Café Philosophy

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Existence unplugged
Thomas McGuire

Freedom is the cause celebre of the modern age. For existentialists, though, the full acceptance of human freedom seems to place an almost terrifying weight upon our shoulders. We are, as Sartre puts it, condemned to be free – forced to make choices – and so freedom becomes paradoxically a source of angst. Part of this angst surely has to do with the overwhelming number of possible lives available to us, and hence the virtually infinite number of selves we might become, from which we have to forge our actual state of being. Failure to choose is not an option, for a living human being cannot fail to participate in life. Who have you chosen to become and why?

Children are exposed to angst early on by the adult world when presented with the expectation of making a ‘career choice’, of deciding on and following a particular path towards creation of a future self, and thereby closing off other options. Commitment to one path closes off countless possibilities and thus condemns numerous future selves to an aborted death – no wonder there is angst associated with such a defining process.

Existentialists are concerned about authenticity, and the person who identifies too closely with the role they play, rather than their inherently free selfhood, may be an insubstantial human being. Perhaps it is only children who are truly capable of leading authentic lives. Their imaginations allow them to play with a seemingly endless variety of possibilities, absorbing themselves in particular identities; to decide who they want to become, or even commanded to assume particularly defined roles. Of course, children often claim that they know who they want to be when they grow up (a firefighter, dentist etc.) but this projection of a future self can change from day to day.

It is often presumed that despair, and even suicidal tendencies must follow from existentialist thought. The problem for Sartre is how to find meaning in a universe that, he believes, is without any divine agency. He believes that values like right and wrong originate from human consciousness, not God. Yet Kierkegaard, usually considered to be an existentialist, was a devout Christian. Both philosophers held a radical notion of human freedom, in which every little choice counts – either because this is our one and only life, or because we are being judged on our worthiness for eternal life. Both religious and anti-religious conceptions of life are capable of generating despair. If Sartre’s philosophy is a recipe for unhappiness, is that because of its atheism or because of the general existentialist focus on absurdity and suffering? That is a question with no easy answer.

Novels can be a great way of bringing philosophical viewpoints to a wider audience (Ayn Rand’s Atlas Shrugged is a prime example), and in this issue Michael Rockler explains why a famous detective novel is also an existentialist classic (p.6). Jean Paul-Sartre, existentialism’s most lucid exponent, was a fascinating character and his contributions to human culture immense. Benedict O’Donohue explains ‘why Sartre matters’ (p.12). Sartre’s long-time partner, Simone de Beauvoir, herself became an icon of the feminist movement when she wrote The Second Sex. You are invited to take a closer look at this often misunderstood manifesto of women’s rights (p.11).

We can probably all remember having had at least one traumatic experience, even if we are unfamiliar with existential angst. Trauma, as an individual and social condition, is a blossoming field of research and some recent books on the subject are reviewed inside (p.17). Trauma is one way to explain destructive or anomalous behaviour. Those who have experienced extreme trauma (e.g. refugees from warzones) may sometimes do bizarre and dangerous things to others. A victimized ethnic group may become the victimizer next time around. Since traumatic events in a person’s life can often be linked to present behaviour, it is tempting to search for a similar reason why malfunctioning societies act the way they do. A cultural anthropologist of Western society could see signs of trauma, real and imagined, almost everywhere: in TV’s obsession with conflict and dysfunction, in movies about the destruction of the world (e.g. 2012) or the onslaught of zombie flicks representing the complete breakdown of rational society.

Trauma is also something that is increasingly used to try and shift moral responsibility for actions away from oneself. The battered wife who poisons her husband can claim to have a traumatic stress disorder in order to make herself less culpable. This is a tricky situation for the existentialist, who wants to uphold the human freedom to choose in every situation while recognising ‘facticity’, the physical and social limits which make our free will less capable of being expressed. Some people are, of course, more hemmed in by facticity than others.

If you’re angst-prone, try not to feel too bad after reading this issue. Look at the plus side: you are more in charge of your life than you may have realised. And the less attached you are to the superficial, role-playing aspects of your ‘self’, the more real your experience of life is going to get. Now, back to that coffee.
Sam Spade Existential, Hero?

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Perhaps the most popular existential work of the 20th century was written by a man who has not usually been identified as a philosopher, but whose work clearly embodies existential themes. Dashiell Hammett, creator of the hard-boiled detective novel, applied an existential viewpoint to his writing. His novel The Maltese Falcon is an excellent example of literature in which existential themes run through the story.

The Maltese Falcon begins when a young and very attractive woman, Brigid O’Shaughnessy, approaches private detective Sam Spade and his partner, Miles Archer. She wishes to hire them to rescue her sister from Floyd Thursby, whom she believes has her sister under control. Spade and his partner take the case, but it results in the murder of Archer. It also compels Spade into a hunt for a mysterious statue in the shape of a Falcon, which is allegedly encrusted with jewels.

In the end, Spade solves the murder of Archer and turns the perpetrator over to the police even though it may ultimately not be in his best interest to do so. But as Spade says, “when a man’s partner is killed, he has to do something about it.”

Existentialism, as defined by Sartre, Camus, Kierkegaard and others, begins with the premise that ‘existence precedes essence’. For many other philosophical systems, the essence of a person is present at birth. For existentialists, however, an individual must define his or her own reality. Because the universe does not provide meaning, only existence, the existential task of a human being is to create his own or her own meaning, and the central requirement for living a meaningful life is a continual process of self-definition. A person is not defined by what he or she claims to be, but rather by his or her actions.

Existentialists often focus on death in their writings because death provides a temporal limit to the process of self-definition. Existentialists further believe that the defining process encompasses solitude, choice and freedom. In order to create one’s self, freedom of action is required. Hence, one must not become so entangled with the lives of others that one’s autonomy is diminished. Generally, existential decisions regarding the creation of self may be difficult ones, and can lead to great anguish.

- Hammett, Hamlet and Macbeth

Dashiell Hammett was born on May 27, 1894 in St. Mary’s County, Maryland. He grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, where he attended a vocational high school for one semester in 1908. He left school to help in his father’s business, which he did not want to do. At 14, he had completed all the formal education he was ever to receive. In 1915, Hammett joined the Pinkerton Detective Agency—a job he enjoyed, and held for three years, before enlisting in the army in June 1918 to fight in the First World War. In 1920 he returned to Pinkerton and worked in the Spokane, Washington branch of the agency. In November, he entered a hospital with tuberculosis, which he had contracted during the War. In 1921 he married Josephine Dolan, who was his nurse, and soon thereafter the Hammetts had their first child and moved to San Francisco.

Hammett was no longer able to work as a detective, so to make a living for his family he began to write detective stories, drawing on his work as a Pinkerton operative. His novels were well received, and in 1929 he published his best-known book, The Maltese Falcon. It has been made into several films; the most successful one being produced in 1941, directed by John Huston. Huston essentially adapted the novel into film by following the novel closely, but not quite verbatim. Hammett wrote several more novels, and later in his life he earned a living as a screenwriter in Hollywood. He also adapted his work for radio and television. He died in January, 1961.

