CHAPTER 4

CONTINENTAL PERSPECTIVES

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- **4.1** Explain Continental philosophy versus other approaches to ethics.
- **4.2** Discuss Nietzsche's claims about the role of reason in morals.
- **4.3** Articulate Sartre and Beauvoir's claims that ethics are ambiguous and always personal.
- **4.4** Critically analyze the relation of ethics to politics in Marx and the existentialists.

4.1 CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS

Continental philosophy is a very broad category of philosophy that gained popularity in the 1970s. It is a term still used mainly by the Anglophone philosophers who invented the term, that is, by most philosophers in the United Kingdom and the United States. It describes something other than **analytic philosophy**, and it is in fact an interesting historical feature of the field of philosophy in general as well as of ethics in particular.

The contrast between the analytic and Continental philosophies seems to rest on a confusion of methodological and geographical terms, comparable to, say, "brain surgeon" versus "Belgian." This is a curiosity the British philosopher Bernard Williams (1929–2003) pointed out: the methods of

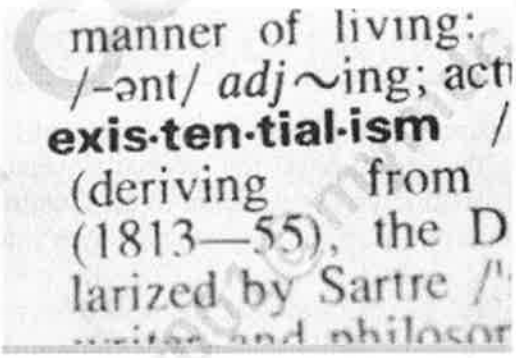
philosophers over here, and the location of philosophers over there. Williams attempted to bridge the gap between the two traditions. By the early 21st century, the gap is closing a bit, but stereotypes linger. Recent attempts to return to an earlier term for Continental philosophy, phenomenology and existential philosophy were abandoned in the face of more recent European movements, such as structuralism and post-structuralism, which in fact are themselves getting away from existentialism. "Continental" remains a useful, if lazy, term for what they do over there.

For philosophical analysts, logical methodology—the part of this book dealing with critical thinking and moral reasoning, for instance—is and ought to be the main subject of ethics. Nothing wrong with that, perhaps, save that since the middle of the 20th century that enterprise has tended to leave out many important everyday problems as well as major political problems. In other words, it turned the study of ethics away from practical matters, from the political questions that were at the heart of ethics from the time of Plato and Aristotle, from the questions that remained central to Continental philosophers from Hegel and Marx right through Sartre and Foucault. While analytic philosophers made epistemology—the philosophy of knowledge—the centerpiece of their academic field, sometimes even proclaiming the end of metaphysics, continental philosophers still dared to analyze matters of wisdom. They considered reflection on the meaning of reality and the ways in which we may know that reality are the basic problems of metaphysics *and* epistemology. Beginning with the Ancient Greeks, these problems were considered in the *polis*, in reasoned public discourse, in the context of ethics and politics. That is, as Aristotle pointedly noticed, it is nearly impossible and certainly unwise to consider ethics without also considering politics.

AN ETHICS FOR EVERYDAY LIFE AS IT IS LIVED

The thinkers we now call Continental philosophers never stopped making that connection. In many American university philosophy departments, they are not even considered philosophers. Edmund Husserl is usually given a pass and is often studied in analytically inclined philosophy departments by concentrating on the German philosopher's free use of the tools of logic and on his real concern with distinguishing mathematics and

logic from psychology and the human experience as it is lived. **Friedrich Nietzsche**, a controversial precursor of existentialism, on the other hand, is often treated as a curiosity in textbooks. Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Michel Foucault all have been variously called folk psychologists or sociologists and, as a sort of insult, artists. **Karl Marx**, Friedrich Engels, and V.I. Lenin are political scientists of considerable historical influence, but not "real" philosophers. Simone de Beauvoir, who will be discussed in detail in Part III, is a feminist, not a moral philosopher. Questions such as "What is the meaning of life?" "What kind of life should I live?" "Am I responsible for others?" or "What is my place in this world?" came to be seen as silly, pretentious, frivolous, or at the very least unclear and at best fuzzy and difficult to answer. Not for the first time, it is worth remembering that the fact that a question is difficult does not mean that it has no answer. It merely means that the question is difficult.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Definition of word existentialism in dictionary

The philosophies that still analyze these difficult questions are hard to ignore. The Age of Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries exploded into the historical realities of the French and American revolutions and led to the destruction of the political power and moral hegemony of church and monarchy alike, all based on an optimistic trust in reason as the root of moral and political truths. Thus, ethical theories as diverse as those of Kant's categorical imperative with its absolute moral laws and the utilitarians' hope to find a flexible way to make moral judgments based on the consequences of an act all were based on this faith in reason. How to find a law without a lawgiver? Reason seemed the best answer. Major reforms, from the establishment of democratic governments, the likes of which had not been contemplated in millennia, to the movements to abolish slavery, to give women equal rights, to reform and re-examine the role of prisons and the morality of the death penalty, and to achieve marriage

equality—topics dealt with in Part III of this book—rest largely on a faith in reason. That faith in reason was already present in Aristotle, who recognized that it is reason that makes us better than animals, reason that makes ethics possible.

