Preface

Existentialism is commonly associated with Left-Bank Parisian

cafes and the ‘family’ of philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone

de Beauvoir who gathered there in the years immediately following

the liberation of Paris at the end of World War II. One imagines offbeat,

avant-garde intellectuals, attached to their cigarettes, listening

to jazz as they hotly debate the implications of their new-found

political and artistic liberty. The mood is one of enthusiasm,

creativity, anguished self-analysis, and freedom – always freedom.

Though this reflects the image projected by the media of the day

and doubtless captures the spirit of the time, it glosses over the

philosophical significance of existentialist thought, packaging it as a

cultural phenomenon of a certain historical period. That is perhaps

the price paid by a manner of thinking so bent on doing philosophy

concretely rather than in some abstract and timeless manner. The

existentialists’ urge for contemporary relevance fired their social

and political commitment. But it also linked them with the

problems of their day and invited subsequent generations to view

them as having the currency of yesterday’s news.

Such is the misreading of existentialist thought that I hope to

correct in this short volume. If it bears the marks of its post-war

appearance, existentialism as a manner of doing philosophy and a

way of addressing the issues that matter in people’s lives is at least as old as philosophy itself. It is as current as the human condition

which it examines. To ensure at the outset that this point is not lost,

I begin my initial chapter with a discussion of philosophy, not as a

doctrine or a system of thought but as a way of life. The title of

Chapter 1 comes from Classical scholar Pierre Hadot’s study of the

return to the Stoics as an example of how ‘Ancient’ philosophy can

offer meaning to people’s lives even in our day. Though his

preference is for the Greeks and Romans, Hadot finds a similar

concern in the writings of Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich

Nietzsche, the so-called 19th-century ‘fathers’ of the existentialist

movement, and among their 20th-century progeny.

It is commonly acknowledged that existentialism is a philosophy

about the concrete individual. This is both its glory and its shame.

In an age of mass communication and mass destruction, it is to its

credit that existentialism defends the intrinsic value of what its

main proponent Sartre calls the ‘free organic individual’, that is, the

flesh-and-blood agent. Because of the almost irresistible pull

toward conformity in modern society, what we shall call ‘existential

individuality’ is an achievement, and not a permanent one at that.

We are born biological beings but we must become existential

individuals by accepting responsibility for our actions. This is an

application of Nietzsche’s advice to ‘become what you are’. Many

people never do acknowledge such responsibility but rather flee

their existential individuality into the comfort of the faceless crowd.

As an object lesson in becoming an individual, in the following

chapter, I trace what Kierkegaard calls ‘spheres’ of existence or

‘stages on life’s way’ and conclude with some observations about

how Nietzsche would view this project of becoming an existential

individual.

Shortly after the end of the war, Sartre delivered a public lecture

entitled ‘Is Existentialism a Humanism?’ that rocked the

intellectual life of Paris and served as a quasi-manifesto for the

movement. From then on, existentialism was associated with a

certain kind of humanistic philosophy that gives human beings and human values pride of place, and with critiques of alternative

versions of humanism accepted at that time. In Chapter 3, I discuss

the implications of that problematic lecture, the only one Sartre

ever regretted publishing, as well as his contemporary Martin

Heidegger’s ‘response’ in his famous *Letter on Humanism*.

While the supreme value of existentialist thought is commonly

acknowledged to be freedom, its primary virtue is authenticity.

Chapter 4 is devoted to this topic as well as to the nature and forms

of self-deception, or bad faith, that function as its contrary. I relate

authenticity to existential individuality and consider the possibility

of an ethics of authenticity based on existential responsibility.

In order to counter the criticism, widespread immediately after the

war, that existentialism is simply another form of bourgeois

individualism, bereft of collective consciousness and indifferent to

the need to address the social issues of the day, I devote Chapter 5 to

the issue of a ‘chastened individualism’, as the existentialists try to

conceive of social solidarity in a manner that will enhance rather

than compromise individual freedom and responsibility, which

remain non-negotiable.

In the last chapter, I draw on the foregoing as well as on other

aspects of existentialist thought to consider the continued relevance

of existentialist philosophy in our day. It is necessary to separate the

philosophical significance of the movement, its powerful insights,

and its attention to the concrete, from the arresting but now dated

trappings of its Left-Bank adolescence. From many likely

candidates, I choose four topics of current interest to which the

existentialists have something of philosophical import to say.

Two features of this brief volume may perhaps strike the reader as

limitations even in a short introduction: the number of commonly

recognized ‘existentialist’ names that are absent and, at the other

extreme, the possibly excessive presence of Jean-Paul Sartre

throughout the work. Regarding the first, though I could have mentioned, for example, Dostoevsky or Kafka, Giacometti or

Picasso, Ionesco or Beckett, all powerful exemplars of existentialist

themes in the arts, my concern is to treat existentialism as a

philosophical movement with artistic implications rather than as

( just) a literary movement with philosophical pretensions – which

is a common though misguided conception. The reason for not

discussing Buber or Berdaiev, Ortega y Gasset or Unamuno, and

many other philosophers deserving of mention here, is that this is a

‘very’ short introduction, after all. Those interested in pursuing the

topics discussed here will find suggestions of useful sources at the

end of the book.

As for the prominence of Sartre, he and de Beauvoir are the only

philosophers in this group who admitted to being existentialists. To

the extent that it is a 20th-century movement, existentialism

certainly centred on his work. And no one better exemplifies the

union of and tension between philosophy and literature, the

conceptual and the imaginary, the critical and the committed,

philosophy as reflection and philosophy as way of life, that defines

the existentialist mode of philosophizing than does Jean-Paul

Sartre.