In an essay originally published in 1976, John W. Cawelti argues that for Hammett, and thus for Sam Spade, the cosmos is godless and ruled by chance and violence. Rather than being in a benevolent universe in which there is progress, human beings are alone in a meaningless world. This view is also present in Macbeth’s famous lament:

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Unlike Sam Spade however, Macbeth is not an example of existentialist man, but rather is defined by the people and circumstances around him. The weird sisters and Lady Macbeth define his choices, diminishing his freedom as they help him hurt himself into the abyss. While Hamlet, for example, struggles to define himself, Macbeth allows others to define him. Sadly, the end is the same for both; but Hamlet remains a noble figure while Macbeth has become an archetypal villain.

Sam Spade’s Self

In Hammett’s novel, Spade tells Brigid the story of Fitcraft – a person from an earlier case solved by the detective. Mrs Fitcraft asked Spade to find her husband. The man had left his family with enough financial resources to be comfortable, but could not be found.

Spade traced his quarry to Canada. It turns out Fitcraft was a successful businessman. As he was returning from lunch one day a beam from a construction site fell and nearly killed him. This led Fitcraft to reflect on his life, and he concluded that he had not made enough of it. His near-death-experience made him decide to leave San Francisco and seek a better life elsewhere. He took care to see that his family was well provided for, then left.

Spade goes on to tell Brigid that in fact, Fitcraft’s new life was an almost exact replica of his former life. He married again, and his new wife was very much like his first spouse. He even had a similar kind of job.

Spade tells this story to Brigid because he (and Hammett) need to make the point that people do not easily change. Once one has defined oneself, it is difficult to become a different person. Thus Spade tells this story partly to prepare Brigid (and the reader) for the climax of the novel. Hammett puts in the novel to make the point that creating one’s life requires difficult choices and hard work. Simply leaving San Francisco for Canada does not lead to the creation of a new essence. But unlike Macbeth, Sam Spade has defined and is defining himself. The ending of the novel makes this clear.

Spade has finally acquired the elusive Maltese Falcon. He offers to sell it to Gutman and Joel Cairo. They seemingly agree to terms, and spend the night in Spade’s apartment waiting for Effie Petine, Spade’s secretary, to bring the Falcon. However, when it arrives the Falcon turns out to be a fake. Now Spade faces a crucial definitional choice. The two characters who have been chasing the Falcon ask Spade to join them as they continue their quest. Should they succeed (and the odds of their success would certainly increase if Spade joins them), all of them would become immensely wealthy, including Spade. Spade declines the offer, and after Gutman and Cairo leave, he calls the police, and this leads to their apprehension and arrest.

Spade then faces a second major choice. He has developed a romantic attachment to Brigid, with whom he has made love. He has also deduced that Brigid killed his partner, Miles Archer. Does he accept Brigid’s offer to be with her, or does he turn her in to the police for murder? Spade deliberates:

Listen. This isn’t a damned bit of good.
You’ll never understand me, but I’ll try once more and then we’ll give it up. Listen. When a man’s partner is killed he’s supposed to do something about it. It doesn’t make any difference what you thought of him. He was your partner and you’re supposed to do something about it. Then it happens we were in the detective business. Well, when one of your organization gets killed it’s bad business to let the killer get away – bad for that one organization and bad for every detective everywhere. Third, I’m a detective and expecting me to run criminals down and let them go free is like asking a dog to catch a rabbit and let it go.
Here Sam Spade has defined himself as a detective. That's not only how he makes a living, it's also who he is. That definition entails certain behaviors which he cannot change if he is to maintain his identity – part of being a detective involves catching criminals and bringing them to justice.

Sartre proposed a Kantian ethical test: he argued that one's behavior must meet a standard of universal applicability – one's actions must be applicable by all. Spade has applied this test to his definition of himself as a detective: if all detectives caught criminals only to let them go, what would be the consequences for law enforcement? Spade's self-definition includes a commitment to do something when one's partner is killed. It's part of his code as a detective, and if he violates this code he's no longer living within the self-definition he has created. In his life Flitcraft defined himself as a dedicated husband and businessman. That definition remains for him even if he changes wives and countries: it's who Flitcraft is. And being a detective is who Sam Spade is. (However, Sartre would call such an attitude of fixed self-definition 'bad faith', or 'inauthenticity'.)

Effie Perine, Spade's secretary, is the one person in the novel with whom Spade has an authentic relationship. Iva Archer, Miles Archer's wife, would like to have a serious relationship with Spade, as would Brigid. But Effie accepts (and probably loves) Sam Spade for who he is. Effie's attitude to achieving some measure of autonomy and freedom – to the desire to be the architect of one's own life. Striving for personal authenticity provides an antidote to outside conditioning, and to some extent is a reaction to the inauthenticity prevalent in culture, religion, politics, and everyday life. A desire for authenticity is also essential for the discovery of the truth, and for finding fulfillment in life, making it more meaningful and comprehensible. In general, a state of inauthenticity can be a source of profound dissonance, prompting people to try to become more authentic, in harmony with their inner and outer lives.

The quest for authenticity is in part related to achieving some measure of autonomy and freedom – to the desire to be the architect of one's own life. Striving for personal authenticity provides an antidote to outside conditioning, and to some extent is a reaction to the inauthenticity prevalent in culture, religion, politics, and everyday life. A desire for authenticity is also essential for the discovery of the truth, and for finding fulfillment in life, making it more meaningful and comprehensible. In general, a state of inauthenticity can be a source of profound dissonance, prompting people to try to become more authentic, in harmony with their inner and outer lives.

The Limits of authenticity
Ben G. Yacobi asks if it possible to live authentically depends on various social, political, religious and cultural characteristics. But the unique nature of each individual is best seen not in who he is, but in who he becomes, and becoming authentic is a continuous process, not an event. It involves not just knowing oneself, but also recognizing others and the mutual influence between individuals. If the quest for personal authenticity is just for self-fulfillment, then it is individualistic and ego-based; but if it is accompanied with the awareness of others and the wider world, then it can be a worthwhile goal.

Philosophies of Authenticity
The concept of authenticity has been explored throughout history by many writers, from ancient Greek philosophers to Enlightenment authors, to existentialists and contemporary social theorists. The social barrier to achieving authenticity (or self-realization) was emphasized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), who argued that personal authenticity is diminished by the need for the esteem of others in societies characterized by hierarchy, inequality, and interdependence. According to Rousseau, authenticity is derived from the natural self, whereas inauthenticity is a result of external influences.

The existential philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) said that authenticity is choosing the nature of one's existence and identity. He also linked authenticity to an awareness of mortality, since only by keeping in mind one's inevitable death can one lead a truly authentic life. His project of realizing one's identity in the context of an external world with its influences, implies a complex relationship between authenticity and inauthenticity which means that they should be viewed not as mutually exclusive concepts, but as complementary and interdependent. Heidegger argued that both authenticity and inauthenticity are basic forms of being in the world, and they cannot be separated.

Another existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80), argued that there is no unchanging essence to the self, but we have a free will that allows us complete freedom to determine our lives from the choices available. According to Sartre, existence precedes
esence: in other words, the human being first comes into existence and then continually defines oneself, rather than coming into being with an already given nature. So for Sartre, authenticity requires taking full responsibility for our life, choices and actions. Therefore the anxiety or 'angst' which results from our realization of our own inescapable freedom is an integral part of authentic living. However, it should be emphasized that the individual's freedom is constrained by nature and society, as well as by their own limitations – what Sartre called their 'facticity'.