> ***"Morality is neither rational nor absolute nor natural. The world has known many moral systems, each of which advances claims of universality; all moral systems are therefore particular, serving a specific purpose for their propagators or creators, and enforcing a certain regime that disciplines human beings for social life by narrowing our perspectives and limiting our horizons."***
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche

4.2 MAN AND SUPERMAN: NIETZSCHE

Then Friedrich Nietzsche sounded the alarm about our trust in reason, and he was among the first to reject the rationalist metaphysics that he believed led to a slave morality of subjection to the established order and to religion. "Which is it," asked Nietzsche with every intention to provoke, "Is man one of God's mistakes or is God one of man's?" He saw the reigning morality as the morality of the herd, of slaves ready to be exploited. It was the morality of the masses who follow orders, supported by Christian ethics. A superior master morality would be the morality of the noble individual human being. The philosopher's role must be, according to Nietzsche, to help destroy the slave morality. The problem remains, as Plato was the first to notice in the *Republic*, of who will decide the enforcement of this superior morality? Nietzsche's famous *Übermensch*, the superman or metahuman mentioned briefly in his 1883 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, was likely an attempt to lead human beings into being more than, in his words, human, all too human. The concept of the *Übermensch* who is above the slave morality of the masses remains at the very least a difficult ethical and political question.

MORAL PHILOSOPHERS: FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE (1844–1900)

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) was born in the Prussian province of Saxony, on October 15, 1844. His father died when Nietzsche was five years old, and the boy was raised by the women of his household—his mother, sister, and aunts. At age 14, in preparatory school, he studied theology, German literature, and classical studies. He graduated in 1864 and continued his studies in theology and classical philology at the University of Bonn. Soon after he gave up the study of theology and was transferred to Leipzig, where he was introduced to the works of Kant and Schopenhauer.

GERMANY—CIRCA 2000: Postage stamp printed in Germany, shows portrait of Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche by Edvard Munch, circa 2000
©: Sergey Kohl/Shutterstock.com

The precocious scholar was awarded the chair of classical philosophy at the University of Basel in 1868. He also served briefly as a medic in the Franco-Prussian War during that time, but ill health forced him to return to the university. He taught at Basel from 1869 to 1879, and it was at this time that he developed a close friendship with the composer Richard Wagner and wrote the book *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music.* Ultimately the friendship fell apart, and Nietzsche began to question the value of the Prussian culture and certain anti-Semitic doctrines being put forth by Richard Wagner and others. Although Nietzsche's writings were employed by Nazis and other anti-Semites in the following century, it is worth pointing out that the author himself was neither. Nietzsche loathed both. He rejected biological racism and German nationalism, saying once "every great crime against culture for the last four hundred years lies on their conscience."

Nietzsche shortly after his time at the University of Basel renounced his Prussian citizenship and began a productive period devoted to writing. In the period from 1872 to 1888 he published nine books. One of the most influential was *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* In that book, Zarathustra represents the "higher man." This superman rejects faith and morality on the assumption that "God is dead." This notion of man and superman lends itself to the interpretation that in his view not all people are created equal. Given this basic inequality in our natural abilities, it follows that there will be an unequal distribution of rights and liberties. Nietzsche appears to argue that moral precepts are primarily derived from either cultural doctrines or religious ones. He articulates a dichotomy between what he calls the slave morality and the master morality. The weak and disenfranchised hold the slave morality, which claims in part that all people are equal and all people deserve fair treatment. Those in power or control of society hold the master morality. The master morality is the morality of nobility, where cunning and pride are held in highest regard. This system denies equality. This morality claims that the wool has been pulled over our eyes and that the notions of equality and fairness are lies perpetuated by lesser men. We can exert power over the conditions that seem to control us.

MORAL PHILOSOPHERS: FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE (1844–1900) *continued*

In his writings from the *Twilight of the Idols* (or *How to Philosophize with a Hammer*), he appears to take an amoralist stand proclaiming that "he [the philosopher] take his stand beyond good and evil and treats the illusion of moral judgment as beneath him." This demand follows from an insight that he was the first to articulate: that there are no moral facts. Moral and religious judgments are based on realities that do not exist. Morality is merely an interpretation of certain phenomena—more precisely, a misinterpretation. Moral judgments, like religious ones, belong to a stage of ignorance in which the very concept of the real, and the distinction between what is real and imaginary, is still lacking.

"Truth" at this stage designates all sorts of things that we today call "figments of the imagination." Moral judgments are therefore never to be taken literally; so understood, they are always merely absurd. Semiotically—that is, in terms of how we create our own meaning—however, they remain invaluable: They reveal, at least for those who can interpret them, the most valuable realities of cultures and psychologies that did not know how to "understand" themselves. With prophetic insouciance, looking forward to postmodernism's skeptic attitude toward the possibility of ethics, Nietzsche seems to suggest that morality is only a language of signs and a group of symptoms. As he writes in *Twilight of the Idols*, "one must know how to interpret them correctly to be able to profit from them." Only then can we set about the task of improving humanity.

4.3 FROM MARX TO SARTRE AND BEAUVOIR: EXISTENTIALISM, ETHICS, AND POLITICS

Karl Marx critically analyzed the alienation that comes from facing an unjust world that makes no sense, and he suggested in his *Communist Manifesto* and elsewhere that in fact it is political action that must be taken as "everything solid melts into air." with the famous closing lines "Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains." Though Marx's philosophy has been radically interpreted and misinterpreted in the 20th and 21st Centuries, the questions Marx asked and the way he examined them continue to pose philosophical and political challenges with the development of what the French economist Thomas Piketty calls a "patrimonial capitalism" which is at once global and more concentrated on ever fewer, richer capitalists owning more and more of the means of production.

The success of ruthless dictators from Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin right through Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-Un was envisioned in anguished human terms by the visionary Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Particularly in the chapter called "The Grand Inquisitor" from his 1880 novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky added a painfully personal touch to Nietzsche's question as well as to Marx's answers by pointing out the comforts of being told what to do and of pretending that the choice is not ours to make. That was the precocious beginning of **existentialism**, a 20th- and 21st-century philosophical movement that encompasses not only most of those who are bundled together as Continental philosophers but also artists like Alberto Giacometti; novelists including Miguel de Unamuno, Franz Kafka, and Georges Perec; playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Harold Pinter; the filmmakers Jean-Luc Godard, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Krzysztof Kieslowski; and, yes, the feminist novelist and essayist Simone de Beauvoir.

