11. The Future of Existentialism

We should classify the version of idea that existence precedes essence articulated most fully in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, and Sartre's *Saint Genet* as the canonical form of existentialism. This is the theory that the reasons we each respond to in our thought and behaviour reflect the values enshrined in our own projects, which we can change but which become progressively sedimented as they are deployed in cognition and action. As a result of this sedimentation, values can continue to shape our thought and action even if we no longer explicitly endorse them, indeed even if we now reject them, at least until contrary values have become equally sedimented. Socialisation in childhood therefore has a profound and lasting influence, but one that can be reduced over time through action expressing more recently endorsed values.

This theory of the structure of human existence grounds an ethical theory that has two dimensions. One dimension is the psychoanalytic theory that some forms of distress can be traced to the mistaken idea that people in fact have fixed personalities, an idea that can become sedimented as part of the project of valuing oneself as having some particular fixed nature. Fanon and Sartre both argue that we should overcome this false idea in favour of recognising that our existence precedes our essence. This eudaimonist kind of argument, however, cannot ground the second dimension of existentialist ethics, which is a moral requirement to value the structure of human existence. This is supported by Beauvoir's argument that agents whose freedom consists in the fact that their existence precedes their essence are thereby obliged to value that freedom. If these arguments are right, the virtue of authenticity is morally required and has therapeutic value.

This is the canonical version of existentialism. Other theories of human behaviour can be classed as forms of existentialism only if, or only to the extent that, they agree that our existence precedes our essence, that human individuals have no fixed natures and their motivations are rooted in projects that they have chosen and can revise. Likewise, other eudaimonist ethical theories and other proposed moral obligations can be classified as

existentialist only if, or to the extent that, they recommend or require recognition that our existence precedes our essence. What are the prospects for this canonical existentialism? What contributions can it make to current thinking about the roots of motivation, about the sources of anxiety and other forms of distress, and about how we ought to behave? How should this existentialism develop in response to the advances made in philosophy and psychology across the two-thirds of a century since these works were published? This final chapter sketches contributions that this renewed understanding of existentialism could make to moral philosophy, empirical psychology, psychotherapy, and literary criticism through analyses that would, reciprocally, test and develop this existentialism.

1. Authenticity and Social Conditioning

One question posed by Beauvoir's argument for the categorical imperative of authenticity, her argument in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* that we are obliged to respect the objective value of human freedom, is whether it succeeds in establishing its conclusion. One issue here is whether we should accept that it is incoherent to value an end and to see this value as dependent solely on oneself treating the end as valuable. Beauvoir's argument relies on this being incoherent, as we saw in chapter 10. Another issue is whether we can explain the value of an achieved end without identifying it with the value of a potential means and without presupposing the objective value of human agency. A third is whether we can account for the value of a potential means without accepting the objective value of the structure of human existence as the free pursuit of projects. These complicated issues, however, will not be addressed here. For there is a prior question to ask about the argument. Does the conclusion even set substantive moral constraints on behaviour anyway? If the answer to that question is negative, then the concern with whether the argument is logically sound loses its interest.

One of the weaknesses of the eudaimonist argument for authenticity is that it can conclude only that we should recognise the true structure of reality, as we saw in chapter 9. This style of argument cannot recommend valuing that structure positively, rather than disvaluing it or treating it as neutral in value. As a result, it cannot set restrictions on acceptable behaviour. Beauvoir's argument does conclude that we should value human freedom. But it is not immediately clear that this would restrict behaviour either. For according to existentialism, the freedom we have to set our projects, to change the values that animate the field of reasons we experience, is an inalienable metaphysical structure of our experience. Even 'the slave in chains', Sartre proclaims at one point, 'is as free as his

master' in this sense (B&N: 570). But this entails that freedom cannot be increased or diminished. 'If freedom is indeed equal in all of our actions', writes Merleau-Ponty in response to Sartre, 'if the slave displays as much freedom by living in fear as he does in breaking his chains, then it cannot be said that there is such a thing as free action' in contrast to unfree action (PP: 461).