Albert Camus (1913-60) claimed that we inhabit a universe which doesn't care about us and offers us no salvation and compels the individual to recognize that the only path to freedom is authentic self-realization. To be authentic, one must be aware of the absurdity of a world with no objective morality and purpose, and create meaning in life through rebellion against the absurdity. Such personal authenticity emerges from a disregard for any (non-existent) external consolation, and implies that the individual exists in a permanent exile, alienated from their own life, society and the universe. Nevertheless the world has no specific inclination for either good or evil: it is what it is. No value judgements can be attached to it, even if life does not make sense to a human perspective.

These philosophical views on personal authenticity vary, but there is a common theme of personal authenticity as a dynamic process of endless becoming in a changing society and world, rather than a fixed state of being. And authenticity and inauthenticity should not be considered as mutually exclusive states, but rather as mutually dependent concepts.

**Some Basic Qualifications**

The concept of 'authenticity' is a human construct, and as such it has no reality independent of minds. But is authenticity possible, or even desirable? The question is possibly misleading as it implies an absolute yes or no answer, and does not allude to any possibility of 'partial authenticity'. This steers us toward an interpretation of the concept of authenticity as an absolute, but in general the search for absolutes is fruitless. So let's consider some things that can limit absolute authenticity.

Some argue that authenticity is impossible to achieve as an on-going state of being, since any real authenticity is transient and impossible to maintain indefinitely. And like identity, authenticity cannot be adequately defined or measured, since many characteristics of an individual are in constant change, with no fixed reference points. Individuals undergo changes throughout life with the deluge of observations and interpretations, so human identity is multidimensional and dynamic; it is a work in progress rather than a fixed state. Therefore, retaining some measure of personal authenticity is a lifelong project that may never be fully accomplished. Personal authenticity involves principles and ideals which are continually reevaluated through self-examination and social interaction, so who is to judge if someone else is being authentic or not? The key question is, how can we distinguish between true authenticity and a mere display of authenticity? If one's 'authenticity' is being promoted, highlighted, or exhibited, then it is not true authenticity. Authenticity cannot be declared, publicized, instructed, marketed, or exchanged as some sort of commodity. It must be understated and unpretentious.

Being true and honest to oneself and others is relational, and connected to the outside world as well as to one's inner life. However, to avoid aggravating others, one must observe the need to limit the expression of one's authenticity in specific situations. One may thus distinguish between 'internal authenticity' and 'external authenticity'. To avoid burdening others with our personal issues, we may often be inclined to hide our true feelings. True authenticity isn't about expressing one's inner self with its full range of shifting emotions in all situations. Unbiased self-awareness in the present moment is of great importance, as it can enhance the clarity of one's inner dialogue and diminish the reach of the ego.

But being true and honest is not enough. There are certain attributes without which the concept of 'personal authenticity' would remain an empty shell, ambiguously defined and poorly understood, and without which the quest for authenticity may in fact become detrimental for interpersonal relationships and for society. These characteristics necessary for authenticity include capacities for unbiased self-examination and accurate self-knowledge, reflective judgment; personal responsibility; humility; empathy for and understanding of the other (person), as well as a willingness to listen to feedback from others. Achieving personal authenticity is complicated by the presence of illusions and biases, including self-deception, wishful thinking, and the tendency to behave differently while under observation.

**Paradoxes of Authenticity**

It's a paradox that one can discover some measure of personal authenticity not by avoiding the outside world, but only by immersing oneself in it; and yet authenticity is achieved by resisting outside influences in one's self-realization. Furthermore, since human lives operate with uncertainties, authenticity can only be discovered in uncertainty. Thus, another paradox is that the authentic can only be attained through an immersion in uncertainty, but uncertainty hinders the discovery of the true self, without which knowledge authenticity cannot be achieved. In addition, any objective discovery of the self is only possible without preconceptions and biases – but we all have preconceptions and biases. Therefore no self-examination, however long and detailed, can ever fully reveal one's true identity, and thus what being authentic would truly involve. And difficult circumstances can also lead to self-doubt and insecurity; true self-knowledge must make allowance for this.

The question is, how do you really know whether you are being authentic or not? One does not consciously consider whether one is being authentic throughout daily life. But on the other hand, complete self-knowledge is impossible: one cannot possibly explore the entire labyrinth of human consciousness. And to a large extent, cognitive processes, such as perception and reasoning and much of the content of memory, are inaccessible to conscious awareness. The tendency is to fill the gaps between the known and the unknown with the known facts and thoughts about oneself, in order to provide a coherent portrayal. As a result, self-examination may lead to an inaccurate self-depiction. The ability of the human mind to examine great amounts of information or multiple aspects of a given topic is limited, further leading to an incomplete understanding or an erroneous representation of what is observed or experienced. Human knowledge always remains incomplete and provisional, yet without full awareness, no complete authenticity is attainable, so at any given moment, authenticity can be only partial.

In addition, there will coexist in one individual multiple identities and self-images, depending on the various contexts in which the individual holds a role. These identities may be strongly internalized in society, including personal, occupational, cultural, ethnic, national, political, and religious identities. The dynamics of identity changes can be complex and unpredictable as changes in society, economies and politics. These factors make any unambiguous discovery of personal identity a difficult challenge, especially as the analysis is usually simplified, and the intricate interdependence of the various elements is typically overlooked. This can result in the illusion of understanding personal identity, and thus an illusion of ideal authenticity.

Human judgments and attitudes are based on the interpretation of perceptions of reality rather than on the interpretation of reality itself. The limits of human perception, thought and self-knowledge, are some of the main hurdles to personal authenticity. One may never arrive at full self-knowledge, which is constantly being defined and refined on the basis of new understandings against the background of the world and its demands.

Another limitation in the quest for authenticity is related to the language used, which is open to misinterpretation, and words and language are inadequate for expressing the full spectrum of one's thoughts and feelings. Allegories, connotations, and metaphors are the major sources of misunderstandings. In addition, words and sentences are often ambiguous, having more than one possible meaning. A completely clear language with a direct and evident correspondence between experiences and words does not exist. And the individual's shifting thoughts and perceptions about themselves may not always be comprehensible, so the expression of them through language may not be consistent. Also the language to describe authenticity can itself be arbitrary and unclear, often using ambiguous words such as 'true', 'genuine', 'original', 'real', 'self', or 'natural'.

Authentic communication depends on the capacity of individuals to recognize what is true for themselves, and on the adequacy of language to express their thoughts, so the limits to language, interpretation, and expression impede their authentic relationships with each other. In such communications it is not always apparent whether the authenticity or inauthenticity of interactions is due to the circumstances, or the language, or the subject matter, or the participants and their perceptions and interpretations.
Another dilemma with personal authenticity is related to the fact that most personal attributes change with time, yet personal authenticity is expected to demonstrate some measure of consistency. This apparent contradiction involves a requirement for both change and constancy. In other words, if an individual's identity is continually evolving, how can one recognize or discover the meaning of personal authenticity over a lifetime? Perhaps the value of authenticity is not in its constancy, but rather in its consistent evolution throughout the lifetime of the individual.

Further Limitations on Authenticity

Other factors that may hinder the development of personal authenticity include a lack of understanding of authenticity, one's prior programming, the fear of rejection and failure, and social pressures to conform (and thus live inauthentically). In the latter cases, individuals typically try to show their best faces and express what is expected of them so that they will be perceived in a good light. In many situations, the need for collaboration with others may demand some adaptation, that is, some inauthentic compromise.

