Chapter 6
Existentialism in the 21st century

> Remaining open to the adventures of experience.
>
> Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Although 'existentialism' remains a frequently mentioned term and Sartre arguably the most widely recognized philosopher of the 20th century, one often hears the claim that the movement is over; that it has been supplanted by two successive waves of French thought, structuralism in the 1960s and poststructuralism in the 1970s and 1980s, after which the momentum dissipated as the cohort of philosophical personages passed away. Admittedly, as a phenomenon of popular Western culture, existentialism reached its high point in the years immediately following the end of the Second World War. This was the era of 'Apache' (ruffian) dancing, of jazz in smoke-filled Left-Bank clubs, of theatre of the absurd, and of freedom in almost every sense of the word. In its French expression, it was a child of the liberation. The intensity of that moment could scarcely have been maintained. And yet its spirit remained in the depths of Western society, to surface in various nonconformist movements of the following decades and perhaps flaming out in the events of May 1968.

Graffiti on Parisian walls during the student rebellion of 1968 proclaimed 'All power to the imagination' (*L'imagination au pouvoir*). This captures the spontaneity, the utopian hope, and,

possibly, the ultimate futility of that student uprising, which has sometimes been described as the 'Sartrean' revolution. The remark epitomized the existentialist thesis that as beings in-situation we are creatures of the possible, of what Sartre called transcendence, or temporally speaking, the future. I have argued that for him 'transcendence' denotes primarily the activity of our imaging consciousness by which we reach beyond what we actually perceive to what could or might be perceived. No one has ever seen a unicorn but we have images of what one might see if such a creature existed in the physical world. As Sartre wrote in his study of novelist and playwright Jean Genet: 'The same insufficiency enables man to form images and prevents him from creating being.' Consciousness as the lack or insufficiency of being (as what he calls 'nothingness' in his title *Being and Nothingness*) depends on being the way our image of the unicorn depends on perceived horses, horns, and the like that consciousness cannot create but which it is free to fashion as it pleases. Our creative imagination is the expression of that freedom which defines us as human.

But Sartrean consciousness is committed; it is not simply free-floating reverie. And as the freedom that it pursues becomes increasingly concrete, that commitment grows more and more political, as does the 'imaginary' that expresses it. His ideal of the 'city of ends', where all relations are egalitarian (eye-level) and non-objectifying, constitutes the model to guide our social interchange. The relation between artist and public that Sartre characterizes as one of gift-appeal in which individuals communicate while respecting one another's freedom is now presented as the pattern for authentic social interaction in general. Not that Sartre is slipping into aestheticism (the substitution of the beautiful for the good, of art for morality). In fact, he writes of authentic love and friendship in similar terms in his posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics* – a view that will confound weekend existentialists who are accustomed to the analysis of (inauthentic) love portrayed in terms of sadism/masochism in *Being and Nothingness*.

As a cultural phenomenon, then, existentialism may have had its day. Yet even in a cultural sense, it has left its traces in the various subcultures that have succeeded it and in the vocabulary of anguish, bad faith, commitment, authenticity, and the like that continues to punctuate our discourse. Still, in this respect, it can be considered a period piece.

But as a philosophical movement, to the extent that it ever was one, existentialism in its various avatars has played a major role in Continental philosophy for over 50 years and has now entered the perennial philosophical conversation in which it voices the abiding moral concerns of the human condition. In other words, it continues to defend individual freedom, responsibility, and authenticity in the midst of various forms of determinism, conformism, self-deception, technologism, and the like so prevalent in our day. And it often does so in an imaginative mode that employs art and example to bring home in concrete fashion abstract principles that otherwise risk being dismissed as scholastic irrelevancies or admired from a distance as interesting intellectual curiosities. This is the kind of concrete philosophy that caused Sartre to 'blanche with emotion', in de Beauvoir's words, as their erstwhile friend Raymond Aron (1905–83) raised for them the possibility of giving a phenomenological description of the cocktail glass in front of them at a Parisian cafe in the early 1930s.

By way of example, let me discuss four areas of current philosophical debate, from several other likely candidates, to which the existentialists have already made or are poised to make significant contributions. While merely suggestive and scarcely full-blown elaborations, my reference to the following topics indicates the continued relevance of the authors presented in this volume to our contemporaries who seek to guide their lives in a truly human manner. What may be called the existentialist 'tradition' presents philosophy as a way of life and not a mere parlour game. In what follows we shall see how it promotes a return to experience from the 'linguistic turn' of Anglo-American

philosophy without discounting the positive insights of the latter, a defence of human action against the dominance of abstract structural analyses while respecting the role of structures in our social relations, an elaboration of the richness of interpretation as fundamental to human existence as a complement to causal explanations in science and ordinary life, and a philosophy of responsibility that resonates with our concrete moral experience.