MAKING ETHICS PERSONAL

They all have this much in common: Existentialists believe that an intellectual must be engaged in the actual life of his or her world and that philosophy in particular must focus on the confrontation of the individual with a world that reason simply cannot explain. In the 19th century, **Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855)** already had emphasized the excruciatingly personal nature of the choices human beings make and the existential discomfort of making those choices. The Danish philosopher's celebrated "leap of faith," the way he described personally choosing to believe in God for no good reason other than his choosing to do so, describes not a one-time life event but rather simply the authentic way to face life.

Soren Kierkegaard,
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The existentialists, a word coined in the 20th century, developed this theme and insisted that philosophy must concern itself with the intensely and unavoidably personal nature of our ethical choices. These choices are

constant, and they are not easy. They lead to doubt and uncertainty. They lead to the recognition that feelings of emptiness, dread, nausea, and existential anxiety accompany the realization that we are in fact alone: alone in a world without reason, without any a priori moral rules, without any gods we might have invented, and with no reality other than the freedom that defines who we are and the brutal limits on that freedom presented by the facts of the world. Confronting that situation is the most important fact about human existence according to the existentialists. Comprehension of our existence in the world entails the recognition both of our freedom and of the material limits imposed on that freedom by our being here, now. Clarity about this situation also clarifies the need to act if progress is to be made, moral and political progress. With a grateful nod to the Hegelian dialectic that challenged traditional logic and metaphysics with a claim that being and nothing are in a constant process of becoming; it is the existentialist dialectic between brute facticity and absolute freedom—between *Being and Nothingness*, as Sartre put it in his 1942 masterpiece of that title—that defines our place in the world.

SARTRE: THE MORAL DIMENSIONS OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

The subject was inescapable, but it needed some explaining. The situation was difficult. First, here's some background. **Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980)** studied philosophy at the École Normale Supèrieur in Paris, and he was deeply influenced by a new philosophy, the phenomenology of **Edmund Husserl (1858–1938)**, with whom Sartre's friend Maurice Merleau-Ponty had just finished a semester abroad studying. It was Husserl's revolutionary insight that human consciousness cannot be separated from its presence to the world, that is, from the object of consciousness. Consciousness is always consciousness of something, and the two together make up a phenomenon. Philosophy then must concern itself with that relationship: Our intentionality, that is, our presence as witnesses to the world creates the meaning of that world. Philosophy became the study of life as it is actually lived. To say that Sartre was inspired by this insight when he heard about it from Merleau-Ponty as they were having drinks in a Left Bank café would be a spectacular understatement—he took Husserl's idea and ran with it. It was then that tragic, absurd historical events intervened. In quick succession, Husserl died; the Germans invaded France; Sartre joined the army and fought the Nazis; and he was taken prisoner of war, escaped, and worked in the Resistance for the rest of the German occupation.

> ***"From the moment he is born, from the instant he is conceived, a man begins to die."***
>
> Simone de Beauvoir.

It was during the occupation that he wrote both *Being and Nothingness* (1943), the seminal text of existentialism, and *No Exit* (1944), the first play staged in Paris after the liberation. He also found time for ghostwriting anti-Nazi articles for the resistance underground paper *Combat* with his friend **Albert Camus (1913–1960)** and with the most important woman in his life, **Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986).**

In *Being and Nothingness,* Sartre introduces a novel idea: We are "nothing"; that is, we are not a thing. The world is a thing; it is "being." Being is solid, knowable—it's just there. Human beings, on the other hand, are defined by not-being, that is, by nothingness. You can know the desk where you're sitting now, and know everything there is to know about it. But you can never say that about the student sitting next to you: Whatever you think you know, there's more there. There is always more.

Street art Montreal Simone de Beauvoir on Feb. 7, 2015 in Montreal, Canada.
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Sartre refers to these two categories of reality as being-in-itself (the world) and being-for-itself (us). We are defined by freedom. We are condemned to be free. Our existence precedes essence precisely because it is our existence, our presence to "being," that gives "being" its meaning. We are witnesses to our lives, in other words, and we are constantly creating its meaning. We are always projecting ourselves into a future. This can be and often is difficult, even intolerable. So an easy way out of this is to pretend to be a thing or to pretend that others are things. That is what Sartre calls bad faith, and he points out that we know better.

MORAL PHILOSOPHERS: SIMONE de BEAUVOIR (1908–1986) and JEAN-PAUL SARTRE (1905–1980)

Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre and Simone-Lucie-Ernestine-Marie Bertrand de Beauvoir first met when they were students in 1929, and they stayed together a lifetime. She was beautiful, he was interesting, and they were both brilliant. He called her "Castor" ("Beaver"), a nickname that stuck later appeared in the dedication of his books. When it came time for both young Parisians to take the fiercely competitive postgraduate exam for the *agrégation* in philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure to become college professors, Sartre earned the first place, and, narrowly, Beauvoir came in second, becoming at age 21 the youngest student ever to pass the exam.

They were champions of free love well before the 1960s made that concept mentionable. As a couple, Sartre and Beauvoir were not monogamous, but they certainly were faithful in their fashion, to each other and to each other's work. When history forced itself on them, they not only managed but thrived: Sartre joined the French army in 1939, was captured by the invading Germans in 1940 and was sent to a prisoner of war camp, and was released in 1941 because of poor health—his poor eyesight eventually led to blindness. Back in Paris, he and Beauvoir took up teaching jobs, but they also helped found the underground group *Socialisme et Liberté* and soon devoted themselves to the underground resistance in Paris fighting the Nazis. Sartre and Beauvoir also ghostwrote and helped to publish the clandestine resistance newspaper *Combat*, founded by their friend Albert Camus.

