Why existentialism still matters

Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus have something to say about living authentically.

by Robert Westbrook in the December 21, 2016 issue

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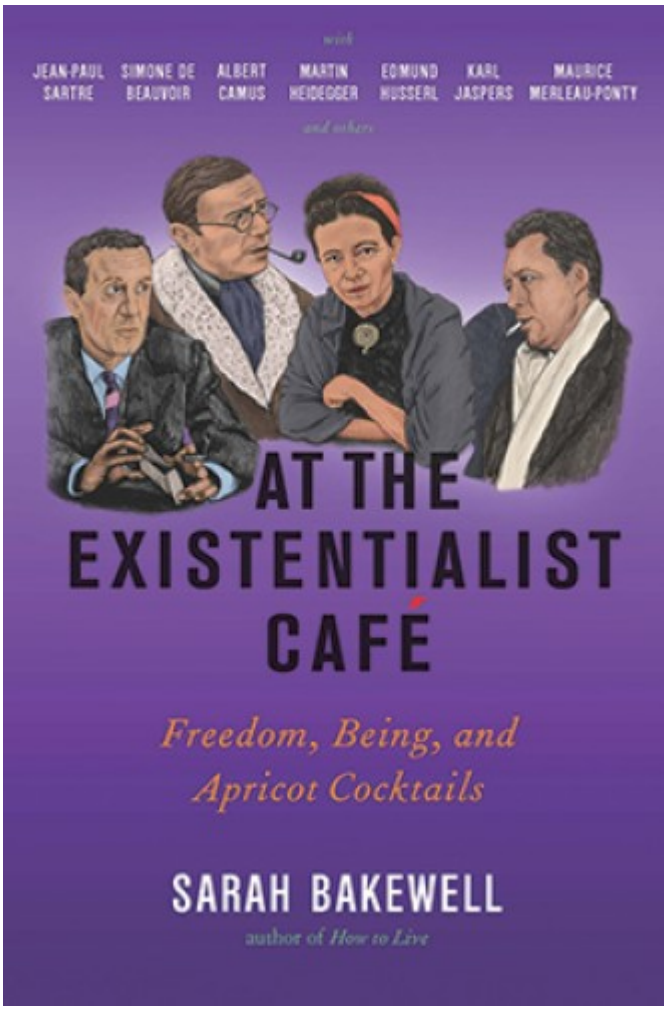

At the Existentialist Café

Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails

By Sarah Bakewell
Other Press

Existentialism, which was all the rage in Europe and America in the late ’40s, ’50s, and early ’60s, has lost much discernible meaning. One rarely even hears the term these days. In our age of terror, one is most likely to encounter *existential* used in claims of “existential threats” to national security that call for the relaxation of moral scruples against torture, assassination, and the slaughter of civilians. Jean-Paul Sartre would not be amused.

In the United States, no one threw the term *existential* around in careless fashion more than Norman Mailer, the one American author who explicitly assumed the mantle of “existentialist” and held a significant role in ushering existentialism into the twilight. When I was in college at Yale in the early ’70s, my friend Mark Singer (now a longtime staff writer at the *New Yorker*) was working on a senior thesis on Hemingway and Mailer as journalists. Mailer came to visit the campus, and Mark eagerly attended a dinner in his honor, hosted at Calhoun College by the critic and literary biographer R. W. B. Lewis.

Here is Mark’s account of the event:

> The dinner was at Lewis’s house in Calhoun. I’d been present earlier in the afternoon as Mailer sat in the living room and enraged the undergraduate women present by lobbing grenades straight out of *The Prisoner of Sex*. As I was leaving, Lewis invited me to come back earlier than that evening’s dinner guests, so I could speak with Mailer one-on-one. During the interval, I went to my room in the Berkeley North Court and smoked a joint the size of a baseball bat. Then, à la Mailer himself, I floated back to Lewis’s to speak with the great man about his and Hemingway’s journalism. (If I were ever subjected to a recording of that conversation, I’d have to be restrained from defenestrating myself.)
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> The other guests arrived, I was drinking Scotch, and sitting in on a conversation Mailer was having with I don’t recall who. I do recall that I found it completely compelling, but, then, I really had to pee. I leaned over to Mailer and said something like, “What do you do when you’re in a conversation as thrilling as your overwhelming urge to take a leak?” He

> looked at me squarely and said, “That’s existential.”
>
> I headed to the john . . . WTF did he mean? I have no idea, but I was too in awe to consider that Mailer might not have had one either. In retrospect I recognize that his references to existentialism butchered Sartre so cavalierly he should have been arrested for negligent homicide, but I lacked the tools (i.e., powers of discrimination) to explore the matter more deeply.

Mailer, on an earlier occasion, reportedly told British writer Colin Wilson that to him existentialism meant “Oh, kinda playing things by ear.”

Sarah Bakewell observes Mailer’s shaky grip on existentialist philosophy in passing in her exceptionally fine book on the subject. She has all the tools necessary to explore the matter deeply and lucidly, and she makes the case to even the most skeptical readers for giving existentialism, properly understood, another look.