Experience and language

The 'linguistic turn' in Anglo-American philosophy away from experience, ideas, and systems of thought to the analysis of concepts and ordinary language is often seen as the move that separated so-called 'analytic' philosophers from their 'Continental' colleagues. In fact, existential philosophy took its own linguistic turn, inspired, on its French side, more by the posthumous publications of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) than by Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) or Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). On its German side, this shift towards language was even more pronounced.

Consider the later Heidegger, for example. Though innocent of Saussurian linguistics, he spoke of language as the house of Being and accordingly employed 'philological' arguments to crack open our ordinary usages to reveal the Being that lay concealed therein. This was his practice even in his earlier, 'existentialist' writings. Consider his analysis of the word 'existence' (in German, *Exsistenz*) into the Latin 'ex' meaning 'out' as in 'exit' (goes out) and the verb 'sistere' (to stand), such that 'to exist' can be read as 'to stand out' from the crowd, from the average everyday, even (in Sartre's interpretation) from our very selves. Recall Sartre's claim that we are 'more' than ourselves, referring to our consciousness always moving beyond the present and actual to the future and possible. We have seen that when viewed temporally, *Exsistenz* denotes the future as not yet and as possibility. On this analysis, the term brings to our attention the temporal horizon on which traditionally

timeless Being could now be understood. Some of Heidegger's 'parsings' of Classical Greek expressions often seemed forced and did not correspond with the common readings of Classical philologists. But they made perfectly good sense in the context of his attempted recovery of an original awareness of Being that, on his thesis, had been covered over and forgotten by the Western metaphysical tradition. The point in mentioning this approach is to emphasize that Heidegger assigned an importance to language which surpassed that of the philosophers of language in the English-speaking world. Nonetheless, he was not about to confuse the house with its inhabitant, however closely they might be related. Language may be the house of Being and we may be its guardians, but we are not its prisoners.

With Merleau-Ponty, this was also the case, especially in his early phenomenological approach to language. He sees language as expression and as one form of gesture among others, and he assigns to our lived bodies an intentionality that Husserl had reserved for consciousness. The concept of experience is thickened to entail the perspectives of our bodily existence. He insists that language ultimately is itself a form of existence. But with his discovery of the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure in the late 1940s, his understanding of language changes.

Before examining that change, let us pause to consider briefly the nature of a structuralist understanding of language and why it seems so contrary to an existentialist approach. At issue is the role of the free, responsible individual – the hallmark of existentialist thought. In brief, structuralism accords it little, if any, importance. As the name suggests, linguistic 'structuralism' studies the form or structure rather than the content of language. Like an X-ray technician before a body, the structuralist seeks to reveal the underlying organization of language rather than its 'flesh and blood' concrete employment. It considers language to be a systematic arrangement of signs that both make possible and limit communication, much like the skeleton both makes possible and

limits how we can move. But unlike the skeleton in the X-ray, linguistic signs function in a 'differential' manner, that is, their 'meaning' depends on their difference from other signs within the same system or language (*langue*). In a real sense, one doesn't learn a word but a language. Without implicit reference to a natural language such as English or Swahili, the 'word' isn't even a word but a mere sound.

Linguistic signs, for the structuralist, do not 'name' objects as people commonly believe that words do, but rather differentiate among the members of a set of signs. The upshot is that meaning, for a structuralist, is a purely linguistic affair and not a relation between language and the world, as phenomenologists and the general public seem to think. This enables one to focus on the structures and codes of communication in a scientific way rather than get mired in the everyday ambiguities of individual conscious acts of speaking. But this drive towards the abstract and scientific leaves the existential, meaning-giving individual behind. In fact, structuralists discount the role of consciousness that forms the centre of existentialist philosophy and phenomenological method.

Under the influence of structuralist linguistics, Merleau-Ponty modifies his earlier consciousness-based understanding of language as expression in favour of a more formalist and differential approach employed by the structuralists. Language, he now claims, 'is the system of differentiations through which the individual articulates his relation to the world'. In other words, it is no longer the expression of meanings grasped intuitively by eidetic reduction, as Husserl maintained. Rather, it is a purely linguistic phenomenon, based on the comparative difference of signs among themselves in a system or 'language'.

