

# Existentialism

PHIL 375, UBC

Philosophy and Literature

May 22, 2018

Choose from the following options. This item will be graded.

## iClicker Question

[4724] What is the cornerstone of existentialism?

- A   ▶ man is not free but bound to his existence
- B   ▶ man's existence is more firmly established than God's existence
- C   ▶ everything is morally permissible
- D   ▶ existence precedes essence

Choose from the following options. This item will be graded.

## iClicker Question

[1387] Which of these are not part of a Sartre illustration in his paper?

- A   ▶ the picture of Dorian Gray
- B   ▶ joining the resistance or staying with one's mother
- C   ▶ joining a Christian or a Communist trade union
- D   ▶ a man who becomes a Jesuit after many setbacks in life

Choose from the following options. This item will be graded.

## iClicker Question

[4435] Which one of these is a core moral dilemma in Charles Taylor's essay "What Is Human Agency?"?

- A   ▶ legalizing abortion vs valuing human life
- B   ▶ keeping one healthy person alive vs having five sick patients die
- C   ▶ persisting in an academic job vs moving to Nepal
- D   ▶ eating organic local food vs giving to charity

Choose from the following options. This item will be graded.

## iClicker Question

[3878] Which of these contrast pairs is not a distinction found in Charles Taylor's paper?

- A   ▶ qualitative and quantitative evaluation
- B   ▶ weak and strong evaluation
- C   ▶ first and second order desires
- D   ▶ internalist and externalist evaluation

# iClicker Question

Choose from the following options. This item will be graded.

## iClicker Question

[1203] Which of these characters appear as examples in Alexander Nehamas chapter "How One Becomes What One Is"?

- A   ▶ Ulysses (Joyce), Ahab (Melville), Anna Karenina (Tolstoy)
- B   ▶ Gregor Samsa (Kafka), Elizabeth Bennet (Austen), Gatsby (Fitzgerald)
- C   ▶ Hamlet (Shakespeare), Jeremiah (Hebrew Bible), Vergil (Dante)
- D   ▶ Charlus (Proust), Odysseus (Homer), Zarathustra (Nietzsche)

Choose from the following options. This item will be graded.

## iClicker Question

[1997] What, according to Nehamas, characterizes the unity of a life in Nietzsche?

- A   ▶ a metaphysical soul
- B   ▶ social acceptance as a subject
- C   ▶ organization and coherence
- D   ▶ a life-time unifying narrative

# What the Self Is Not

Nehamas contrasts Nietzsche's view of the self with the following.

**Descartes** an immortal and indivisible subject existing separately from the body

**Descartes (again)** the source of thought

**Freud** the core whose appearance is consciousness

**Parfit/Carruthers** a Humean collection whose unity is secondary

**Plato** a tripartite organism of appetites, spirit, and mind, over whom the mind should rule

**Aristotle** a lifetime with narrative/moral coherence



# Becoming What One Is

There are several interpretive problems with “becoming what one is.” How are they resolved?

- ① what does Nietzsche mean by “what one is,” when he considers the self by and large a malignant invention?
- ② what does it mean to call upon someone to “become what one is” when there is no such thing as free will?
- ③ what is the underlying unity of that which one is, if it is neither physiological nor psychological nor metaphysical?

According to Nehamas, Nietzsche has the following recommendations to become what one is.

- human beings with a strong will create their own laws (they are new, unique, incomparable)
- they allow for organization and coherence (they do not entertain tolerance towards themselves)
- they prefer brief habits to the development of character (contra Aristotle), knowing that the future threatens any unity found between the present and the past
- they affirm eternal recurrence

# Reproaches Against Existentialism

- quietism (communists) intellectual contemplation leads to just another bourgeois worldview
- privileging the solitary over solidarity, forgetting the “smile of the infant” (Catholics)
- the seriousness of human affairs and moral responsibility (Christians)

JPS: They call us gloomy, when they say (dismal proverbs),  
“charity begins at home”

In the 18th century, the idea of the artisan-designer for human beings was sidelined, but the quest for a human essence remained. The paper knife.

- “man surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards”
- man differs from a scientific object because he is nothing until he makes something of himself
- in choosing for himself he chooses for all men (Christian trade union, monogamy)
- man is condemned to be free

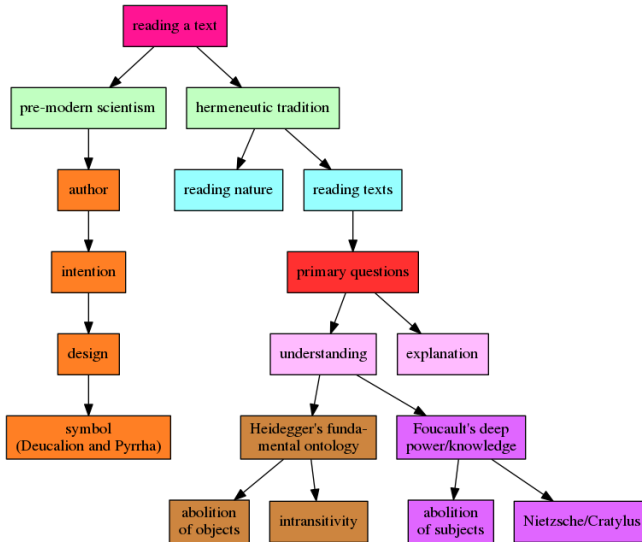
# Open Questions

- How typical is the Free French example for a moral dilemma?
- Man fashions both the signs and their interpretation → the importance of hermeneutics for ethics (Jesuit priest)
- Sartre's reliance on Kant ("one ought always to ask oneself what would happen if everyone did as one is doing," 292) and Descartes ("the starting point for truth is one's immediate sense of self", 302)
- Contrast human nature with the human condition to understand what Sartre means by cowardice. "Those who hide from total freedom, in a guise of solemnity or with deterministic excuses, I shall call cowards" (308). The story of Carlos Flores and the subway accident.
- How appropriate is it to demand strict authenticity from humans? Don't we need an essence for authenticity, for "being who we are"? Michel Foucault's criticism.