If freedom cannot be increased or diminished, then it might seem that the imperative to respect the objective value of freedom is only a requirement not to extinguish any instance of it by killing someone. How else could valuing that metaphysical freedom limit our behaviour? Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex*, however, that freedom can be constrained by the individual's circumstances. To identify this argument, we need first to solve a puzzle about Beauvoir's use of the term 'transcendence' in that book. Within the space of a few sentences in the Introduction, she identifies 'transcendence' as the structure of 'every subject', but then talks of its 'degradation' as 'transcendence lapses into immanence', a degradation which one ought not cause in oneself or in others (SS: 17). How can transcendence be the structure of human existence and yet vary between individuals? The answer cannot be that Beauvoir is here using the term 'transcendence' in two different senses. For the whole argument of the book is that there is a 'lived contradiction' between the humanity of woman and the conditioning imposed by her situation (Young 1980: 141; Sandford forthcoming). Woman 'is denied transcendence' (SS: 677). This contradiction is felt as frustration, which engenders resentment and recrimination (SS: 661-4, 770).

Yet the term 'transcendence' does have two aspects in Beauvoir's book. For it can be opposed either to 'facticity' or to 'immanence', which are not equivalent to one another. Facticity is the set of one's own physical features and the physical and social features of one's situation, the facts that one has to deal with. But our situation comprises more than our facticity. The structure of human existence is that we pursue projects, we endorse values, through which we experience our facticity as a field of reasons. This is the ontological aspect of our transcendence (P&C: 97-9). The projects we pursue can either transform that facticity or can simply maintain it. A sense of powerlessness is engendered in women through being denied the education and skills available to boys and men, Beauvoir argues. In response, women tend to value obedience to men and their own confinement to cyclical repetitive tasks like housework (SS: 654-60). This leaves women with the task of maintaining their facticity rather than transforming it. Only through paid employment, argues Beauvoir, can women escape this life of immanence and regain the kind of transcendence that transforms facticity (SS: 737).

Sedimentation is what unifies the two aspects of transcendence. Because girls are raised for a life of immanence, sedimentation of the requisite values through upbringing narrows the range of projects they are equipped to formulate and pursue in adult life. Social pressure to conform to gender norms reinforces this sedimentation in adult life. The woman's ontological transcendence is directed to formulating fields of reasons that reflect the sedimented value of maintaining, rather than transforming, facticity. The demands of facticity thus come to shape experience, thought, and behaviour, leaving little role for the freedom to imagine that facticity transformed (Stone forthcoming). Thus, 'degradation' into immanence is also one 'of freedom into facticity' (SS: 17). But being degraded is not the same as being reduced: woman's ontological transcendence, her metaphysical freedom, remains entirely (SS: 680). This is why its degradation is felt as frustration, which implies an eudaimonist reason to oppose the conditioning of feminity (SS: 776-7, 780). Beauvoir's argument for the imperative of authenticity, moreover, applies here too. For the objective value of transcendence is violated by constraining it to a subset of possible projects. It is, however, a further question whether the imperative to respect transcendence requires us to secure conditions that allow its wider exercise beyond maintaining current facticity, as Beauvoir claims (P&C: 137), or whether it requires only that we do not preclude those conditions.

2. Sedimentation as Character Formation

Whatever the practical implications of the moral imperative of authenticity, the idea that we are subject to that imperative rests on the core idea of the canonical form of existentialism. This is the idea that the human individual is neither to be identified with the radical freedom that Sartre had earlier endorsed, which is currently often thought to be central to existentialism, nor to be understood as merely the product of social forces, as has been a prevalent view in European philosophy since the heyday of existentialism, but rather combines the freedom to revise the values that shape one's outlook with the sedimentation of one's projects over time. These are not two distinct components, but are unified in the structure of human existence as the pursuit of projects. For the existentialist idea of a project is a commitment to valuing some end that informs one's thought and action. Through this repeated endorsement, the value becomes progressively sedimented into the individual's outlook, increasing its influence in shaping the reasons they encounter in the world. Yet the individual can reject that value and work to sediment some contrary project to overcome it. Is this a coherent theory of human existence?

It certainly has a strong philosophical pedigree. For it is essentially the idea of character that animates the tradition of Western ethical thought that emphasises virtue, an idea stretching back to ancient Greece and still most thoroughly developed by Aristotle. The existentialists articulate this theory in a distinctive way. They place great emphasis on the individual's ability to critically reflect on the values that shape their characters and to develop new sedimented values in their place. And they pay greater attention than is usual in the virtue ethical tradition to the role of society in shaping the individual's character through childhood and through social pressure in adult life. These have been features of the virtue tradition since Aristotle, as has the idea that one's character traits shape one's perception of the world, but in existentialism these ideas become the focus of attention. This facilitates the two innovations of existentialism within this tradition. One is the use of this theory of character to develop a form of psychoanalysis that traces anxiety and other forms of distress to the individual's sedimented values. The other is to adapt Kantian ideas of morality to argue for a categorical imperative to respect this structure of human existence.