But Merleau-Ponty remains sufficiently committed to the existentialist values of individual freedom and responsibility to resist total capitulation to the structuralist contention that the language 'speaks' us rather than the converse. What saves these

values amidst structural forces is his distinction between being *determined* by socioeconomic factors (which he denies) and being *motivated* by the same (which he is willing to admit). His point is similar to that of so-called 'action theorists' in Anglo-American philosophy, who distinguish behaviour, which is caused and not free, from action for which reasons are given and where talk of freedom and responsibility is appropriate. Like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty is increasingly sensitive to the sociohistorical dimension of the meanings by which we interpret and guide our lives, whereas the structuralist approach tends to neglect the existential and historical in favour of ahistorical structures. He refers to this feature as the 'historicity of knowledge'. Sartre would later agree that we must learn to structure and categorize phenomena less rigidly. Merleau-Ponty is already reading phenomenological 'meanings' as historically contextualized. If not a capitulation to the relativism that Husserl eschewed, this view does suggest a certain nod towards pragmatism and the historical that maintains structure and practice, language and speech act in creative tension.

What sustains this tension is what Merleau-Ponty calls 'institution':

> What we understand by the concept of institution are those events in experience which endow it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will acquire meaning, will form an intelligible series or a history – or again those events which sediment in me a meaning, not just as survivals and residues, but as the invitation to a sequel, the necessity of a future.

In other words, an institution is a set of events that 'structure' my experience but which experience, in turn, modifies and refashions. Rather than a closed set of all possible combinations such as Merleau-Ponty takes Saussure's 'language' or the kinship structures of Claude Lévi-Strauss' anthropology to be, institutions as structures are tables of 'diverse, complex probabilities, always bound to local circumstances' and thus open to 'the adventures of

experience'. This is an existentialist adaptation of and contribution to structuralist accounts.

By his own admission, Sartre did not formulate a philosophy of language, but he insisted that the elements of one could be found throughout his works. Language, for him, was a phenomenon of expression that extended beyond words to nonverbal symbols and gestures. Like Merleau-Ponty, Sartre argues that the problem of language is exactly parallel to the problem of bodies: I cannot hear myself speak nor see myself smile.

Ontologically, language belongs to the category of 'being-for-others' in *Being and Nothingness* and to the domain of the 'practico-inert' in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. But in both cases, Sartre reads the move from language in general to natural languages such as French and German and then to dialects and slang, terminating in the individual speech act as a movement from the abstract to the increasingly concrete. The speech act of the situated individual would be the most concrete linguistic phenomenon. Language, on this account, is a basic technique for appropriating the world rather than the means of constituting it, as poststructuralists would insist. This exhibits Sartre's remark that 'freedom is the only possible foundation of the laws of language', a claim that structuralists would categorically deny. In other words, our freedom and responsibility extend to our choice of words and hence to the very language system (for example, the racist and sexist epithets) that we sustain by these choices. This is a typically existentialist understanding of language in its sensitivity to the implicit moral significance of our concrete acts of expression and communication. Yet it significantly limits the sense-making power of language as well as the claims of what has been called 'linguistic idealism', namely the denial that there is a reality external to and independent of language on which our use of words is supposed to be based.

But this abstract-concrete relation is historicized in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1958). Now *praxis* (human activity

in its sociohistorical context) has replaced being-for-itself or consciousness, and the *practico-inert* (the sedimented prior praxes that both limit and facilitate present praxes the way natural language limits and facilitates speech acts) has assumed the functions of being-in-itself or the nonconscious from *Being and Nothingness*. Unlike being-in-itself, the practico-inert is the site of counter-finality, the unintended consequences of our practical decisions. The practice of deforestation to increase arable land, for example, can produce the opposite effect by causing floods. Sartre cites this as a function of the *practico*-inert; that is, as an example of our prior praxes coming back to undermine our present projects. As before, the relation between language and the specific acts of speaking is one of abstract versus concrete. But the objective possibilities and the counter-finalities of language as practico-inert significantly refine the rather vague contrast of abstract/concrete in Sartre's earlier position. Great weight is now assigned to the power of language insofar as it exercises what structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser called a kind of 'structural causality' on our speech acts. With his concept of the practico-inert, Sartre, in fact, is recognizing the validity of Saussurian linguistics as Merleau-Ponty interpreted it, while continuing to insist on the existentialist primacy of individual praxis in his understanding of linguistic phenomena.