There was a time when *existential* meant something.

Bakewell is a marvel. No one better writes what some might call “popular intellectual history” (although I would prefer to call it good intellectual history). Her 2010 book *How to Live*, an impressive and widely read tour of the life, thought, and influence of the late 16th-century French moralist Michel de Montaigne, made her exceptional talent evident. *At the Existentialist Café* features a much larger cast of characters, and she skillfully weaves together the intellectual biographies of a crowd of transatlantic thinkers. Her “giants” are (rightfully so) Martin Heidegger and Sartre, to whom she devotes the closest attention. But they share the stage with chief supporting actors Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Among others in more minor roles are Hannah Arendt, Raymond Aron, Frantz Fanon, Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers, Emmanuel Levinas, Iris Murdoch, Jan Patocˇka, and Richard Wright.

Bakewell’s approach to these figures is both biographical and philosophical: “I think philosophy becomes more interesting when it is cast into the form of a life.” She is right about this, but the temptation when writing for a wide audience of non-philosophers is to sacrifice the philosophical (with its careful attention to difficult texts) to the biographical and the contextual. Bakewell makes no such sacrifices, and in this sense her book well outstrips most other attempts by intellectual historians to reach general readers.

She adeptly portrays the personal lives of her protagonists, not least the unconventional partnership of Sartre and Beauvoir and the often bitter shattering of friendships such as that of Sartre and Camus. And she connects the thinking of her philosophers to their significant shaping contexts, including the trauma of World War I, the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust, the French defeat at the hands of the Germans in World War II, the subsequent devastation of Germany by Allied armies, the political battles over communism in the ’50s and ’60s, and the dismantling of French colonialism.

But Bakewell also shines in describing and analyzing very difficult ideas—sometimes expressed in willfully difficult fashion by the likes of Heidegger, Levinas, and others—with remarkable clarity and force. She has an enviable talent for calling up analogies, examples, and comparisons that illuminate the opaque corners of modern philosophy.

Existentialism grew out of phenomenology, and Bakewell begins her account with the meeting in December 1932 in a Paris café of three young French friends who had just launched academic careers: Aron, Sartre, and Beauvoir. Aron, just returned from Germany, was excitedly bringing news to the others of a radical new approach to philosophy pioneered by Freiburg professor Edmund Husserl, who termed it *phenomenology*. Husserl’s battle cry was “To the things themselves!” By this he meant (in one of Bakewell’s many pithy succinct summaries), “Don’t waste time on the interpretations that accrue upon things, and especially don’t waste time wondering whether the things are real. Just look at *this* that’s presenting itself to you, whatever *this* may be, and describe it as precisely as possible.” In sum, Aron told them, you can make philosophy out of something as ordinary as the apricot cocktail on our table.

Sartre was “knocked out,” and he soon departed for Germany to find out about phenomenology for himself. There, as Bakewell says in one of her particularly lovely passages, he began to craft

> a philosophy of expectation, tiredness, apprehensiveness, excitement, a walk up a hill, the passion for a desired lover, the revulsion from an unwanted one, Parisian gardens, the cold autumn sea at Le Havre, the feeling of sitting on overstuffed upholstery, the way a woman’s breasts pool as she lies on her back, the thrill of a boxing match, a film, a jazz

> song, a glimpse of two strangers meeting under a street lamp. He made philosophy out of vertigo, voyeurism, shame, sadism, revolution, music, and sex. Lots of sex.

Phenomenologists proved able to “bracket” (*epoché*) interpretation for only so long before pursuing various possible meanings of their exacting descriptions of human being-in-the-world. Husserl gave his thought an inward, idealist cast by treating phenomena as confined to a mental realm. Others pushed phenomenology aggressively outward. Husserl’s renegade student Martin Heidegger took an ontological turn, treating phenomenology as a means to address the question of enfolding Being itself. Sartre turned phenomenology in an ethical direction, building on Husserl’s concept of “intentionality”—the idea that thinking is always *of* or *about* something—to move toward a radical understanding of human freedom as self-creation in “an indifferent, hostile, resistant world.” If Husserl interpreted intentionality as “an operation that pulled everything back into the mind after all,” for Sartre it meant, as he said, “to wrest oneself from moist, gastric intimacy and fly out over there, beyond oneself, to what is not oneself.”

Authentic action grows out of a "situated freedom."

This ethically inflected phenomenology informed Sartre’s early fiction (*Nausea*) as well as his philosophical masterwork *Being and Nothingness*. It led eventually to the stage of the Club Maintenant in Paris on the evening of October 28, 1945, where for an overflow crowd he laid out for the first time the essentials of what he had come to call *existentialism*. Like Husserl, he had a slogan for his philosophy: “Existence precedes essence.” By this he meant that human beings were peculiar animals, blessed and cursed with the freedom to make of themselves what they will, undetermined by any prior essential selfhood granted them by God or nature. We make ourselves up as we go along. To deny this freedom for self-creation is to act inauthentically and in “bad faith.”