Being under constant observation and scrutiny at best inhibits authenticity, and at worst makes it nearly impossible. Thus, politicians cannot be authentic, since they always have to appear confident and nearly flawless rather than show any honest doubt or vulnerability. The politicians are on the stage of the theatre of life, where they must perform their art of convincing and pleasing groups of people with different values, aspirations, beliefs, dreams, and needs. So in politics, authenticity is at least difficult to sustain, although a politician may have a well-developed capacity of self-reflection and the desire to ensure consistency between their actions and values, and so may be able to achieve authenticity in some situations. Nonetheless, the public expects politicians to deliver on their promises, and the bottom line is always prosperity, jobs, and security, so in this context, authenticity takes second place to other concerns.

The attempt to achieve personal authenticity is also exacerbated by ever-advancing technologies that inundate an individual's perception of reality with illusions, such as television. Another such technology is virtual reality. The pervasive use of virtual reality may eventually result in difficulties distinguishing between virtual and real experiences, exacerbating the endless human propensity for self-deception and self-delusion. Generally, the future of human experience is related to emerging enhancement technologies, including memory and cognitive enhancement techniques. The merging of human and machine may necessitate new definitions of what a human being is, and generate new problems related to human nature and identity, the nature of society, and the meanings of existence and human authenticity.

If life is an art, as in any art form, one can approach perfection, but one can never arrive. As for personal authenticity, some never bother with it, some discover it in certain actions, some strive to approach it in both life and art, but very few ever arrive.

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'It changed my life!

Everyone should read Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, argues Toril Moi

An accomplished novelist, Simone de Beauvoir won the Prix Goncourt for The Mandarins in 1954. She is also one of the most important French memoirists of the 20th century. Yet it is to The Second Sex, her epochal essay from 1949 on the oppression of women, that we should return.

Ever since it was published, The Second Sex has provoked intense responses. In 1949, it unleashed a sexual scandal. “Unsatisfied, cold, piafique, nymphomaniac, lesbian, a hundred times aborted, I was everything, even an unmarried mother,” Beauvoir comments in her memoirs. For half a generation, an aura of queer sexuality clung to the book. Early American editions had a naked woman on the cover. In the 1950s and early 1960s, any young woman caught reading The Second Sex would be considered decidedly subversive.

In the years before the women’s movement, The Second Sex was a source of inspiration and insight for countless women. “It changed my life!” is a refrain one often hears. Yet feminist responses to The Second Sex have been surprisingly ambivalent. In their breakthrough books, major writers of the women’s movement - Betty Friedan, Kate Millett and Germaine Greer - barely mention Beauvoir, as if to deny the influence of a threatening mother figure.

In the 1980s, feminist theory became an academic subject, yet this did not benefit The Second Sex. Dominant French theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray were openly hostile to Beauvoir, whom they cast as a champion of “male” notions of equality as opposed to their own sinuous celebrations of feminine difference.

When Beauvoir died in April 1986, one French differentialist, Antoinette Fouque, a founder of the des femmes bookstore on the Left Bank, declared that the author of The Second Sex had been pushing an “intolerant, assimilating, sterilising universalism, full of hatred and reductive of otherness”.

In the late 1990s, I still felt that the book was not being read with the care and attention it deserved. Compared to the 1980s, however, the situation was much improved; serious academic reconsideration of Beauvoir truly got under way in the early years of the decade. Today, there is a steady stream of serious books and essays on her work.

Everyone who cares about freedom and justice for women should read The Second Sex. Long before Amartya Sen, Beauvoir argued that abstract freedom (the right to vote, for example) will make
Beauvoir's analysis of sexism is perhaps her most powerful theoretical contribution to feminism. In a sexist society, she argues, man is the universal and woman is the particular; he is the One, she is the Other. Women therefore regularly find themselves placed in a position where they are faced with the "choice" between being imprisoned in their femininity and being obliged to masquerade as an abstract genderless subject.

To explain what she means, Beauvoir gives an example. In the middle of an abstract conversation, a man once said to her that "you say that because you are a woman." If she were to answer "I say it because it is true," she writes, she would be eliminating her own subjectivity. But if she were to say "I say it because I am a woman," she would be imprisoned in her gender. In the first case, she has to give up her own lived experience; in the second, she must renounce her claim to say something of general validity.

The anecdote warns us against believing that feminism must choose between equality and difference. As long as that "choice" takes place in a society that casts man as the One and woman as the Other, it is not a choice, but an insoluble dilemma. Beauvoir argues ferociously against attempts to lay down requirements for how women ought to or behave. To her, any imposition of "femininity" on women is an invitation to soul-destroying alienation.

The Second Sex provides a strong alternative to identity politics. For Beauvoir, identity is an effect of choices and actions in specific situations: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." Living under vastly different conditions, women are unlikely to develop the same political interests. Women often have stronger allegiances to their race, religion, social class or nationality than to their own sex, Beauvoir writes.

Unfortunately, the only English translation of The Second Sex, done in 1953 by the zoologist HM Partridge, is seriously defective. Almost 15 per cent of the text is missing. The philosophical inaccuracies are such that it is difficult to get a clear sense of Beauvoir's thought. For decades, Random House, Beauvoir's US publisher, resisted every suggestion that the translation was flawed. However, a new translation has finally been released. The translators, Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevaller, are best known as cookery book writers.

The Second Sex is a wonderfully energetic book. For Beauvoir, the future is wide open, and freedom within reach: "The free woman is just being born," she optimistically concludes. The Second Sex urges us to have faith in our power to transform the future.

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Why Sartre Matters
Benedict O'Donohoe

The 21st June 2005 was an auspicious date – the summer solstice, the tipping point of Gemini into Cancer, and the centenary of the birth of Jean-Paul Sartre. And on 15th April 1980 – just 32 years ago – Sartre died. These two dates are worthy of note because, in the intervening 75 years, Sartre created a legacy that is not only memorable but is also, and more importantly, an appeal to an unconventional worldview and, by implication, to action.

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Why Sartre Matters
Benedict O'Donohoe

The 21st June 2005 was an auspicious date – the summer solstice, the tipping point of Gemini into Cancer, and the centenary of the birth of Jean-Paul Sartre. And on 15th April 1980 – just 32 years ago – Sartre died. These two dates are worthy of note because, in the intervening 75 years, Sartre created a legacy that is not only memorable but is also, and more importantly, an appeal to an unconventional worldview and, by implication, to action.

Sartre's attainments as writer and intellectual suffice in themselves to ensure his eminence in the canon of French literature. He is probably the most significant representative of 20th century French letters, whose accomplishments, by their breadth and their depth, their quality and their quantity, surpass those of Gide, Proust or Camus – and he arguably dominates the world stage too. In any case, he is, by various accounts, the most written-about writer of the last century. He also bears comparison with the great names of previous French generations, against whom he measured himself from an early age, surrounded by the leather-bound tomes of his grandfather's library: whether Descartes or Pascal in the 17th century; Voltaire or Rousseau in the 18th; Balzac, Hugo or Zola in the 19th – Sartre set out to forge a reputation equal to any of these giants, and only the most gurgling critics deny that he realised that lofty ambition.