The upshot of this brief survey of existentialist approaches to language is to indicate the degree to which it is lived experience (in German, *Erlebnis*), or what Sartre calls *le vécu*, rather than language as such that constitutes the groundwork for their discussions. Language is important, but chiefly insofar as it expresses or fashions experience in a mutual but often strained relationship.

The threat of being confined in what Fredric Jameson called the 'prison-house of language' is scarcely a problem for the existentialists as it has been for many linguistic idealists both on the Continent and in the English-speaking world. Thanks to the Husserlian theory of intentionality, consciousness was always

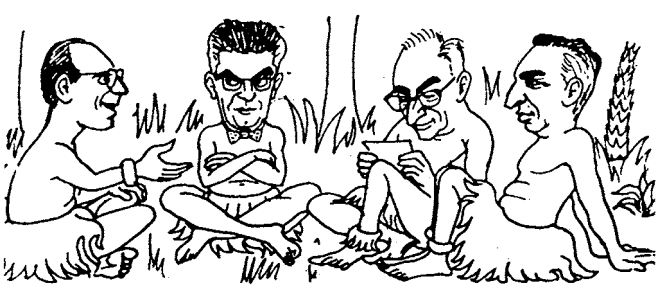
already 'in the world'. And even when their attention broadened from consciousness to lived experience, it was the experience of language and the language of experience rather than language as such that interested the existentialists. Though their early understanding of language was arguably instrumentalist, as exemplified by Sartre's unfortunate distinction in *What is Literature?* between poetry and prose in terms of their respective capacity for commitment, the writings of Merleau-Ponty were already moving beyond that somewhat oversimplified view towards a more structuralist conception of language at the time of his death. Sartre too would refine his earlier thesis to accommodate linguistic and other structures under the concept of the practico-inert in the *Critique*.

Structuralism and poststructuralism

I mentioned that the existentialist 'movement' was eclipsed by two successive schools of thought, namely structuralism and poststructuralism in that order, and their presence continues to be felt in our day. Whether they agreed to the identification or not, the leading members of the structuralist school of thought were popularly taken to be anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, Marxist theorist Louis Althusser, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, literary critic and semiologist Roland Barthes, and, of course, structuralist linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, whose work in linguistics provided the theoretical basis for the movement as we saw in the previous section. Again, as the name suggests, structuralism is a somewhat Platonic approach to social phenomena that searches for the impersonal and necessary structures that unconsciously guide and limit our reasoning processes and practices. From that point of view, the reasoning processes of 'primitive' people are as logical as those of modern individuals. The method distinguishes the non-temporal considerations of a cultural practice such as the rules of language formation or the kinship regulations of a tribe from its developmental or historical aspects like the concrete way in which these rules are applied in practice. Structuralists pay more attention

to the non-temporal dimension of these phenomena in their quest for broad rules that will give their respective investigations general, scientific status. Thus kinship relations within a 'primitive' society, for example, can be shown to follow an unconscious 'logic' of largely binary relations (of inclusion and exclusion) that determine in advance who is permitted to marry whom and who is prohibited from doing so. In most Western legal systems, for instance, it is forbidden for individuals related as first cousins or closer to marry. But in so-called 'primitive' societies, as Lévi-Strauss demonstrated, that system of permitted and prohibited marriages follows far more complex rules than simply prohibition of consanguineous marriage. Ideally, such patterns or structures can be charted according to certain 'codes' that the structuralist scholar will decipher. In an analogous way, a similar unconscious logic can be observed operating in literary works (Barthes), in Marx's scientific socialism (Althusser), and in Lacan's famous decree that the unconscious is 'structured like a language' – a formulation that Sartre found quite attractive even as he continued to reject the concept of an unconscious.

Here too, what makes the structuralist antithetical to the existentialist approach to these topics is the impersonal, necessitating role assigned to these social structures; their claim to be objective and scientific. This marks the beginning of the



15. Leading structuralists employing 'primitive' reason

so-called 'decentring of the subject' that will become the explicit theme of poststructuralist thought. But what set this method in direct opposition to existential phenomenology and caused so much ink to spill was its avowed 'anti-humanism'. As Michel Foucault conjectured at the conclusion of his reputedly 'structuralist' masterpiece, *The Order of Things*, the success of structuralism in the 1960s suggests that an epistemic event may well occur in the near future that would change the fundamental structure of what we currently call 'knowledge' with an abruptness similar to the change that, he argued, brought our modern, man-centred mode of sense-making into being in the first place. If such a radical event were to occur, he surmised, 'one can certainly wager that man would be erased like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea'. For these structures are no more the product of individual agency than were Plato's universal ideas or forms. Rather, individuals are the bearers and not the inventors of these structures in the same way they are the bearers not the inventors of the grammatical rules of the language they speak. The responsible individual on whom the existentialist concentrated is reduced to a 'place holder' in the impersonal structures of which he or she is usually ignorant.