# Hermeneutic and Scientific Method

understanding	vs.	explaining
narrative	vs.	model
inter-textuality	vs.	experiment
coherence	vs.	falsifiability
hypostatic	vs.	hypothetical
texts	vs.	nature
integration	vs.	differentiation
dialectic	vs.	monism

# The Hermeneutic Tradition



# Structuralism

	Pre-Structuralism	Structuralism	Post-Structuralism
unit of meaning	word	sentence	text/discourse
"it is raining outside"	stating the fact	stating the fact in contrast to other facts	starting point for a multiplicity of perhaps incoherent facts
meaning	content	form	self-reference
semiotics	design	difference	sign
truth	correspondence	coherence	multiplicity
hermeneutics	trust	comparison	suspicion
grammar	semantics	syntax	polysemy
explanation	construction	reduction	deconstruction
authorship	intent	system	death
location	centre	structure	decentring



# Frankfurt's Second-Order Desires

- first-order and second-order desires
- qualitative and quantitative evaluation of desires
- weak and strong evaluation (the defining feature for strong evaluation is to have a qualitative distinction of the worth of the motivations)

Utilitarianism fails on two counts:

- 1 weak evaluation is not reducible to calculation
- 2 moral evaluation is not reducible to weak evaluation

# Criteria for Distinction

- contingency** strong evaluation dilemmas cannot be resolved by appeal to contingencies
- contrast** strong evaluation proceeds on the basis of contrasts (courage is meaningless without cowardice and vice versa)

# The Problem with Second-Order Desires

- the practical vs the moral approach to raising children
- consider a law that makes something morally repugnant (abortion, drug consumption, corruption, sex with children) more legal and less frequent → would you assent to it?
- are the moral notions at the basis of strong evaluation only a front to legitimize moral/social/economic pressure on others? (Mandeville)
- the drug that allows you to eat cake and be healthy as well (deflated descriptions vs moral reality)
- CT resolves this later by appealing to re-evaluation

Charles Taylor: “honour, dignity, integrity are *simply* other pleasurable states to which we give *high-sounding* names” (23). Why does reducibility in principle imply undue simplicity? Why is the “simple weigher” inferior to the “strong evaluator”? Monism can be maintained even in the face of certain kinds of emergence.

## Charles Taylor

thus the strong evaluator has articulacy and depth which the simple weigher lacks

Really? Isn't it the monist who makes progress? Perhaps the monist does not succeed with the reduction, but many productive (rather than successful) scientific programs originate in a desire to perform a reduction (alchemy).

# The Importance of Articulation

First-order choices are inarticulable. Second-order choices flow from the use of language and articulated coherence. Note the following analogy:

- Descartes' JE PENSE solves an epistemological problem (skepticism); as a consequence, we perceive ourselves primarily and dominantly as thinking beings
- Taylor's JE PARLE solves an ethical problem (what characterizes moral responsibility); as a consequence, we perceive ourselves primarily and dominantly as talking/interpreting/story-telling beings

The story of my great-grandparents.

# Responsibility and Radical Choice

The problem with radical choice (Free French, Nepal) is that it solves the dilemma by rendering the force of the losing side inoperative (this is a problem that Bernard Williams has addressed with respect to utilitarianism and Kantian moral theory in articles such as “Consequentialism and Integrity” and “Ethical Consistency” – see his concept of “regret”).

This is the core claim: agents of radical choice are simple weighers. Taylor wasn't after the utilitarians, he was after the existentialists, undermining their position by putting them in the same boat as the utilitarians. The Meursault/Rieux incoherence problem and what is the object of moral evaluation (in Taylor's case: the way in which an agent successfully articulates coherence in their life; in the existentialist's case: the way in which an agent accepts the human condition).

## Charles Taylor

This is what is impossible in the theory of radical choice. The agent of radical choice would at the moment of choice have *ex hypothesi* no horizon of evaluation. He would be utterly without identity. He would be a kind of extensionless point, a pure leap into the void. But such a thing is an impossibility, or rather could only be the description of the most terrible mental alienation. The subject of radical choice is another avatar of that recurrent figure which our civilization aspires to realize, the disembodied ego, the subject who can objectify all being, including his own, and choose in radical freedom. But this promised total self-possession would in fact be the most total self-loss. (35)

# Where Does the Buck Stop?

Where does the buck stop? Not at radical choice (this would be a sort of foundationalism), but at articulations (hermeneutic circle). At the core are not calculations, but interpretations. There is a hermeneutic circle from self-interpretations that are constitutive of experience to evaluations of these self-interpretations. Radical re-evaluation: Quine's web of beliefs and Neurath's boat.