It was at this time during the Nazi occupation that Beauvoir wrote her first novel, *She Came to Stay* (1943) and her first philosophical essay, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (1944), a prelude to her *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947). Sartre also kept busy. Besides teaching, working for the resistance, and publishing articles in dangerously illegal publications, he managed to write two plays: *The Flies* (1943) and *No Exit* (1944), the latter becoming the first play staged in Paris after the Liberation and one of the most successful works for the theater of the 20th century. Most important, Sartre wrote and got past the censors his monumental *Being and Nothingness* (1942), the seminal text of French existentialism.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre introduces the revolutionary concept that we are nothingness; that is, we are not a thing. The world is a thing; it is "being." Being is solid and knowable—it's just there. Human beings, on the other hand, are defined by not-being. We are condemned to freedom, and hard as we might try to pretend that we are determined, we know better. Freedom is not easy, and we constantly escape into bad faith to avoid the terrifying fact that our lives and those of others are on us. Our existence precedes the essence of meaning, and we make that meaning ourselves. No one else does that for us.

MORAL PHILOSOPHERS: SIMONE de BEAUVOIR (1908–1986) and JEAN-PAUL SARTRE (1905–1980) *continued*

Sartre and Beauvoir remained witnesses to their own lives, as we all must be. They were witnesses to the century.

And they stayed together. More, many more works followed for the prolific pair, as did more public commitments to the struggles of their time. These philosophers practiced what they preached, again and again throwing themselves into the fray, against colonialism, against racism, for women's equality, for a woman's reproductive rights, for gay rights, against tyranny. They both believed that philosophy could not be made in the classroom or in books, that it had to get in there and fight.

PARIS, FRANCE–MARCH 3, 2015: Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir's grave in the cemetery of Montparnasse.
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Jean-Paul Sartre died in Paris on April 15, 1980. A crowd of 60,000 Parisians marched in his funeral. On April 14, 1986, Simone de Beauvoir died. The two are buried side by side in the Montparnasse Cemetery, not far from where they lived their whole lives. In 2000, the city of Paris renamed its Place de St. Germain, in the heart of the Left Bank, the Place Sartre-Beauvoir.

What is going on here is revolutionary in terms of the nature of reality, and it has obvious ethical implications. If existence precedes essence, then we are responsible for what we are. To pretend otherwise is bad faith. That the responsibility for our own existence rests on us now, with Sartre, has an ontological basis. Ontology, we should note here, is either a branch of or a substitute for metaphysics, and it refers to the philosophical study of reality as it exists in the world. Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* is subtitled *An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*.

THE OTHER: REMINDER OF OUR OWN AUTHENTICITY

Our existence is a phenomenon we are both creating and witnessing, but there's a catch: Other people are witnessing it as well. They misrepresent and objectify us, the way we misrepresent and objectify them. Yet we are all responsible for our lives. If we pretend that it's not our fault, that we couldn't help it, that it is beyond our control, we are in bad faith.

This flies in the face of any determinism, of any divine command or theological guidance, of any absolute moral law. It even flies in the face of many 20th-century views of human nature such as those of both Sigmund Freud and B.F. Skinner, from the views of humanity of dialectical materialists after V.I. Lenin. Those psychologists and political philosophers believe there is a certain way we are determined to be: You behave this or that way because of how you were treated as child, or you can't help but reflect the interests of your economic class. It's out of your hands. This deception and self-deception are what Sartre calls bad faith, and it is our duty instead to be authentic because otherwise we are lying and we know it.

Bad Faith: A User's Guide

Consider these statements: "She couldn't help it, she's a woman." "What do you expect, after all, he's Jewish?" "I just need to pass this course—I'm just not an 'A' student." "See what you made me do now?" "That's just the way I am." "Come on, get a grip—that's just human nature." These are bits of bad faith, all of them.

Are you taken aback if the checkout clerk at the grocery store tells you about how tough it was to get to work today because her child is sick?

Is it too much information if a waiter at a restaurant turns out to be someone your sister dated?

If you run into your professor at the beach, do you ask "OMG, what are you doing here?"

Yes, your professor likely owns a swimsuit; and no, you didn't need that image in your head. But face it, up to this point you had been looking at that "other" as that thing, a professor. Of course he has a life, as do you. In fact, he's probably objectifying you too.

Have you fallen into bad faith recently? In other words, have you turned yourself into a being-in-itself or objectified someone else that way? Did you know better?

There is no human nature, Sartre believes; we make it up as we go along. This is not easy, so it is very easy to fall into bad faith and blame everyone and everything for choices that are ours and only ours. That we cannot help but recognize that this is true of others as well as of ourselves brings in a necessary ethical connection. How are we to live, what are we to do, in a world that we choose but always choose within material limits as well as under the gaze of others? By realizing that when we choose for ourselves, we choose for all the others as well. Our responsibility is inescapable.

Courtesy of Octavio Roca.

ETHICS AFTER SARTRE AND BEAUVOIR

All of this leads to politics, and in fact the major Continental perspectives on ethics are political and fall outside the scope of this book. The post-Sartrean project of **Michel Foucault (1926–1984)** remains the most powerful and influential argument for prison reform as well as for reconsidering the role of mental hospitals, the marginalization of the mentally ill and the objectification of sexual minorities. In works such as *Madness and Civilization* (1960), *The History of Sexuality* (1976–1984), *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and *The Birth of the Clinic* (1983), Foucault persuasively argues that we create sociopolitical structures, we endow them with power, and then we are oppressed by them in turn when we accept that these structures' claim to knowledge is in fact a tool of oppression.

That psychiatry and psychology have been used to oppress society, and that prisons have been used to keep that society from revolting has been amply, tragically proved by historical examples from the Soviet gulags and the Cuban UMAP concentration camps, to the institutionalized incidents of torture from Iran to Guantanamo. Foucault is not so much attacking reason as exhorting us to notice how rationality is often a tool of oppression. Throughout his life, tragically cut short by AIDS in 1984, Foucault analyzed the relation of knowledge and power, and he advocated for our

criticizing and attacking institutions that society might consider neutral but are in fact committing violence against society itself.

