauma, angst, and cynicism, needed a philosophy set within the earthly realm.

For Camus, along with the recent horrors and bleak global prospects, the certainty of death made existence itself a mere ‘charade’, and, consequently, life into an absurd predicament. He likened human experience to that of the mythical figure Sisyphus, whose punishment by the Greek gods was to roll a boulder up a hill every day, only to invariably have it roll back down so that he has to start again in the morning. The burden of life in this world are one’s boulder, and all the struggles one encounters have no apparent meaning or purpose since they will be repeated tomorrow. Life is little more than a series of choices, defining moments that dictate how one’s days would progress, without being able to alter the human condition.

Sartre and Camus were both prominent proponents of existentialist choice, which has ensured that their names are inextricably linked in histories of philosophy. However, the two fell out, ostensibly over Sartre’s support of Soviet Russia. In his magazine Les Temps Modernes, Sartre criticised “Camus the bourgeois.” Whether or not Camus had become bourgeois, he remained committed to his feeling of solidarity with oppressed peoples and an antipathy for those who exploited them. There has been much speculation on this break between Sartre and Camus. Some believe the underlying cause was less ideological than personal: Sartre, a conspicuously unattractive man, was envious of the handsome and charming Camus. In October 1957, Camus then aged 44, became the second-youngest writer (next to Rudyard Kipling) ever to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. Little more than two years later, on January 4, 1960, Camus was being driven back to Paris by his publisher Michel Gallimard when the Facel-Vega HK500 sports car left the road at high speed and careened into a tree. The back seat passengers survived, but the Nobel Laureate died instantly. Among the wreckage was the incomplete manuscript for his book The First Man, and in his pocket the train ticket that he hadn’t used after accepting a lift to Paris. In an instant, Camus had gone from being a generational voice to being a corpse on the side of the highway. One wonders what meaning can be derived from such a sudden change. Or perhaps life is simply absurd.

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Ray Cavanaugh also writes for The Irish World, The London Magazine, and New Oxford Review. This article was first published in the October 12 issue of Philosophy Now.
During a walk along Queen st, Auckland recently, I met 3 Italian students who were returning to Italy. Pictured From left, they are: Angelo, Rosa and Pietro. They explained that they had been studying philosophy in New Zealand but were now returning home.

They said they’d enjoyed their stay in New Zealand and would like to return for a longer visit some time in the future.

A bronze statue by Paul Dibble of two native birds, the wood pigeon (top) and the Huia (bottom). The Statue is situated on the corner of Kitchener Street and Wellesley Street near the Gow Langsford Gallery. From a foundry in Palmerston North, Paul Dibble created the statue with the help of a small team of highly skilled assistants. His sculptures vary in size from 350 millimetre high maquettes to large works of over 5.5 metres in height. The casting processes that Dibble has used for his more recent works are based on two methods; ceramic shell, lost wax and sand casting.

For more information contact: www.gowlangsfordgallery.co.nz/artists/pauldibble/