For both the range and the merit of Sartre's opus are quite amazing; he is the author of modern classics in several fields – the novel, Nausea 1938; the short story, The Wall 1939; the play, No Exit 1944; philosophy, Being and Nothingness 1943; criticism, What is Literature? 1948; biography, Saint Genet, Comedian and Martyr 1952; the polemical essay and reportage – numerous issues of his periodical Les Temps modernes, founded 1946 – and ten volumes of Situations; and, not least, autobiographies, Words 1964, widely regarded as an achievement. As if this body of work were not enough, he also wrote screenplays, journalism, art criticism, theses on theoretical psychology – notably the emotions and the imagination – and copious correspondence. Moreover, he made (admittedly, ill-fated) forays into radio and television. In short, Sartre was, in the phrase he borrowed from Chara aubandiand as an epigraph to the final section of Words, `a book-making machine', and the products of his `machinery' had an impact across the spectrum of the arts, media and social sciences.

However, Sartre does not matter simply because he was a great writer, nor even primarily so, although his exceptional command of style and genius at expertly complements his missionary purpose. No, Sartre matters because so many fundamental points of his analysis of the human reality are right and true, and because their accuracy and veracity entail real consequences for our lives as individuals and in social groups. His distinction is to have obeyed his own injunction of 'commitment', and to have persisted in trying to convey his messages to as wide an audience as possible, by exploiting every medium available to the writer.

Existentialism is the philosophical label associated most closely with Sartre's name. It is not a term he coined – that was done by the Catholic philosopher, Benedetto Croce. Existentialism is therefore also a counterblast to the Cartesian duality of mind and extension, or matter, summarised in the famous aphorism: Cogito ergo sum. In effect, Sartre inverts this premise to say: Sum ergo cogito. I am therefore I think, which is for Sartre the natural (arbitrary but actual) order of things.

For Sartre, by contrast with Descartes, consciousness is necessarily embodied: it comes into being only with our advent in the world at birth, and goes out of being with our exit from the world in death. In life, however, consciousness is not only embodied insofar as it is consciousness of something. Take away all the things of which consciousness is conscious, and you would have nothing left. Whereas, Sartre argues, consciousness cannot exist as consciousness of something, it cannot seize itself as conscious exclusively of itself, without being grounded in some material object of which it is conscious. We might well have the impression that the Cartesian duality of mind and matter is an accurate summary of our condition, but this impression is a delusion. The understanding of ourselves as individuated is an empirical process of learning over time, not an innate awareness.

Sartre's project in Being and Nothingness was to try to describe the real nature of human existence in a material world of which we are (as bodies) constituent parts, and yet of which we are simultaneously conscious as though we were, in some sense, not a part of it. This insight produces what is perhaps his most profoundly true paradox, that "a human is that which is not what it is, and is what it is."
But, of course, he also wants to go beyond mere description by drawing out the ethical implications of his ontological analysis, and this enquiry leads him to the moral concepts of freedom, responsibility, authenticity and bad faith, which he discusses at some length in Being and Nothingness, and promises to return to in a later book of ethics.

Obviously, Sartre wasn’t the first western philosopher to dispose of God, and then find himself wrestling with the consequences. Nietzsche notoriously declared the demise of the deity, then confronted the corollary that humans are the sole source of moral values, which had necessarily to be ‘re-valued, beyond good and evil’. For Sartre, however, it is not so much the absence of God (which he postulates a priori) as the nature of consciousness that makes humans the authors of all moral value. The discriminating power of self-consciousness, enabling us to stand outside ourselves as if we were things in the world much like other things, also enables us to discern that any present situation could be different, and that we could make it so: we can always (ought always, Sartre implies) have a project to amend the status quo. Moreover, in most situations, we can conceive of more than one way to change things: in short, we can – indeed, we have to – choose. What Kierkegaard identified as the inescapable ‘Either/Or’, the source of all anguish, is, for Sartre, the defining characteristic of human being: freedom. Freedom is not itself a matter of choice, Sartre insists; it is the inductible, inherent and foundational quality of human being. We are, as he puts it in one of his pithy formulations, ‘condemned to be free’: every time we act, we are destined to act autonomously and by our own lights, and to be wholly responsible for our actions and therefore open to moral judgment on the consequences of our acts. ‘You are nothing but the sum of your acts.’ Another way of saying that existence precedes essence, is to say that ‘doing precedes being’, or that ‘to be is to act’. Because we are conscious of our moral responsibility, we feel anguish in the face of our freedom, and we are naturally inclined to flee from that anguish.

Sartre says in his early philosophy that we always choose how to act, whatever the circumstances might be. The exhausted athlete chooses the moment at which she is too tired to continue; the terrified victim chooses to faint in order to blot out the insufferable situation. He even goes so far as to say that the tortured man chooses when to cry out in pain – and so on. Despite the extreme quality of some of his examples, it seems to me that Sartre is right to be concerned by the fact that, very often, we tend to deny or to disguise our freedom in order to evade responsibility for our actions. This tendency he calls ‘inauthenticity’ or ‘bad faith’. A typical strategy is role-playing, behaving in a way that we feel is dictated or required by the functions we fulfil. He exemplifies this kind of conduct in Being and Nothingness with his caricature of the ‘waiter who is too much a waiter’, a man who escapes the anguish of his freedom by enacting the exaggerated gestures of a cultural stereotype.

Another common evasive strategy, is to claim that one was ‘only following orders’, an excuse advanced in order to exonerate all manner of abominable behaviour, ranging from the Holocaust to the humiliation of Iraqi prisoners. These are well-documented crimes, whose perpetrators defend their actions on the grounds that they were ‘only following orders’. Sartre insists that orders can never cause us to act against our will: they only ever have the force or authority with which the agent himself invests them. The agent always chooses to asssent or disobey, to resist or to acquiesce. Several of Sartre’s protagonists in his novels and plays struggle with the dilemma that they chose to obey orders which they felt they ought to disobey, and yet to which they freely and culpably assented. To lie to oneself about the exercise of one’s own freedom and moral discretion is Sartre’s definition of bad faith.

The authentic person, by contrast, agrees that all his actions flow from his inherent freedom, accepts that every action is an implicit assertion of moral value, and realises that our actions are the only basis on which others are entitled to judge us. Action is our dimension-for-the-others, in the world, and we have a right of mutual scrutiny as if all our actions are committed quite freely. Another entailment of this ethical analysis is that ‘all human life is human’. This utopionaxiomatic, adapted from Nietzsche and Heidegger, is advocated by Sartre to undercut inauthentic interpretations of actions as being, for example, bestial, diabolical, or inhuman. The more apt we become to attribute inhuman or supernatural epithets to our own actions, the more likely we are to be talking about conduct that is, in fact, exclusively or even characteristically human: no other species could conceive, much less enact, Bergen Belsen or Abu Graib.

So, it flows from Sartre’s first principles that we are embodied consciousness, alone in a godless universe, characterised by free choice, destined to act autonomously and by our own lights, and to be wholly responsible for our actions and therefore open to moral judgment on the basis of them. Sartrean existentialism, then, is an ontology that entails an exigent, unrelenting and burdensome deontology, or ethics, whose premises are grounded in empirical good sense, and whose complements derive from it logically and persuasively. Yet there is a problem, which we might call ‘relativity’: the individual’s relation to his situation, or the interface of subjectivity and objectivity, the confrontation of person and history. How does Sartre account for the historical moment, which he calls ‘facticity’ and which is axiomatically contingent? How does facticity impact upon the agent? To what extent is my freedom circumscribed by my conditioning? In Being and Nothingness (1943) he wrote: ‘If war breaks out, it is in my image, it is my war and I deserve it...’ But Frantz, the anti-hero of his play The Condemned of Altona (1960), says: ‘It is not we who make war, but war that makes us.’ To which of these opposing perspectives did Sartre finally adhere?