Since Foucault's structuralism, it must be said that French philosophy is experiencing what Aristotle might have called a fatal flaw in a good tragedy: a weak ending. The project of deconstruction initiated by the Algerian-born French philosopher **Jacques Derrida (1930–2004)** in works including *The Force of the Law* (1990) and *Specters of Marx* (1994) began a healthy debate on existentialism, structuralism, and ethics; but they have not led to fresh revelations of the groundwork for the moral arguments. Derrida remains most influential in the fields of humanities and literature. Foucault's claims that power is always power over something, that action is required to overcome or attain it, remains the most powerful ethical and political insight after Sartre's death in 1980.

Bernard-Henri Lévy (1948–), also born in Algeria, is a pupil of Sartre, and in *Sartre: The Philosopher of the 20th Century* (2000), Lévy proved to be Sartre's most sensitive biographer. Lévy so far has had as varied a career as Sartre himself: journalism, theater, film scripts, political essays on anti-Semitism, and islamophobia, and even some philosophy have flowed from the pen of this public intellectual. *War, Evil, and the End of History* (2004) blends political reportage with moral philosophy in ways that have not endeared him to the academy. His *Left in Dark Times: A Stand against the New Barbarism* (2008) makes a strong Sartrean connection between ethics and politics and applies it to the political realities of the Left in a post-Soviet era. He was targeted for assassination by an extremist Islamic group that same year. Lévy's promised book on the metaphysics of evil may still be a welcome addition to the field in the future.

4.4 FROM POLITICS BACK TO ITS ROOTS: ETHICS AND RESPONSIBILITY

It is worth remembering that Sartre famously promised a treatise on ethics at the end of *Being and Nothingness*. He never got around to writing it, instead working for much of the rest of his life one what would become the seminal modern texts on political philosophy, his vast and posthumously published unfinished masterpiece *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1985). It took his life partner, Simone de Beauvoir, to fill the gap in the meantime by writing the concise 1947 *Ethics of Ambiguity*, a prolegomena to an existentialist politics.

> *"A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied. And it is not true that the recognition of the freedom of others limits my own freedom: to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom. I am oppressed if I am thrown into prison, but not if I am kept from throwing my neighbor into prison."*
>
> Simone de Beauvoir

There are no answers forthcoming unless we come up with those answers ourselves. It is through our choices that we create what we will be, so the choice is ours. The choice is personal. Making it personal of course makes it ambiguous, inescapably so, according to Beauvoir. That ambiguity, paired with the frightening and liberating prospect of freedom, also makes it political, as Sartre points out in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Morality is on us. So is politics.

SWEDEN–CIRCA 1990: A stamp printed in the Sweden shows Albert Camus, Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957, 1957, circa 1990
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Albert Camus, close friend and sometime ideological enemy of both Sartre and Beauvoir and a fellow underground member of the resistance against the Nazis in Paris during World War II, made much of the concept of absurdity in ethics and in politics, in life. Sartre received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964, and he controversially refused it. Before Sartre, Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957, which he happily accepted. The Nobel Academy cited him, one of the youngest Nobelists ever at age 44, "for his important literary production, which with clear-sighted earnestness illuminates the problems of the human conscience in our times." Three years later he was dead from a car accident in the South of France, leaving behind an unfinished masterpiece, *The First Man*. The absurdity of the situation was obvious.

Camus himself had made much of the concept of absurdity throughout his life, from the novels *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947) right through *The Fall* (1956) and the posthumously published *A Happy Death* (1971) and *The First Man* (1995); absurdity is a central theme in his plays too, including *Caligula* (1945), and *State of Siege* (1948), as well as in unclassifiable philosophical works such as *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), *The Rebel* (1951), and *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (1961).

> ***There is no reason; there is only action. Every moral choice is personal***

From Homer and other sources, we know that Sisyphus was being punished by the Olympian gods likely because he had stolen their secrets. The divine punishment was harsh: They condemned Sisyphus to roll a huge rock up a mountain, and when at last he got to the top, the rock rolled back all the way down—so down Sisyphus went to roll it back up, up he kept on pushing, and down the rock went again. And again. And Again. Forever. This hopeless labor was his punishment, this hopeless situation his condition. What interested Camus here was Sisyphus as he headed back down, smiling: He is an absurd hero in this tale.

Camus never meant to claim that the world is absurd. The world is a thing, neither absurd nor rational. What is absurd is our presence in the world given that we keep asking "Why?" as the world remains and always will remain silent. The Enlightenment's faith in reason falls apart: There is no reason; there is only action. Praxis precedes theory, as Marx pointed out. Existence precedes essence, so ethics precedes ontology and metaphysics. Every moral choice is personal: We are defined by what we do. We are what we make of ourselves.

And in making ourselves, in projecting ourselves into a future of our own making, happiness may be found. "It is better to bet on this life than on the next," wrote Camus in *A Happy Death*. In his universalizing Sisyphus' plight as nothing less than the human condition, Camus tells us that "happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth—they are inseparable." Finding joy—choosing joy—in the midst of this lived dialectic is a daunting but necessary project for all of us, one Camus famously exhorts us to take on in the final lines of *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "We must imagine Sisyphus happy." That may be the most pointed moral rule in existentialist ethics—that we must choose to make ourselves happy.

4.5 READINGS IN CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

READINGS: KARL MARX and FRIEDRICH ENGELS: COMMUNIST MANIFESTO

One of the most influential political and philosophical documents in history, the Communist Manifesto was first published in London in 1848 and was soon translated into several languages. It is the first and simplest outline of Marxist views on class differences, and his analysis of class relations and the accumulation of capital at the expense of workers who make a minimum wage raises moral and political questions, which remain challenging to this day. Though Marx's philosophy has been radically interpreted and misinterpreted in the 20th and 21st Centuries, the questions Marx asked and the way he examined them continue to pose philosophical and political challenges with the development of what the French economist Thomas Piketty calls a "patrimonial capitalism" which is at once global and more concentrated on ever fewer, richer capitalists owning more and more of the means of production.