This, of course, gives rise to the thorny problem of the meaning of agency and responsibility in a structuralist world. How can one be held responsible for the very social conditioning that has fashioned one into this kind of person? One observes here the recurrent problem of reconciling individual freedom and social science. To the extent that scientific laws and causes are necessitating, they leave no room for freedom in the existentialist sense. But the structuralists claimed to be on the trail of just such a 'scientific' approach to social phenomena that was modelled on if not grounded in the 'logic' of language itself.

We have observed how Merleau-Ponty was in the process of reconciling existentialist values of freedom and responsibility with scientific methods of structural linguistics, and potentially with the several structuralist applications of this method to what the

French call the human sciences (*Les sciences humaines*). Sartre, in *Search for a Method*, which served as an introduction to his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, insisted that the task of existentialism was to 'reconquer man within Marxism'. What he had in mind was to defeat the Marxist 'economism' (economic determinism) of the party hacks; but his critique would prove equally relevant to the more sophisticated structuralist Marxism of Althusser and his followers that would gain prominence in the mid-1960s. In his *Critique*, as just mentioned, Sartre reserves an ontological place for structure and structuralist studies in the domain of the 'practico-inert' and the analytic reasoning that it supports. Again, Althusser's 'structural causes' can be located in the practico-inert domain, as can Lévi-Strauss' kinship trees. This is a major function of the concept of the practico-inert that is often overlooked. But as we said earlier, as *practico*-inert, the concept guards individual freedom and responsibility even in relation to our most impersonal and 'necessary' social structures. For example, Sartre raises the question of how these kinship structures of Lévi-Strauss operate in time of population scarcity due to war or natural disaster. His implication is that they do not, that we do not serve the structures, they serve us. Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of structures as 'probabilities' rather than as 'necessities' preserves existential freedom as well. Again the humanist motto: 'You can always make something out of what you've been made into.'

What has come to be known as 'poststructuralism' in philosophy or 'postmodernism' in literature, art, and architecture is characterized by what Jean-François Lyotard (in whom these categories overlap) calls the 'fission of meaning'. Just as nuclear fission (splitting or break-up) emits large amounts of energy, so the break-up of the standard unities of genre and narrative, of form and style, of organic relation and hierarchical ordering, and, above all, of substance and self, have yielded multiplicities and interspersions. Similarly, the structuralist binary oppositions that revealed the 'logic' of social and cultural relations are broken up by poststructuralists like Foucault into a plurality of rationalities. While Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

are reinstated as anti-modernist thinkers because of their multiple concepts of truth and their respective emphases on the power of willing and the will to power, Sartrean existentialism is dismissed as incurably modernist because of its alleged reliance on the Cartesian *Cogito* as the starting point of philosophical reasoning. Foucault can be taken as representing the poststructuralist movement when he remarks in a particularly severe dismissal: '*The Critique of Dialectical Reason* is the magnificent and pathetic attempt by a man of the nineteenth century to think the twentieth century. In that sense, Sartre is the last Hegelian and, I would say, the last Marxist.' In other words, in Foucault's opinion, Sartrean existentialism has nothing to say to the contemporary mind.

Notwithstanding the reckless vehemence of Foucault's critique, it is impossible to confine Sartre even to the century that he doubtless emblematized for at least two reasons. The Sartrean subject, as I pointed out, is not a self but a presence-to-self. We have seen that it is precisely *non*-self-identical, which invites fruitful dialogue with postmodern and/or poststructuralist authors like Barthes and Foucault who speak of the 'death' of the author and the 'eclipse' of the self. Though a fundamental dualism does pervade Sartre's thought, it is not the commonly rejected duality of mind and body, of thinking and extended substances *à la* Descartes, but a dualism of spontaneity and inertia – a functional, not substantial, duality that is compatible with poststructuralist thought.