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Sartre moved away from what he called the anti-Marxist ‘thesis of his thought – enshrined in Being and Nothingness which is subjectivist, individualistic and asocial – towards a dialectical conceptualisation, culminating in Critique of Dialectical Reason (1960), which is objectiveist, collectivist, and socially focused. This is another distinctive element of Sartre’s legacy: the attempt to reconcile, without renouncing them, the main tenets of his phenomenological ontology and ethics with a more comprehensive and inclusive worldview that would take account of the historical moment in the narrative of the individual; that is, to incorporate the ideology of existentialism into what he called the “unsurpassable philosophy of our time”, Marxism. This evolution can be encapsulated as a shift from the uncompromising analytical dictum, ‘The facts of life are not the same as the facts of the consciousness of these facts’, to the more subtle dialectical statement: ‘We are what we make of what others have made of us’. This is a pragmatic acknowledgment that our freedoms, albeit inherent and inclutable, are subject to historical conditions. As Sartre once rebuked Camus, in their dispute over the latter’s book The Rebel, “the facts of life are not the same in Pasy and in Billancourt” – respectively, affluent middle-class and poor working-class quarters of Paris.

This progressive realisation on Sartre’s part – stemming successively from his war-time experience of relative constraint and impotence, the random intoxication of post-war notoriety, and the relentless struggle to be a critical travelling companion of ‘the first third-world’. Sartre was clearly ahead of his time in declaring that the first world (the erstwhile imperial powers) was rich at the expense of the third world (the erstwhile colonies), and he inaugurated a new discourse which legitimised the counter-
violence of national liberation and decolonisation as an authentic response to hegemonic, western European domination.

Here again, it seems clear that Sartre’s analysis is spot-on and his moral intuitions are sound. The depredations perpetrated by the imperialist powers against the peoples they enslaved and the lands they expropriated, particularly during the 19th and 20th centuries, were nothing less than institutionalised violence on a massive scale, justified broadly speaking on the same grounds as slavery in the 17th and 18th centuries, namely those of inherent racial and moral superiority. And although the colonies have in name been emancipated, they remain in thrall to their former imperialist masters through such control mechanisms as the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the ever-present threat of American military might. This is the potent infrastructure of globalisation, which ensures that the third world remains poor enough to underwrite the wealth of the first. Sartre’s unshakeable commitment to freedom meant that he was always on the side of the oppressed and dispossessed.

With hindsight, Sartre’s deep suspicion of American intentions in the post-war period looks extraordinarily prescient, and well justified in light of the annexation of western Europe through the Marshall Plan, and the Manichean demonisation of the USSR as the ‘Empire of Evil’ over a 40-year time frame, inaugurated by the manic McCarthyite witch-hunts of the early 1950s (which Sartre parodied brilliantly in his satirical farce, Nekrassov), running through the manic paranoia of the 1960s and 70s, and culminating over the post-9/11 era in the manic McCarthism of the War on Terror. Sartre knew full well that he was always on the side of the oppressed and dispossessed.

During the Christmas holidays I read a book by José Saramago called Blindness which details what happens when nearly everyone in a city goes blind and everything starts going horribly out of control. This is a frightening story but at the same time it portrays a group of people that even in such catastrophic circumstances exhibit courage and reason as a means to re-creating a safer environment. However, there are examples of people’s selfishness, opportunism, and indifference. 

Jose Saramago’s Blindness is a fictional story about a human catastrophe and personal traumatic experiences that prompted me to include a closer analysis by James Berger on the wider concept of trauma.

The following article is an extract from a review of three books; Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History by Cathy Caruth, Words of Hurt by Kali Tal and Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History by Cathy Caruth, Words of Hurt by Kali Tal and Representing the Holocaust, History, Theory, Trauma by Dominic LaCapra.

THE CONCEPT OF TRAUMA BY JAMES BERGER

‘With the publication of three important new books on the psychoanalytic concept of trauma as it intersects with literature, literary theory, historiography, and contemporary culture, it is worth asking why, at this moment, trauma should attract such attention and become a pivotal subject connecting so many disciplines.'
What are the needs for and values of a theory of trauma in the United States at present, and why in particular should there be such interest in trauma among literary and cultural theorists? First, we can look at a popular culture and mass media obsessed by repetitions of violent disasters: the successive Die Hards, Terminators, and Robocops, as well as Nightmares on Elm Street, disease and epidemic films, and now the return of the “classic” disaster films of twisters and turbulence and the repeated sequences of mini-epiphanies within each film; at “real life” cop shows; and at the news itself, that never exhausted source of pure horror. I am particularly fascinated by the “black box” obsession that follows each airplane crash—the wish (which I share) to witness the last moments, especially the moment that reveals the certainty of death entering the pilot’s consciousness. Why do I want to know this, over and over?

We can look next at the preoccupation with family dysfunctions—child abuse, incest, spousal abuse—in the media, most strikingly on the talk show circuit. There appears to be the sense both that the family is the only hope for curing all social ills and that the family is damaged beyond hope. Along with the interest in family breakdown and violence comes the interest in the enigmatic figure of the survivor, the one who has passed through the catastrophe and can tell us what it is like. The survivor is a kind of “black box,” a source of final knowledge and can tell us what it is like. The survivor is a kind of “black box,” a source of final knowledge that never exhausted source of pure horror. I am particularly fascinated by the “black box” obsession that follows each airplane crash—the wish (which I share) to witness the last moments, especially the moment that reveals the certainty of death entering the pilot’s consciousness. Why do I want to know this, over and over?

For instance, a sense of the dynamics of trauma offers an analysis framework for Echenoz’s novels. Finally, Wilcox (1996) links chaos theory to movies. In the “after the End” context, chaos theory can be used to understand differing rates of change, and varying complexity. Specifically, chaos theory results in a non-linear model of culture change which states that small perturbations to certain parts of the system can result in the disruption of the structure of the entire system, resulting in instability (1999, p. 111).

The usefulness of chaos theory in other contexts than pure science is well supported by Dewad’s work (2001) in linguistics and by Esfandi (2006), who has used it to originate a new theorization of Echenoz’s novels. Finally, Wilcox (1996) links chaos theory to David Lynch’s movies. In the following, I explore some ways of applying chaos theory to cultural anthropology, more precisely to interpreting narratives.

The memory, as the identity, can be chaotic; it includes souvenirs of child abuse, Holocaust survivors, survivors of near-death experiences, and so on. And accompanying the survivor in popular consciousness, we have seen proliferating representations of ghosts, angels, zombies, and aliens—all of them witnesses to some “other side,” some realm of both trauma and revelation.

Finally, most generally and perhaps most obviously, the late twentieth century is a time marked, indeed, by the enigmatic figure of the survivor, the one who has passed through the catastrophe and can tell us what it is like. The survivor is a kind of “black box,” a source of final knowledge and can tell us what it is like. The survivor is a kind of “black box,” a source of final knowledge that never exhausted source of pure horror. I am particularly fascinated by the “black box” obsession that follows each airplane crash—the wish (which I share) to witness the last moments, especially the moment that reveals the certainty of death entering the pilot’s consciousness. Why do I want to know this, over and over?