Bourgeois and Proletarians: The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. In ancient Rome we have patricians, knights, plebeians, slaves; in the Middle Ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices, serfs; in almost all of these classes, again, subordinate gradations.

The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones. Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie,

"Manifesto of the Communist Party" by Karl Marx, from the English edition of 1888, edited by Friedrich Engels.

possesses, however, this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes, directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.

From the serfs of the Middle Ages sprang the chartered burghers of the earliest towns. From these burgesses the first elements of the bourgeoisie were developed.

The discovery of America, the rounding of the Cape, opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie. The East-Indian and Chinese markets, the colonization of America, trade with the colonies, the increase in the means of exchange and in commodities generally, gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry, an impulse never before known, and thereby, to the revolutionary element in the tottering feudal society, a rapid development.

The End of Feudalism, the Birth of Modern Industry. The feudal system of industry, under which industrial production was monopolized by closed guilds, now no longer sufficed for the growing wants of the new markets. The manufacturing system took its place. The guild-masters were pushed on one side by the manufacturing middle class; division of labor between the different corporate guilds vanished in the face of division of labor in each single workshop.

Meantime, the markets kept ever growing, the demand ever rising. Even manufacture no longer sufficed. Thereupon, steam and machinery revolutionized industrial production. The place of manufacture was taken by the giant, Modern Industry, the place of the industrial middle class, by industrial millionaires, the leaders of whole industrial armies, the modern bourgeois.

Modern industry has established the world-market, for which the discovery of America paved the way. This market has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land. This development has, in its time, reacted on the extension of industry; and in proportion as industry, commerce, navigation, railways extended, in the same proportion the bourgeoisie developed, increased its capital, and pushed into the background every class handed down from the Middle Ages.

We see, therefore, how the modern bourgeoisie is itself the product of a long course of development, of a series of revolutions in the modes of production and of exchange.

GERMANY - CIRCA 1968: A stamp printed in Germany issued for the 150th birth anniversary of Karl Marx shows Karl Marx, circa 1968.

Each step in the development of the bourgeoisie was accompanied by a corresponding political advance of that class. An oppressed class under the sway of the feudal nobility, an armed and self-governing association in the mediaeval commune; here independent urban republic (as in Italy and Germany), there a taxable "third estate" of the monarchy (as in France), afterwards, in the period of manufacture proper, serving either the semi-feudal or the absolute monarchy as a counterpoise against the nobility, and, in fact, corner-stone of the great monarchies in general, the bourgeoisie has at last, since the establishment of Modern Industry and of the world-market, conquered for itself, in the modern representative State, exclusive political sway. The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.

The bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part.

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors," and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment." It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value. In one word, exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.

> ***"The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie."***
>
> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage laborers.

The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation.

The bourgeoisie has disclosed how it came to pass that the brutal display of vigour in the Middle Ages, which Reactionists so much admire, found its fitting complement in the most slothful indolence. It has been the first to show what man's activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades.

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

Karl Marx grave in Highgate cemetery in London

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production

and consumption in every country. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes.

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, that is, to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.

> ***"All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."***
>
> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

We see then: the means of production and of exchange, on whose foundation the bourgeoisie built itself up, were generated in feudal society. At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged, the feudal organization of agriculture and manufacturing industry, in one word, the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder.

A similar movement is going on before our own eyes. Modern bourgeois society with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells. It is enough to mention the commercial crises that by their periodical return put on its trial, each time more threateningly, the existence of the entire bourgeois society.

Bourgeois Society and Barbarism. Society suddenly finds itself put back into a state of momentary barbarism. The productive forces at the disposal of society no longer tend to further the development of the conditions of bourgeois property; on the contrary, they have become too powerful for these conditions, by which they are fettered, and so soon as they overcome these fetters, they bring disorder into the whole of bourgeois society, endanger the existence of bourgeois property.

The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself.

But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons—the modern working class—the proletarians.

Workers Outnumber the Bourgeois. In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed—a class of laborers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labor increases capital. These laborers, who must sell themselves piece-meal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market.

Owing to the extensive use of machinery and to division of labor, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him. Hence, the cost of production of a workman is restricted, almost entirely, to the means of subsistence that he requires for his maintenance. But the price of a commodity, and therefore also of labor, is equal to its cost of production. In proportion therefore, as the repulsiveness of the work increases, the wage decreases.

Modern industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrial capitalist. Masses of laborers, crowded into the factory, are organized like soldiers. Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the over-looker, and, above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself. The more openly this despotism proclaims gain to be its end and aim, the more petty, the more hateful and the more embittering it is.

The proletariat goes through various stages of development. With its birth begins its struggle with the bourgeoisie. At first the contest is carried on by individual laborers, then by the workpeople of a factory, then by the operatives of one trade, in one locality, against the individual bourgeois who directly exploits them. They direct their attacks not against the bourgeois conditions of production, but against the instruments of production themselves; they destroy imported wares that compete with their labor,

they smash to pieces machinery, they set factories ablaze, they seek to restore by force the vanished status of the workman of the Middle Ages.

At this stage, therefore, the proletarians do not fight their enemies, but the enemies of their enemies, the remnants of absolute monarchy, the landowners, the non-industrial bourgeois, the petty bourgeoisie. Thus the whole historical movement is concentrated in the hands of the bourgeoisie; every victory so obtained is a victory for the bourgeoisie.

But with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more. The growing competition among the bourgeois, and the resulting commercial crises, make the wages of the workers ever more fluctuating. The unceasing improvement of machinery, ever more rapidly developing, makes their livelihood more and more precarious; the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more the character of collisions between two classes. Thereupon the workers begin to form combinations, trade unions, against the bourgeois.