Empirical social psychology is converging on a similar conception of motivation. Disparate research traditions concerned with the psychological functioning of goals, values, schemas, and attitudes have each developed towards the conclusion that the mental item in question gradually increases its influence over the individual's cognition and behaviour whenever it is deployed in reasoning or affirmed in action. This idea is presently best supported and explored in the social psychology of attitudes, where it is generally agreed that any evaluative attitude has a dimension of 'strength' as well as a dimension of 'content'. The strength of an attitude is not the degree to which the individual approves or disapproves of the attitude's object, which is part of the content, but is rather the degree of influence it has over their cognition and behaviour. If you think that democracy is a very good thing, for example, then this attitude has the content that democracy is a very good thing. How strong the attitude is depends on how quickly it comes to mind in connection with relevant matters, which determines the degree of influence it has over your thought and behaviour (Webber 2015, 2016a).

It is difficult to draw such general conclusions from social psychology in much detail, because this research is currently fragmented into investigations of distinct constructs without much disciplinary pressure towards integrating these findings into a general framework. But one concept that has become well established on the basis of this research

is accessibility. Mental items are generally thought to have a degree of accessibility that increases every time they are deployed in cognition and action. The more accessible an item is, the more quickly it comes to influence some cognitive process. The high-speed cognition characteristic of spontaneous, engaged, unreflective behaviour tends to be influenced by only the most highly accessible mental items, the ones that are most sedimented by previous deployment in thought and action. Slower cognitive processes, such as careful thought and planning, draw on these same items and on less accessible items, in proportion to the time taken to make the decision. This idea of a distribution of accessibility is well modelled by the 'cognitive-affective system' theory of personality, which integrates a wide range of experimental findings (Mischel and Shoda 1995).

This model can account for both the social conditioning and the freedom over our values that existentialists describe. Social pressure to formulate and act in accordance with specific values, particularly in childhood but also throughout adult life, produces a tendency for those values to become highly accessible mental items, well connected with the rest of one's mind and highly influential over one's thought and behaviour. But this operation of social pressure is through a cognitive system that can just as well embed the values formulated by the individual through critical reflection. In so doing, the influence of social conditioning can be overcome. This critical reflection will not simply repeat and reinforce the values sedimented through social conditioning, for two reasons. One is that this is the slower form of cognition, which draws on one's less accessible ideas, attitudes, goals, values, and so on, as well as on the ones that have been made highly accessible through repeated use. The other is that this can involve critical reflection on those more accessible mental items, reflection that will itself be informed by the less accessible ones, which may have their own roots in all manner of sources other than the prevailing culture of one's social context.

3. Empirical Psychology and the Philosophy of Mind

Although this convergence in empirical psychology supports the core claims of existentialism, psychology is an ongoing science. Its current findings cannot be taken as the final word. Further empirical work may change this understanding of the mind significantly and further conceptual work on integrating the range of constructs that psychologists have developed may provide reason to revise this picture. The cognitive-affective system model of personality, for example, stands empirically supported by the wide range of empirical research that it incorporates, but its ability to accommodate new

findings would strengthen and perhaps refine it further, while it would be challenged by experimental data that it could not accommodate. However, we should not think of existentialism simply as a philosophical theory that must be passively informed by developments in the empirical study of the mind. We should not take every experimental result at face value, still less the interpretation of that result offered by the experimenters. Existentialism should rather evolve through critical engagement with the empirical study of the mind, contributing its own conceptual integrative perspective and consequent critical evaluations of experimental data.

Indeed, the classical works of existentialism that we have considered in this book all have this dimension. They are works in the philosophy of psychology, as well as having other philosophical aims. They were all developed through critical analyses of the empirical research available at the time and conceptual integration of what seemed to these existentialist philosophers to be the most robust empirical information. They were intended neither as applications of the science of the mind, nor as an alternative to it, but as unifying that science into an overarching framework that accommodates the robust findings and shapes agendas for further empirical research. This feature of existentialism has not been very influential, because psychology has since developed a range of empirical methodologies that are generally considered more reliable than those employed in the work that Beauvoir, Fanon, and Sartre drew upon. But this proliferation has produced psychology's current state of fragmentation, which isolates leading theories from one another in a way that mitigates against their mutual enrichment. Existentialism could contribute to overcoming this problem by providing an integrative perspective developed from its existing conceptualisation of the mind through revisions required for accommodating more recent robust empirical findings.