Bakewell unpacks Sartre’s slogan in characteristically helpful fashion:

> As a human I am whatever I choose to make of myself at every moment. I am *free*—and therefore I’m *responsible* for everything I do, a dizzying fact which causes an *anxiety* inseparable from human existence itself. On the other hand, I am only free within *situations*, which can include factors in my own biology and psychology, as well as physical, historical and social

> variables of the world into which I have been thrown. Despite the limitations, I always want more: I am passionately involved in personal *projects* of all kinds. Human existence is thus *ambiguous*: at once boxed in by borders and yet transcendent and exhilarating. An existentialist who is also *phenomenological* provides no easy rules for dealing with this condition, but instead concentrates on *describing* lived experience as it presents itself. By describing experience well, he or she hopes to understand this existence and awaken us to ways of living more *authentic* lives.

What interests Bakewell most about existentialism is the ambiguity she identifies here, the tension implied by its notion of “situated freedom” between the constraints imposed by the contingencies of our “thrownness” (Heidegger) in the world and our freedom to act in the midst of such contingencies in light of the (often frightening) responsibility we bear for our actions.

Though all those in Sartre’s circle in the late 1940s shared this conception of “situated freedom,” they held the terms of this formulation in different balance. Sartre, Bakewell demonstrates, minimized the limits imposed by situations—”Everything in him longed to be free of bonds, of impediments and limitations, and viscous clinging things.” She illustrates Sartre’s desire by way of his debate with Jean Genet over the genetic basis for homosexuality. Sartre would not concede any such innate predisposition. On the other hand, Bakewell finds Camus inclined to undue fatalism (a reading from which I would demur).

Her sympathies lie most with those such as Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty who kept freedom and contingency in balance, particularly the former, who argued in her underappreciated *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) that “we have to do two near-impossible things at once: understand ourselves as limited by circumstances, and yet continue to pursue our projects as though we are truly in control.” This perspective also informed Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), arguably the finest masterwork of existentialism.

"Who cares about freedom, bad faith, and authenticity today?"

Bakewell says Merleau-Ponty would be “an intellectual hero” of her story, as would Beauvoir. She describes the former as “the happy philosopher of things as they are.” This is a curious choice for a book devoted to a philosophy of incessant self-creation

and re-creation. It seems to me an unsettling characterization of the author of *Humanism and Terror* (1947), an unabashed apology for Stalin that Bakewell slides over all too quickly. Beauvoir, Bakewell's other hero, is a more apt choice. Her four-volume autobiography provides Bakewell with a model of the "inhabited philosophy" that she attempts to write, and she draws heavily upon it for evidence and inspiration.

Bakewell is more circumspect in her estimate of her "giants." She owns up to her attraction to Heidegger's thinking, but in the end she finds him repellent. Not only, of course, for his unapologetic Nazism and the fascist dog whistles in *Being and Time*, but also for the mystagogy of his late work, with its insistence on a retreat to a passive waiting for the unveiling of Being and a thoroughgoing indictment of modern technology—the siren call of which she admits to hearing. But, she concludes, "there is something of the grave in this vegetative world." Heidegger's philosophy can be "exhilarating, but in the end it is a philosophy in which I cannot find a place to live."

Her verdict on Sartre is mixed, but on the whole, favorable. "Of course, he was monstrous," she acknowledges. "He was self-indulgent, demanding, bad-tempered. He was a sex addict who didn't even enjoy sex, a man who would walk away from friendships saying he felt no regret. . . . He defended a range of odious regimes, and made a cult of violence." But she says, unlike Heidegger, Sartre was "full of character. He bursts out on all sides with energy, peculiarity, generosity, and communicativeness. . . . He was good—or at least he *wanted* to do good. He was driven to it." Here one might well disagree, but to her credit Bakewell has provided every bit of evidence one would need in order to do so.

"Situated freedom," even of the carefully calibrated sort defended by Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, was in the eyes of existentialism's critics still too unhinged a conception of human being-in-the-world. Its early adversaries, orthodox Marxists and conservative Catholics, contended not merely for contingency but for irresistible determination, whether material or divine. Later opponents (including structuralists like Claude Lévi-Strauss, proponents of the *nouveau roman* like Alain Robbe-Grillet, and poststructuralists like Jean Baudrillard) thought the existentialists gave too much credence to humans as agents in the world. They dismissed existentialism as an unfortunate humanist hangover. They "turned philosophy back into an abstract landscape," Bakewell complains, "stripped of the active, impassioned beings who occupied it in the existential era."

Intellectual history at its best sends readers back to the original sources, and Bakewell excels at this. *How to Live* sent its readers in search of Montaigne's essays. *At the Existentialist Café* should move readers to pull yellowing paperbacks of *Nausea*, *The Stranger*, and *The Second Sex* off of used bookstore shelves. Some might even wade into *Being and Time* and *Being and Nothingness*. Their debt to Bakewell will thereby deepen, for all these books and others she introduces remain, in every respect, stirring.

"Who cares about freedom, bad faith, and authenticity today?" the snarky Baudrillard asked contemptuously in 2001 in an obituary for existentialism. Many still do, thank God.

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