The bourgeoisie finds itself involved in a constant battle. At first with the aristocracy; later on, with those portions of the bourgeoisie itself, whose interests have become antagonistic to the progress of industry; at all times, with the bourgeoisie of foreign countries. In all these battles it sees itself compelled to appeal to the proletariat, to ask for its help, and thus, to drag it into the political arena. The bourgeoisie itself, therefore, supplies the proletariat with its own instruments of political and general education, in other words, it furnishes the proletariat with weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie.

Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product. The lower middle class, the small manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant, all these fight against the bourgeoisie, to save from extinction their existence as fractions of the middle class. They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. Nay more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history. If by chance they are revolutionary, they are so only in view of their impending transfer into the proletariat, they thus defend not their present, but their future interests, they desert their own standpoint to place themselves at that of the proletariat.

The proletarian is without property; his relation to his wife and children has no longer anything in common with the bourgeois family-relations; modern industrial labor, modern subjection to capital has stripped him of every trace of national character. Law, morality, religion, are to him so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests.

All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interests of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air.

Hitherto, every form of society has been based, as we have already seen, on the antagonism of oppressing and oppressed classes. But in order to oppress a class, certain conditions must be assured to it under which it can, at least, continue its slavish existence. The serf, in the period of serfdom, raised himself to membership in the commune, just as the petty bourgeois, under the yoke of feudal absolutism, managed to develop into a bourgeois. The modern laborer, on the contrary, instead of rising with the progress of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class. He becomes a pauper, and pauperism develops more rapidly than population and wealth. And here it becomes evident, that the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an over-riding law. It is unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery, because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state, that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him. Society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie, in other words, its existence is no longer compatible with society.

The essential condition for the existence, and for the sway of the bourgeois class, is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage-labor. Wage-labor rests exclusively on competition between the laborers.

The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers.

The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion than that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women. He has not even a suspicion that the real point is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production. The workers have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got.

Historical Necessities, Moral Implications. When the ancient world was in its last throes, the ancient religions were overcome by Christianity. When Christian ideas succumbed in the 18th century to rationalist ideas, feudal society fought its death battle with the then revolutionary bourgeoisie. The ideas of religious liberty and freedom of conscience merely gave expression to the sway of free competition within the domain of knowledge. The history of all past society has consisted in the development of class antagonisms, antagonisms that assumed different forms at different epochs.

But whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all past ages, the exploitation of one part of society by the other.

The Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things. In all these movements they bring to the front, as the leading question in each, the property question, no matter what its degree of development at the time. Finally, they labor everywhere for the union and agreement of the democratic parties of all countries.

Let the ruling classes tremble at a communist revolution. Workers have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

WORKERS OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!

READINGS: SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: INTRODUCTION TO THE ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY

Human existence is drenched in ambiguity, an inescapable feeling that we are here alone and there is no obvious moral guide other than ourselves. In this short 1946 essay that preceded her book of the same title, Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) analyzes the struggle for authenticity that everyone faces, the temptation to pretend to be determined by rules that we in fact have imagined. She expands on Sartre's characterization of human beings as "useless passions." We are no things, we are free—within brutal material limits, not least of which is the fact that we all will die. It is within those limits that moral decisions are made. And the decisions are ours, no one else's.

From the moment he is born, from the instant he is conceived, a man begins to die; the very movement of life is a steady progression toward the decomposition of the tomb. This ambivalence is at the heart of every individualized organism, but the animal and the plant do nothing but submit to it; man knows it. For him, this life that makes itself by unmaking itself is not just a natural process; it itself thinks itself. A new paradox is thereby introduced into man's destiny. As a "rational animal" and a "thinking reed,"' he frees himself from his immediate condition yet without destroying it. He is part of the world of which he is consciousness. He affirms himself as pure interiority against which no exterior power could take hold, and he also submits himself as a thing crushed by the obscure weight of other things. At each instant he can grasp the timeless truth of his existence, but between the past that is no longer and the future that is not yet, this instant when he exists is nothing. He alone holds this privilege of being a sovereign and unique subject in the middle of a universe of objects, yet he shares it with all those like him. In his turn an object for the others, he is nothing more than an individual in the collectivity on which he depends.

As long as there have been men who live, they have all experienced this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers who think, most of them have tried to mask it. They have striven to re- duce mind to matter, or to absorb matter into mind, or merge them together within a unique substance. Those who accepted the dualism established a hierarchy between the body and the soul that allowed the part of oneself that could not be saved to be considered as negligible. They denied death either by integrating it with life or by promising man immortality, or they denied life, considering it as a series of illusions under which hides the truth of Nirvana. And the ethics that they proposed to their disciples always pursued the same goal; it was a matter of eliminating ambiguity by making oneself pure interiority or pure exteriority, by evading the world of the senses or by being engulfed in it, by attaining eternity or by enclosing oneself in the pure instant. Hegel, with more ingenuity, claimed to reject none of the aspects of man's condition and to reconcile them all. According to his system, the instant is conserved in the development of time, Nature is affirmed in the face of the Spirit that denies it by positing it, the individual finds himself in the collectivity within which he loses himself, and every man's death is realized by being canceled out in the Life of Humanity. One can thus repose in a marvelous optimism where even bloody wars simply express the fertile restlessness of the Spirit.

To this day there exist many doctrines that choose to leave certain aspects of an overly complex situation in the shadows. However, in spite of these rational metaphysics and consoling ethics, men of today seem to feel the paradox of their condition more acutely than ever. They recognize themselves as the supreme end to which all actions must be subordinated. But the requirements of action drive them to treat each other as instruments or obstacles: as means. The more their hold on the world increases, the more they find themselves crushed by uncontrollable forces; they are masters of the atomic bomb, yet it is created only to destroy them. Each one of them has the in comparable taste of his own life in his mouth, and yet each one feels more insignificant than an insect in the midst of the immense collectivity whose limits merge with those of the earth. Perhaps in no other age have they manifested their greatness more brilliantly, and in no other age has this greatness been so horribly flouted. Despite so many stubborn lies, everywhere, at every instant, at every opportunity, the truth comes to light: the truth of life and death, of my solitude and my connection with the world, of my freedom and my servitude, of the insignificance and the sovereign

importance of each man and of all men. There was Stalingrad and there was Buchenwald, and neither erases the other. We try to flee in vain: cowardice doesn't pay.[12] We must, on the contrary, look this undulating truth in the face. We must not conceal but assume our fundamental ambiguity. We intend to draw the strength to live and reasons for acting from knowing the authentic conditions of our life.