If it is to play this role, however, then philosophers of mind who draw on existentialism should not take the theory elaborated in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* as the paradigm existentialist account of the mind, but turn instead to the canonical form of existentialism common to Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, and Sartre's *Saint Genet*. At least, we should consider carefully whether Sartre was right to replace his initial variety of existentialism, which incorporated his idea that projects have no inertia of their own but are sustained only by the individual's continuing endorsement of them, with the idea of sedimentation employed by Beauvoir and Fanon. As we have seen in the course of this book, Sartre's initial variety of existentialism does not provide clear accounts of what it is to undertake a project, of how a project influences experience and cognition, or of how

values are transmitted culturally. It seems, moreover, that these gaps in his theory cannot be filled except by replacing his idea of radical freedom with the idea of sedimentation. If this is right, then philosophical positions that employ the problematic aspect of Sartre's initial form of existentialism are likely to face problems of their own as a result.

We can see this difficulty in Richard Moran's influential theory of self-knowledge, which focuses on the fact that one can answer a question about one's own mental state through the deliberative process that forms that mental state. If asked whether you think it will snow tomorrow, you need not introspect your existing beliefs or make an inference from your behaviour. You can simply consider whether it will snow tomorrow. Your conclusion will both form your belief on this matter and announce that belief. If asked whether you would like to go to the cinema this evening, you can consider whether to go to the cinema this evening and announce your conclusion. It is because we have this authority to make up our own minds, argues Moran, that we have epistemic authority over our own minds. Only I can have this kind of insight into my beliefs and desires, because only I can form my beliefs and desires through deliberation. This conception of first-person authority is partly inspired by Sartre's theory in *Being and Nothingness* that our mental states persist only because we endorse them (Moran 2001: 77-83, 139-42, 164, 172-3, 192).

Moran's theory is challenged, however, by cases where a belief or desire has been reinforced through cognition and behaviour employing it repeatedly over time. For if this leads to the sedimentation of that mental state, as current social psychology suggests is the case, then that mental state will not simply be displaced by deliberation that leads to a contrary mental state. If my thought and behaviour have been shaped for many years by the goal of becoming an academic philosopher, for example, then deliberation resulting in the conclusion that I should instead become a lawyer will not simply displace the desire to be an academic philosopher. Instead, I will now have two desires: the newly decided upon desire to become a lawyer, and the sedimented desire to become an academic philosopher. Moran's theory therefore cannot account for knowledge of one's own sedimented mental states. Perhaps it could be supplemented by a further theory to deal with these cases, but that further theory might instead displace Moran's by accommodating the cases his theory covers as well as those his does not (Webber 2016b, 2017).

4. Stereotypes and Implicit Bias

These problems faced by Moran's account of self-knowledge are emblematic of the general problem faced by any theory of mind that endorses the idea found in *Being and Nothingness* that mental states have no inertia of their own but rely on the individual's continuing endorsement of them. This idea is not only challenged by our own experience of beliefs and desires persisting despite our rejection of them and having unwanted influence over our thought and behaviour, which might be explained as an experience of malfunction. It is more deeply challenged by the convergence of distinct research programmes in social psychology on the idea that the normal function of a mental state is to exert a degree of influence over cognition proportionate to its previous deployment in cognition. This closely resembles the idea of sedimentation found in the canonical works of existentialism. But there are important differences between existentialism and social psychology in the use to which this idea is put, differences that could themselves ground important contributions that existentialism could make to the science of the mind. We can see these differences clearly in current empirical research into implicit bias and stereotype threat.

An 'implicit bias' is a behavioural bias that indicates an attitude or association that the agent explicitly disagrees with. The term 'implicit' refers to the detection of cognitive items or processes through their effects on behaviour, including speech behaviour. Experiments have found, for example, that people will correctly identify a handgun more quickly if it is held by a black man than if it is held by a white man, and will be more likely to misidentify another object as a handgun if it is held by a black man than if it is held by a white man. This bias was found in both black people and white people playing a videogame in which they were to shoot the characters carrying handguns but not shoot the characters carrying other objects. The implicit measures here are the reliability of shooting only those people with handguns and the speed of making these identifications. Subjects were then asked explicitly about their views on the relation between ethnicity and violence, these questions being embedded in a large, anonymised, and confidential questionnaire. The bias detected by the implicit measures does not correlate with whether the subject explicitly associated black men with violence (Correll et al 2002).