Secondly, though Sartre does not subscribe to a multiplicity of rationalities, he has clearly distinguished two such in his *Critique*, namely dialectical and analytical reason. The former is dynamic and historical, the latter is neither. This raises the possibility of other forms of reasoning besides these two. Moreover, he has linked each of them with a political and social class, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie respectively, in a bow towards the Foucauldian (and Nietzschean) unity of knowledge and power – a postmodernist thesis. In fact, Sartre's claim that 'all knowledge is committed' not only expresses his concept of life-orienting Choice but also

introduces the power-knowledge issue in a somewhat Nietzschean sense well before Foucault made that relationship prominent once more. And if Sartre is suspicious of the Freudian unconscious for its threat to individual freedom, he is equally critical of the sceptical perspectivism and multiple rationalities that he believes discourage radical social change and thereby favour the socioeconomic status quo. This was already his criticism of his former friend Raymond Aron's approach to historical understanding in the late 1930s.

When one adds de Beauvoir's continued, if sometimes disputed, presence in the current feminist movement, one can conclude that, without being postmodernists *avant la lettre*, both she and Sartre can join the proto-existentialists, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, in also furthering this aspect of the philosophical conversation in the 21st century.

Hermeneutics

The increased importance of philosophical hermeneutics in the 20th century also contributed a momentum to carry existentialist thought into the 21st. As the method of interpreting a text, originally a Biblical and then a legal and finally any literary or artistic text, hermeneutics has played an important role in Continental thought. As the notion of 'text' came to include the manifestation of any intentional act from the founding of an institution to the jabs and feints of a boxer, the scope of hermeneutical interpretation expanded accordingly. With Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and Max Weber (1864–1920), the use of 'understanding' became the defining method of the human sciences, especially history and humanistic sociology (*Verstehende Soziologie*) as distinct from the natural sciences. At the hands of Heidegger and especially his student Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) 'understanding' and interpretation became our fundamental manner of being-in-the-world.

Like phenomenology, hermeneutics is primarily a method and not a

metaphysical or ontological theory. It assumes that all knowledge is contextual ('situated', as Sartre would say) and that the knower comes to a problem with a 'prejudice' or pre-understanding of the issue at hand. This is an ancient problem, as old as the sophistical argument that learning is impossible because either you knew it already and hence cannot learn it or it is so foreign to you that you would not recognize it if ever you encountered it. Hermeneutics insists that learning is indeed possible because we both know and do not know whatever we are learning. The problem is to explain in which sense this paradoxical claim holds true. This is commonly called the 'hermeneutic circle'. Gadamer, the best-known practitioner of hermeneutics in our day, defines it as '[letting] what is alienated by the character of the written word or by the character of being distantiated by cultural or historical research speak again'. In other words, it is a method for discerning the meaning of an unfamiliar text, whether its strangeness be historical, like an ancient inscription, or simply foreign to us, like the statements of someone from another culture or even from another profession or academic speciality. It was introduced into modern philosophy by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and extended to the human sciences by Dilthey and Weber. Taken in the broad sense of 'comprehending' another's action as opposed to 'explaining' it causally (which might jeopardize one's freedom), the existentialists employed it extensively, each in his or her own way. A brief review of five of our figures will reveal its use at their hands as well as how 'existential' hermeneutics bears continued relevance to current discussions of the topic.

The first was Nietzsche, no admirer of Schleiermacher, who insisted that all knowledge was interpretation and denied that there was any fundamental 'text' beyond which one could no longer move in an attempt to comprehend it definitively. Knowledge could never be absolute or apodictic; it was interpretation of interpretation all the way down. This seems to lead to a kind of pragmatist approach to truth and knowledge that both Nietzsche and the postmodernists favour. On this account, knowledge is like treading water and truth

is our success in doing so. This is a far cry from Husserl's phenomenology, which was intended to combat just such 'relativism' as well as the 'voluntarism' (emphasis on will over intellect in relating to the world) that he believed it fostered.

The anti-Cartesian nature of hermeneutical method comes to the fore with Martin Heidegger. We are now in the midst of the hermeneutical circle just mentioned. Heidegger argues that one already has an inkling (what he calls a 'pre-understanding') of the subject one is investigating prior to its actual pursuit, otherwise one would not be interested at all. It was Heidegger who rendered phenomenology hermeneutical. In fact, his masterwork, *Being and Time*, is one extended effort to articulate our pre-understanding of Being that makes our own existence problematic to us. It is also one reason why his mentor, Husserl, refused to recognize Heidegger's as authentic phenomenology.

Sartre continues this line of inquiry in *Being and Nothingness* where he appeals to our 'preontological comprehension' of an array of interrelated topics from being and non-being to the criteria of truth and one's fundamental project. The task of phenomenological description is to bring this implicit awareness to reflective consciousness. Such comprehension is immediate and precognitive. It affords a concrete guide for our subsequent investigations that are mediated by reflection and articulated in concepts.