For the full article by James Berger refer:
http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-19950590/unclaimed-experience-trauma-narrative.html

James Berger is a Senior Lecturer, English and American Studies at Yale University. His book: After the End applies wide-ranging evidence—from science fiction to Holocaust literature, from Thomas Pynchon to talk shows, from American politics to the fictions of Toni Morrison—to reveal how representations of apocalyptic endings are indelibly marked by catastrophic histories.


A unique thriller of ideas. Berger’s lucid, cogent, and erudite demonstrations arguments often startled me and mesmerized me—I couldn’t put the book down until the end, and after the end I walked away with a sensation of having had my mind expanded and edified. I predict that After the End will become a classic text not only in literature but also in theology and cultural studies.

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Order and disorder are well known concepts in various fields, such as mathematics, physics, biology, but also literature, linguistic, and social sciences. For instance, the transition theories—starting with Rustow (1970) up to the most recent work of Careathers (2002) and O’Donnell (2002)—address, in some way, the uncontrollable, chaotic, and hybrid characteristic of a society in transition to democracy. As such, while analyzing the collapse of the organizational system of the Zanis, in Southwest US, Stone calls the anthropologists to have a look at the chaos and complexity theory: “[d]ue to the open and dynamic nature of dissipative structures, anthropological applications of these ideas can be used to understand different and varying amounts of experimentation and instability in a cultural system.

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Since 9/11, the Madrid and London attacks, the revolts of the French suburbs, we talk more and more in terms of order and disorder. Chaos theory could find its utility in the attempt to understand some of these phenomena. It could help in analyzing complex, dynamic, or non-linear categories, including those of identity—which seems to be, in our days, multiple, fluctuant, in crisis, built, negotiated, and especially omnipresent.

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A memory without forgetting, a memory without loss is a dead memory (Pontalis 2000). Angü (2001) sees a similitude between the representation and the memory needs forgetting, as the life of some needs the death of others ("la vie des uns a besoin de la mort des autres"). However, oblivion is an ambiguous category: on the one hand, memory erodes, on the other hand, it comes back; on the one hand, there are the experiences that are meaningful to the daily life (the habits, the habits), on the other, their immemorial aspect.

This dichotomy between remembering and forgetting is admirably described by Caruth (1996) as the dialogue of knowing, seeing and listening. And this is not easy, especially when it implies death. "It is not necessarily good […] to recall the past. It is not wrong to forget, it is not necessarily sad to forget, and we should not, cannot, strive strenuously to remember everything we ever knew", says Douglas (1995, p. 15). This can explain the "memory holes", which makes think of the unspeakable and its consequences when remembering becomes a narrative. In Agamben's words, the unspeakable describes a "whatever singularity", who, having a face or a hand, cannot attest his own absence. Thus, the "whatever being" represents the total loss, the bare life. The unspeakable is not only the impossibility to testify about … in the name of …, but also the intervention, the censorship, or the fear related to it. Finally, it can represent a secret, a hidden souvenir, a state or a sensation that can, in certain contexts, show up, come out, be told. We are not far from Poulet's representation of memory and even closer to the Freudian slip. And there is a link to do with the way that chaos works; perturbations (even minor) can change the way memory and remembering function.

These particular moments can organize or, on the contrary, disorganize the narrative; often dramatic, they are moments without rules, wordless, in an atypical, non-temporal time, a time with no sayings and yet full of meaning. How shall we approach in methodology the witnessing of unspeakable narrative? What is the language of the “whatever singularity”? Because, despite difficult souvenirs, people believe in and feel the need to testify, often on behalf of the absent ones.

For Agamben (2003), the figure of the unspeakable inhabits the state of exception, the nomos, the camp, the “whatever singularity’s” limits. Thus, the unspeakable is not universal, nor particular, but it is singularity, a “whatever singularity”. For Guattari, “there were no aesthetic limits that could not be transgressed, no moral norms that could not be subverted. One must explore and experience anything – including the demonic, the artificial, and the fugitive – that would spur imagination, quicken sensibilities, and deepen feelings” (2001, p. 2-3). This also applies to the field of arts, where the question of representation is central. This approach has in limits, especially “[(]this thing is not death, it is not murder or burned houses, it is not even extermination. It is the will to extermination” (2003, p. 115).

In order to be able to narrate the total experience of bare life, the language will eventually transform; the language of witnessing is to become a language that loses its signified, evolving into a “multiplicity” or “supra-language”. The act of witnessing can then be described as a system of relations between the inside and the outside of the language, between speakable and unspeakable. Zarka (1993) identifies “language cracks” when the narrators mention things they did not seem to hear. There are “enclaves” of apparently coherent discourses; there are flashes and short phrases that are describing atrocious scenes.

Is this a Freudian slip, a psychoanalytical loss? It is possible. During narratives I recorded in 2005 in post-communist Romania, I could observe various moments indicating a loss be it of a chance, of a beloved one, of an object, of humanity. Even the researchers would suffer a loss during their interventions, as they can miss something essential for the story, miss asking a question or hearing an answer, avoid an eye contact at the right moment, so on. I would name these moments Freudian slips of the narratives; given their unconscious aspect, they could make a synonym to the unspeakable.

In both situations, the remembering is possible in particular contents, in presence of certain stimuli that are making the act of recollection unpredictable, chaotic.

Chaos and complexity theory would thus find their pertinent, as they can create a logical framework facilitating to represent and to understand the links between past—present or absent—and future. It can help to comprehend the global story, to realize how in narratology is the unspeakable narrative, that could be quite complex, as the moments of silence, the obliivions, the story losses, the black holes are legitimate and can be explained.

The question of remembering and witnessing would hence be interpreted as comings and goings between the outside and the inside of the language, between the language and the non-language, between the speakable and the unspeakable, between immanence and transcendence. The narrator as well as the researcher need to be ready to occupy the whatever singularity limts; they have to accept seeing and feeling the non-language of bare life. It is experiencing a time and a space of silences and holes, but as long as there is will to understand and to accept these moments of loss, there is a chance to open the way to nomadism and flexibility in the becoming (see Pandolfi 1999).

The text that will house this testimony will be that of a poetics of the unspeakable. Four individuals are needed, otherwise the representation is not complete: the one who is absent, the person who testifies, who the one who receives the testimony, finally, the reader. Chaos theory is helpful for translating these various presences and relations by making it easy to understand what is unclear or apparently senseless.

In our days, the struggle seems to be linking memory and forgetting, repairing the abuses of memory, fighting the manipulation of the memory, putting together fragments of memory (memories), creating lieux of memory. To do this, we shall not be afraid to deconstruct and demystify the memory; probably would learn to forget in order to be able to remember. Chaos and complexity theories can be useful in this attempt, as they can create sense where we could not find any for a long time.


Even Nameless Horrors must be Named

To what extent can an aestheticisation of mass murder be seen as acceptable or valid? Is it question of content or purpose, or rather about who is doing the actual writing? And if one kind of aestheticisation is legitimate, on what basis should another be disallowed?