But it does correlate with whether the subject knew that society's stereotype of black men associates them with violence (Correll et al 2002: 1323). The bias correlates, that is to say, with knowledge of the social stereotype but not with endorsement of that stereotype as

accurate. Implicit bias experiments more generally tend to focus in this way on the effects that society's stereotypes of a particular group of people have on an individual's behaviour towards that group, where the individual knows of the stereotype but does not agree that it is accurate. In contrast, the term 'stereotype threat' has been developed to name the influence that society's stereotypes of a particular group of people have over the behaviour of members of that group when the stereotype is made salient. One classic experiment found that women performed less well than men on a mathematics test that had been described to them as producing gender differences, but equally well when it had been described as not producing gender differences (Spencer, Steele, and Quinn 1999). Another found that women taking a mathematics test performed less well when they took it alongside men taking it in the same room (Inzlicht and Ben-Zeev 2000).

Stereotype threat research might thus seem to support Beauvoir's theory of the role of social stereotyping in the construction of gender. But this would be threatened by three separate analyses of experiments into this idea of gender disparities in mathematics test scores, which have concluded that any effect of stereotype threat is at best very weak and perhaps non-existent (Stoet and Geary 2012; Ganley et al 2013; Flore and Wicherts 2015). Beauvoir's theory, however, does not entail that a reminder of this stereotype will impede women's performance in mathematics tests. For her theory is rather that being stereotyped as inferior at mathematics influences an individual's choices across their development, so the stereotyped group are likely to become less adept at mathematics than if they had not been stereotyped in this way. This theory is consistent with the analyses of stereotype threat experiments. For there is indeed a gender disparity at the highest levels of performance on mathematics tests, though it is unclear how this emerges across childhood or whether there are gender disparities at lower levels of performance (Stoet and Geary 2012: 93-4; Ganley et al 2013: 1886-7). Beauvoir's theory might explain the disparity at high levels of achievement and could model the development of this disparity through social conditioning across childhood and adolescence. It could be used to ground specific hypotheses concerning the development of mathematical abilities and to design experiments testing these hypotheses.

The idea of implicit bias has proved to be more robust than the initial findings of stereotype threat. But the canonical form of existentialism has an important perspective to offer here too. Like implicit bias, Fanon's 'negrophobia' is a socially pervasive classification transmitted through cultural media, which then influences the thought and behaviour of people who repudiate it as well as of those who agree with it, including people negatively

classified by it. Fanon's conception, however, is psychiatric rather than social psychological. His central concern is with effects of this classification on people who fall under it. Research into effects of perceived racial discrimination supports his view that being the victim of bias causes psychiatric problems (Pascoe and Richman 2009). But his further point that psychiatric problems stem from the internalisation of this stereotype by its victims seems not yet to have been subjected to rigorous empirical research. This is perhaps because experimental psychology of stereotypes has been concerned primarily with the effects of their misrepresentation of people. Existentialism, by contrast, emphasises their role in shaping the people they classify, a conceptual perspective that would significantly enrich current empirical research into stereotypes and implicit bias.

5. Existentialist Psychotherapy

Existentialism was developed as a psychoanalytic theory that traces an individual's behaviour to their projects, particularly to the values they have adopted at the heart of those projects. Sartre's initial form of existentialism held that the individual is free to alter these projects at any time, but as we have seen he soon found this idea to be unsatisfactory and embraced instead Beauvoir's idea that social meanings become sedimented in someone's outlook through the projects that person pursues in response to them. This theory of the sedimentation of social meanings, central to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* as well as Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Sartre's *Saint Genet*, could ground important new contributions to psychotherapy as well as to social psychology. Richard Pearce has recently argued that the existentialist psychotherapy movement should shift its emphasis away from developing distinctively existentialist therapeutic techniques to the deeper aim of developing an existentialist understanding of the origins of the problems that psychotherapists help to address. This understanding, he argues, should embody Sartre's view that behaviour 'is grounded in human agency and reflective of conscious choice', in contrast with viewing behaviour as 'mechanically determined and therefore subject to "correction"' (2016: ref).