Karl Jaspers adopted the Diltheyan and Weberian method of applying hermeneutics to the human sciences, particularly to psychology and history. The concept of comprehension (*Verstehen*) that Dilthey formulated and which Weber employed with such effect was introduced in France by Raymond Aron in the late 1930s. In fact, it was Aron's work that sparked Sartre's interest in the philosophy of history. Jaspers and the others shared the Diltheyan ideal of a textual hermeneutic that would enable one 'to understand an author better than he understood himself'. An important instrument in Jaspers's psychopathology, as it would later be in

Sartre's existential psychoanalysis, hermeneutics served to 'humanize' the human sciences by giving us access to their 'inner life'; that is, to the intentions and purposes that move agents to action as distinguished from the natural 'causes' that explain their behaviour.

But Sartre introduces a particularly existentialist-humanist use of hermeneutics towards the end of *Being and Nothingness* when he adopts it as the method of 'existential psychoanalysis'. The aim of this project is to bring to reflective consciousness the basic 'Choice', or life-defining project, of an individual. As we noted in Chapter 4, it assumes that a life is a totalizing phenomenon like the progression of a narrative, the unity of which depends on a pre-reflective and sustained adoption of a set of values and criteria that give meaning/direction (*sens*) to that life. Since pre-consciousness is completely translucent and implicitly self-aware, the task of the existential analyst, who can be the subject him- or herself, is to bring this comprehension to full knowledge. This is achieved with the help of a hermeneutic or interpretation of the empirical signs of the basic Choice. Like someone walking along a sandy beach, one can 'read' one's direction by looking back at one's footprints. Existential psychoanalysis seeks to reveal, not who, in bad faith, we pretend to be or erroneously think we are, but who our previous actions reveal we have Chosen (capital 'C') to be. Though he does not use the expression formulated by hermeneuticist Gadamer, Sartre seems to require a kind of 'fusion' of interpretive horizons between the analyst and the analysand to bring this off. But he does speak of our 'comprehension of another's comprehension' in ordinary social experiences as well as in writing an existential biography such as that of Gustave Flaubert. This would seem to be the functional equivalent of the fusion of horizons in the successful act of interpretation.

Moreover, the hermeneutic method assumes that a linguistic expression or any cultural object is embedded in a tradition. But this tradition can either impede communication or foster it,

depending on the proper hermeneutical method employed. Although Dilthey defended hermeneutics as the proper method of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) as distinct from the method of functional relations and causal explanations employed by the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*), Heidegger describes 'understanding' as the human's fundamental way of being-in-the-world. It follows that the method of understanding (*Verstehen*) is not simply a complement to the natural sciences, as Dilthey seemed to imply and as Weber urged, but is the basis of human knowing in general. Sartre would seem to agree with Heidegger in that our pre-reflective awareness in *Being and Nothingness* is elaborated as 'comprehension' in the *Critique*, where it is described as simply the translucidity of praxis to itself. Hermeneutics would then be a universal method, appropriate to all forms of human understanding. And yet Sartre, who links hermeneutics with dialectical reason and praxis, wishes to retain a place for 'analytical' reason as employed in the natural sciences. And to this extent he agrees with Dilthey and Weber. But he clouds this translucidity when he introduces the notion of 'ideology', or false consciousness, into the mix. This need not concern us here, except to warn us that the unblinking eye of Sartrean consciousness is more liable to visual complications than was previously recognized. Yet even if this qualifies the scope of human freedom and responsibility, it scarcely removes it.

An ethics of responsibility

In a post-postmodernist world, the inherited fragmentation of unifying principles and absolute values constitutes a particular challenge to ethical theory and moral practice in any recognizable sense of those terms. To start with, the very notion of an ethical identity seems to assume what Dilthey called 'the connectedness of a life'. From Ancient times, moralists have insisted on consistency as an essential ingredient in a moral life. Authentic existence in the Heideggerian sense entails the overcoming of the 'dissipation' of our efforts in sheer busyness and idle curiosity. Both he and Sartre look

towards a resolute and sustaining project or 'Choice' to achieve this unity rather than taking refuge in some form of substantial identity. Each philosopher conceives of the human being as a responsible individual. And while Heidegger was reluctant to venture an ethics until the ontological question of the meaning of Being had been fully addressed (which never happened), Sartre was eager to 'give the bourgeoisie a guilty conscience' by drawing attention to those pockets of bad faith (such as denials of responsibility) that punctuate our everyday lives. For Sartre, responsibility, like freedom, is everywhere.