This is a complex question. Those seeking to answer it can easily find themselves drowning in noncommittal goodwill statements of the “this must be shown” variety, without touching on the complications involved in all literature based on things that really happened. Just as there is no such thing as pure literature, literature that tells the truth and nothing but the truth, so there is no such thing as innocent literature. Everything written about historical events has consequences for the way those events are to be interpreted. To believe anything else would be naive.

Many of my generation, born in the early 1960s or before, will remember the huge impact made by the television series The Holocaust when it was shown...
around 1980. It triggered initiatives to deepen our knowledge of the Holocaust, the results of which we see today, but also unleashed a wave of excessive sentimentalisation. Our receptivity to what is now termed witness literature is dependent on increased social acceptance of this kind of storytelling: but what is socially acceptable is ultimately what has already been allowed to appear in the media in some shape or form. Today we are surrounded by Holocaust kitsch on a scale we can scarcely appreciate. This kitsch permeates our understanding of what happened, at all levels. The Holocaust is something we would rather solemnly commemorate than actively remember; Auschwitz is turning into a place of pilgrimage, a place in which to exercise evil rather than investigate it, while the concrete suffering in that and other places is reduced, with the help of popular culture, to images of boys in pyjamas and little girls with plates.

Perhaps this sentimentalising, trivialising trend can be defended to some extent on pedagogic grounds. We have to find ways to come to grips with evil for it not to become abstract and hence intangible. But the consequence of our collective ritualisation of remembrance is that it inhibits our own individual relationship to, and responsibility for, what actually happened. From what we perceive as a moral duty to give this unprecedented event the space it deserves, we adopt a submissive position that we prefer to see what happened. From this scorched earth there are simply no testimonies at all. So now we have a paradox. While historians are increasingly preoccupied with the rule, the fact that nobody survived, other versions of the Holocaust focus increasingly on the exceptions to that rule. Not only are the survivors’ testimonies about those who did not survive, which would be logical, but on what the survivors have to say about their own survival. But the story of the Holocaust is not the story of a miraculous rescue mission like the one Schindler mounts in Stephen Spielberg’s film. Nor is the Holocaust the story of a pianist who plays so beautifully that even a hardened Nazi sheds a tear. Nor is the Holocaust, to look at it from another side, the story of how a woman becomes a Nazi guard just because she never learned to read. All these stories are exceptional stories, accounts of modern miracles. They are the result of grafting the external narrative structure of the survivors’ stories onto the dramaturgical demand of popular culture that every story should end in salvation and atonement. These stories become insidious, even downright dangerous, the moment they aspire to the external narrative structure of the survivors’ stories onto the dramaturgical demand of popular culture that every story should end in salvation and atonement. These stories become insidious, even downright dangerous, the moment they aspire to the higher purpose of making us understand what took place, and thereby try to seek social acceptance for what is essentially a sophisticated lie.

We live in an age obsessed with healing, and try any means of seeking atonement, scarred out of our wins by the sight of a generation that there might be none. This, I think, is one explanation of why the Holocaust has in recent years come to play an ever larger role as a theme of, and metaphor for, that fictive self-insight which popular culture is so obsessed with trying to articulate and even propagate.

It seems probable that our emotional response to popular culture’s interpretations of the Holocaust will always be marked by the duality I have been trying to highlight. The events described in witness literature, for example, are so unparalleled that we have a moral obligation to hold them up as examples. But sometimes, paradoxically enough, the power of the example can be so great that it creates distance where there should not be any. And this distance can, in turn, prevent us from understanding the heart of the matter, namely what applies to all great catastrophes: that they are not exclusively tied to, or even conditional on, the historical periods in which they occur. Nor can we reduce them to special cases of a general law, whether we call that law racism or fascism or anything else, and then believe that such a definition says everything there is to say, and that all we need to do beyond that is simply to repudiate its pronouncements on moral grounds.

In my eyes, the only meaningful way of relating to the stories of Primo Levi, Imre Kertész’ great novel Fatelessness, Shalamov’s Kolyma Tales or Herta Müller’s novels and short stories from totalitarian Romania is to read them as testimonies of a total collapse of human conduct and responsibility: a collapse of such a nature and on such a scale that it transcends any attempt to explain them exclusively in terms of historical, political or psychological concepts; a collapse that is like a contagion, and like a contagion penetrates our self-knowledge at all levels. That is why those hunting high and low for the “authenticity” in all texts that deal with totalitarianism and subjugation are on such a terribly wrong track. In reality, the only reality that counts, are there no unblemished witnesses, as it is perfectly possible to be a victim yet not wholly blameless. And ultimately there is no language, either, through which pure, unsullied experience could find expression. As Herta Müller has put it on more than one occasion, most recently in her essay collection Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel (Always the Same Snow and Always the Same Uncle), language is often the only thing to remain uninfected by this contamination.

Anyone who wants to engage critically with this literature has to realise that outlawing metaphor is not enough to bring out ‘the truth’ about anything at all. Literature that is meaningful does not arise out of some kind of refining process. It does not restore, or create safe havens. Literature that is meaningful tears down boundaries and knocks our self-knowledge off course. This is where the moral force of literature and its aesthetic justification lie. ‘I don’t want to view the world reasonably, so that it can look back at me,’ writes Imre Kertész in his Gályanapóló (Galley Boat Log). ‘I don’t want atonement. I want existence, opposition...’

I believe, with Kertész, that it is time to lift the aesthetic state of emergency that has surrounded witness literature for so long. The important thing is not who does the writing, not even what their motives are. The important thing is the literary efficiency of the texts. How far do they succeed in giving people back the contours of their own existence, or as Kertész puts it: giving the individual his life, his fate? Literature can either be steered by a genuine will to open up new access points to, and broaden our view of, the reality that is portrayed. Or it does its best to shut away reality by making it a museum object, rendering the past invisible (and thus intangible), or by making the case for some form of atonement that is in fact little more than a veiled desire to embellish, and by embellishing simply to set amnesia to work by other ways. We choose for ourselves the sort of literature we want.
How to Live - A Life of Montaigne
In One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer
-by Sarah Bakewell

“WINNER OF THE 2010 NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD FOR BIOGRAPHY”

In this new book, Sarah Bakewell takes the already-readable Montaigne and makes him that much easier to read. The main themes of his writing are distilled and presented within the historical and biographical context that makes it all come alive.

How to get along with people, how to deal with violence, how to adjust to losing someone you love—such questions arise in most people’s lives. They are all versions of a bigger question: How do you live? Montaigne discussed these questions in essay form as if he were chatting to his readers: just two friends, whiling away an afternoon in conversation.

There seems no end to the appeal of the essayist’s basic idea: that you can write spontaneously and ramblingly about yourself and your interests, and that the world will love you for it. Modern day Bloggers might be surprised to learn that they are keeping alive a tradition created more than four centuries ago. Montaigne wrote about things as they are, not things as they should be—and this included himself.

I found Bakewell’s book to be one of the best I have read in years - the framing of Montaigne for the modern world is incredibly well done and the thoughts of the Master Essayist are human and stuff that will stay with you.

I’m in love with this coffee shop, whenever I’m there I feel so alive: maybe it’s the music or the atmosphere, or simply the best coffee and food I’ve ever tasted.

The mismatched furniture and crockery and shelves of books provide an informal chatty vibe and with inside and outside seating you can also watch the world go by.

The cafe opens at 6.30am Monday to Friday (Sat 9am—2pm).

* Friendly baristas? check.
Amazing coffee and food? check.
Great location? check.