Given the shortcomings of Sartre's theory of radical freedom, this conception of human agency and conscious choice should reflect the role of sedimentation in the canonical works of existentialism. It should be grounded, that is to say, in the idea that the individual's projects and values are undertaken in a context not only of social structures and restrictions, but also of the individual's internalisation of social meanings that they might not endorse. This internalisation, according to existentialism, then shapes the

individual's outlook and desires in ways that they might not notice. Sedimented social meanings can cause distress directly or can do so indirectly through their effects on behaviour. This is not to say that existentialist psychotherapy should not draw on Sartre's first existentialist treatise, *Being and Nothingness*, which includes a conception of freedom that is inconsistent with this idea of sedimentation. That book nevertheless contains a wealth of insights valuable for the development of existentialism. We should read Sartre's *Saint Genet* not simply as a rejection of this earlier book, but as a transformation of its central themes. Not every detail of the earlier theory that survives this transformation is explicitly repeated in the later book.

One important feature of existentialism across these works is the identification of the individual with their body. Indeed, this is central to the development of existentialism within the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition. 'Freudianism's value derives from the fact that the existent is a body', Beauvoir argues, in that 'the way he experiences himself as a body in the presence of other bodies correctly translates his situation' (SS: 69). It is this identification that underpins, for example, the centrality of sexuality to the psychoanalytic understanding of the individual. Because of this identification, moreover, phenomenological analyses of 'the lived body', particularly those of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, continue to inform the theory and practice of psychotherapy. But these analyses tend to cast the body solely as a site of trained habitual behaviours, inherited through upbringing and shaped by physical needs and social expectations. Existentialism, by contrast, explores how embodiment is shaped by the individual's projects and the social meanings these projects incorporate. In the canonical form of existentialism, this internalisation of a social meaning becomes sedimented over time, but the influence of social meanings on perception and behaviour through projects is already a central concern of Sartre's first existentialist treatise.

Because social meanings are internalised through projects, according to existentialism, individuals are fundamentally gendered and racialised. Social groups are distinguished not only by habitual behaviours, but more deeply by the social meanings that shape each individual's experience of their own bodies and of the social and physical world. Beauvoir argues, for example, that being gendered as a woman involves living with a sense of shame caused by the sedimented internalisation of the social meaning of femininity, which emphasises beauty and purity beyond the reality of the female body (SS: 331, 347). In a reference to the feeling of physical contingency and limitation that Sartre's describes in his first novel, Fanon describes his sense of inferiority triggered by being called a '*négre*' as a

bodily 'nausea' (BSWM: 92; see Sartre N: 143-6). If psychotherapy is to be renewed by the existentialist conception of embodiment, it should not focus solely on bodily habits. Although socialisation as a member of a social group involves training in habitual practices characteristic of that group, it also entails the internalisation of specific social meanings, which then shape one's experience of one's own behaviour and of the appearance and functions of one's body.

The classic existentialist works of Beauvoir, Sartre, and Fanon from 1943 to 1952 are rich in insights into this internalisation of social meanings and its effect on one's experience of oneself and the world, ideas that might usefully inform the full range of therapeutic work. Since internalised social meanings shape the individual's perspective on the world, their understanding of their position in relation to other people, and the possibilities open to them, according to existentialism, they shape the projects the individual pursues, their experience of their own behaviour, their experience of their body, and their self-image. Because social meanings can have this effect without the individual realising it, experiences of anxiety, depression, trauma, and other forms of distress can be deeply imbued with such social meanings even if the distressed person does not endorse them. It follows that subtle social influences can pervade the therapist's practice just as they can pervade the distress the therapist aims to alleviate. Attention to this social dimension of existentialism could therefore inform the procedures of psychotherapy as well as illuminating the causes of distress and suggesting ways of overcoming it.

6. Refining Existentialism

Just as attention to these aspects of existentialism could inform psychotherapy, this practical application could help to develop existentialism itself. The existentialist subordination of the family's influence on the individual to society's influence, for example, is challenged by therapeutic findings. Sartre represents Genet's family as simply the immediate instrument of their wider society (SG: 6, 18-19, 21-2, 34-5). Beauvoir considers the family too weak to counteract social pressure on the child to conform to gender role (SS: 305-6). Fanon replaces the Freudian focus on the family with an emphasis on shared cultural media (BSWM: 121-2, 165-9). By contrast, Lennox Thomas provides case studies from his psychotherapeutic practise to argue that colonial images of superiority and inferiority survive by 'generational transmission' through a family's stories, rituals, expectations, and behavioural styles, remaining today 'as ubiquitous as great grandma's recipe for apple pie' (2013: 126). Barbara Fletchman Smith argues that

the forced destruction of families that was central to transatlantic slavery continues to affect attitudes among descendants of enslaved people (2000). We should see this idea of generational transmission as complementary to, rather than a rival to, the existentialist theory of the interiorisation of social meanings. This raises the question of how social and familial influences interact.