The popularity of French ethicist Emmanuel Levinas (1905–95) in postmodern ethics opens a door to the revival of existentialist concepts and values, though he was not commonly viewed as an existentialist. What attracted many postmodern thinkers to Levinas's position was its rejection of a metaphysical foundation for ethics and its turn to an ethics of responsibility in place of one of universal principles or abstract values. If Levinas had not existed, the postmodernists would have had to invent him.

Yet even postmodernists acknowledged the need for basic ethical principles such as 'justice', which Jacques Derrida famously claimed was 'perhaps undeconstructable'. By this, he meant that it was perhaps not liable to Derrida's usual method (deconstruction) of unravelling the unity of a concept by analysis of the 'loose ends' or 'traces' that it harboured from a prior metaphysical assumption. More simply put, justice was perhaps an absolute in a relativistic world.

Levinas likewise accorded justice a certain relative ultimacy. For Levinas, justice is derived from the advent of the third party even though it is based on the original responsibility of the face-to-face, his fundamental ethical category. In this sense, justice resembles Sartre's concept of the upsurge of our 'being-for-others' with the appearance of a third person in our midst. As with the utilitarians before them, the postmodernists have found the concept of justice

their Achilles' heel. It seems to bear a non-negotiable character to which they must comply. No amount of 'gaming' (as Lyotard proposed by considering justice an especially serious game) or metaphorical sleight of hand succeeds in escaping its stark demands. And yet, as with Kierkegaard's tragic hero, impersonal justice, indifferent to 'attenuating circumstances', can cause great harm.

It is at this point that the existentialists' concept of being-in-situation offers help. Again, it is a case of sensitivity to concrete thinking. And once more, it is not so much a matter of introducing novel ideas as of calling us back to insights that are traditional even if their conceptual context is not. Two such appeals to 'concrete' thinking in Aristotle come to mind, namely his distinction between justice and fairness (equity) and his concept of the prudent person. In the former instance, one can avoid the unfairness of the acontextual application of the law by considering the particularities of the case. The distinction between the letter and the spirit of the law is another expression of this same attention to the concrete.

In a sense, the notion of an ethic of situations is not news. It is at least as ancient as Aristotle's concept of the prudent person (*phronimos*), our second example. This is the one who knows the right thing to do at the right time in the right circumstance. Prudence, as ethicist Josef Pieper says, may be understood as 'situation conscience'. There is an obvious concreteness about 'prudential' judgements in the Aristotelian sense. They are the fruit of a certain non-vicious circularity: the virtuous person is someone who makes virtuous judgements, but one must learn to be a virtuous person by making such judgements. That's just the way it is. There is no absolute starting point. One is always *in medias res*. We find ourselves in the ethical version of the hermeneutic circle.

Like the prudent person, the existentialist judges 'in-situation'. But where the prudent person *discovers* what is the right thing to do, the existentialist *decides* what is the right thing to do. He or she is

'creative' where the Aristotelian is investigatory. The 'authentic' individual decides in full recognition of the fallibility of his or her judgement. But having made the choice in view of the best available evidence, not just arbitrarily, and in view of the promotion of freedom, the authentic person, as we saw, will make it the right choice by their follow-through.

It is into this field of ethical free-fall that the existentialist meets the postmodernists' demands for an ethical practice without metaphysical commitment or inviolable laws and principles. As we have suggested, the Sartrean view of an ethic of value-appropriation that expresses and sustains freedom throughout a person's life can begin to meet these postmodernist requirements in a post-postmodern world. If the modernist view of ethics, as ethicist Zygmunt Bauman claims, is to insist that the conflict between the autonomy of rational animals and the heteronomy of rational management (between ends and means), though not yet resolved, is resolvable in principle, while the postmodern position consists in the willing endorsement of this non-resolvability and a fostering of the multiplicity of options that this allows, the existentialist stand offers post-postmodernism both the power of an ethical ideal (for example, authentic existence in Sartre's city of ends) and the clear-eyed willingness to live with inevitable ambiguity, as Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir propose. This is not far from the Aristotelian warning not to seek greater precision in the moral realm than it allows and, specifically, not to look for quantitative solutions to moral problems. And if the existentialist option meets the postmodern requirement of being unmetaphysical, and so in this respect is decidedly non-Aristotelian, it remains 'modernist' in its commitment to a humanism but to one of its own fashioning.