> ***"The authentic man will not consent to recognize any foreign absolute."***
>
> Simone de Beauvoir

Existentialism defined itself from the beginning as a philosophy of ambiguity; Kierkegaard opposed Hegel by affirming the irreducible character of ambiguity, and it is by ambiguity that, in our own day, Sartre, being and Nothingness (1943), fundamentally defines man, this being whose being is to not be, this subjectivity that realizes itself only as presence in the world, this engaged freedom, this springing forth of the for itself that is immediately a given for others. But it is also claimed that existentialism is a philosophy of anguish and despair; it encloses man in a sterile anguish, in an empty subjectivity;" it is incapable of furnishing him any principle for making choices; let man act as he pleases, for in any case, the game is lost.

Doesn't Sartre declare, in effect, that man is a useless passion, that he tries in vain to realize the synthesis of the for-itself and the in-itself, to make himself god?" This is true. But it is also true that the most optimistic ethics have all started by underlining the element of failure included in man's condition; without failure, no ethics. For a being who, from the outset, is an exact coincidence with himself, a perfect plenitude, the notion "ought to be" *[devoir etre]* would not make sense. One does not propose an ethics to a god. It is impossible to propose one to man if he is defined as nature, as a given. Ethics that are called psychological or empirical are successfully established only by surreptitiously introducing some flaw into the heart of the man-thing that they have first defined. In the second part of *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* [1807], Hegel clearly shows that the ethical consciousness can subsist only to the extent that there is discord between

nature and morality; it would disappear if moral law became the law of nature. So by a paradoxical "displacement," if moral action is the absolute goal, the absolute goal is also that moral action not be present. This means that there can be an "ought to be" only for a being who according to the existentialist definition, questions himself within his being, a being who distant from himself and who has to be his being.

So be it, one might say, but it still must be possible for the failure to be surmounted, and existential ontology does not allow this hope: man's passion is useless; there is no way for him to become this being that he is not. This, change his existence into being. But if he accepts to not be in order to authentically exist, he will abandon the dream of an inhuman objectivity. He will understand that for him it is not a matter of being right in the eyes of a god but of being right in his own eyes. By renouncing to seek the guarantee of his existence outside of himself, he also refuses to believe in the unconditioned values that would rear up across his freedom like things. Value is this lacking being whose freedom makes itself lack, and because its freedom makes itself lack, value appears. It is the desire that creates the desirable, and the project that posits the end. Human existence makes values spring up in the world, and the undertakings in which it will be engaged can be judged according to these values. But first it is situated beyond all pessimism as well as all optimism since the fact of its original spurting forth is pure contingency. There is no reason to exist before existence; nor is there a reason not to exist. The fact of existence cannot be evaluated because it is the fact from which all principles of evaluating are defined. It can be compared to nothing for there is nothing outside of it to serve as a term of comparison. This refusal of any extrinsic justification also confirms the refusal of an original pessimism that we posited at the beginning: since it is unjustifiable from without, existence is not condemned by being declared unjustified from without. And the truth is that outside of existence, there is no one. Man exists. For him it is not a matter of asking himself whether his presence in the world is useful or whether life is worth living. Those are meaningless questions. It is a matter of knowing whether he wants to live and on what conditions.

CAN YOU IMAGINE SISYPHUS HAPPY?

Here's a multiple-choice question: depression or joy? You pick.

It is not exactly cheerful that Beauvoir notices that "from the moment he is born, from the instant he is conceived, a man begins to die." That brutal reality, what the Marxists would call the material conditions, is a fact of life. Add to that a situation like the one Camus describes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*—a poor man rolling a rock up a hill only to have it come down and start the arduous process all over again, forever—and you might think that existentialists have a bleak view of human existence.

And yet, is it a stretch to imagine a life that consists of getting up in the morning, having your coffee, going to school, perhaps working, having dinner, studying, sleeping, then getting up in the morning, having your coffee, going to school, perhaps working, having dinner, studying, sleeping . . .? You get the idea. And, yes, then you die. That part is also true.

So, can you imagine Sisyphus happy?

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Nietzsche, Friedrich (1844–1900), the son of a Lutheran minister, Nietzsche announced the death of God and was among the first philosophers to reject the rationalist metaphysics that he believed led to a slave morality of subjection to the established order and to religion. "Which is it," asked Nietzsche with every intention to provoke, "is man one of God's mistakes or is God one of man's?"

Sartre, Jean-Paul (1905–1980), French philosopher, novelist, playwright, screenwriter, literary critic and biographer, and human rights activist. Sartre is the father of modern existentialism, and his *Being and Nothingness* (1942), together with his unfinished *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1985), ranks among the most serious and seriously inspiring works in modern philosophy.

KEY TERMS

Analytic philosophy a term usually referring to Anglo-American philosophy that denotes a method of focusing on the language of a philosophical problem as the key to examining it; a school of Anglophone philosophy that aims for clarity and precision in its methodology, sometimes sidestepping questions to which the answer might not be clear and precise.

Continental philosophy a term used mainly by most philosophers in the United Kingdom and the United States, describing other than analytic philosophy and covering a broad spectrum of overlapping philosophies from the European continent as well as, more recently, from Latin America.

Existentialism a school of philosophy that emphasizes that existence precedes essence, that is, that we are responsible for the meanings we bring to the world and also that we are both responsible for our actions and free within the brutal limits of the material world.