Similarly, classical existentialism lacks any consideration of the interdependence of gender and racial categorisation. Beauvoir briefly compares gender with race in *The Second Sex*, but does not consider how gender may be constructed differently according to ethnic group (SS: 322, 670). Fanon does analyse the novels of Mayotte Capécia as examples of black women's experience under colonialism (BSWM: 25-35). This analysis has been widely criticised, not least for its assumption that these novels accurately represent the author's own outlook and experiences (Wiedorn forthcoming). His book as a whole, however, focuses on the experience of black men. What is missing from existentialism is thus any analysis of what Kimberlé Crenshaw has called 'intersectionality': the fact that some aspects of one's experience are unique to one's particular combination of race and gender, and perhaps other social features too (1989: 149). As with generational transmission, however, this oversight does not warrant the rejection of existentialism. It shows only that existentialism needs to be refined.

Alongside such refinements to the existentialist conception of the kinds of meanings that become sedimented in an individual's outlook, refinements might also need to be made to this existentialist idea of sedimentation itself. Engagement with empirical research and theory construction in social psychology could develop the existentialist idea that the individual's repeated deployment of evaluative commitments shapes their cognitive system. It might be, for example, that repetition of particular kinds of deployment or in particular contexts is required, or at least is more effective. People often report that their outlook on life has been transformed by becoming parents for the first time, for example. This could be an effect of the emotional impact of becoming a parent, of the intense workload of caring for an infant, or the combination of the two. More broadly, it remains an open question how much a change in environment or other circumstances influences the process of sedimentation. The empirical focus in this area has been on the strengthening of mental states, but the existentialist concern with ethics raises the question of how they can be weakened. Does a value become less sedimented the longer it is not explicitly deployed in reasoning or action, or is its influence reduced only by the sedimentation of a contrary value?

More substantial alterations to existentialism might be demanded by features of human cognition that challenge the core existentialist idea that all motivation is ultimately grounded in the individual's chosen projects. Sexual orientation might seem a clear example. Sartre views homosexuality, in both *Being and Nothingness* and *Saint Genet*, as a manifestation of the individual's projects (B&N: 86-7; SG: 72). This is part of a general theory of sexual desire, and indeed of all affectivity (B&N: 634-6). But no significant challenge to existentialism is presented by the view that sexual orientation is an innate and fixed feature of the individual. The idea that existence precedes essence entails only that sexual desires, fantasies, and actions are grounded in projects. These are expressions of one's sexual potential, which itself is a feature of one's physiology (Pearce 2014: ref). Existentialism holds only that the expression of potential is mediated by the holism of projects. It is the hiker's physiology, their bodily potential, that generates the feeling of tiredness, in Sartre's example, but the hiker's projects determine whether this tiredness is experienced as a reason to stop, as the feeling of appropriation and mastery of the natural environment, or in some other way (B&N: 476-7). Existentialism thus leaves open whether one's sexual preference for men, for women, or for both is a feature of one's sexual potential or of the expression of that potential. It even leaves open whether the same answer to this question applies to all individuals.

A stronger challenge is presented by the idea that some problematic abnormalities of motivation and behaviour manifest fixed cognitive features that can also be present in weaker forms. If someone's social interactions exhibit a lack of reciprocity, an intense preoccupation with a narrow range of interests, a lack of engagement with other people's interests, and an inflexible adherence to rituals, that person might be diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder, but only if these characteristics impair their functioning enough that they need support in navigating ordinary life.[1] It is this impairment of ordinary functioning that warrants the classification 'disorder'. The term 'spectrum' indicates that these features can exist independently of one another and in varying

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[1] This example describes symptoms sufficient for a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder according to the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM-5), but also sufficient for a diagnosis of Asperger's Disorder according to the fourth edition (DSM-IV) and Asperger Syndrome according to the tenth revision of the World Health Organization's *International Statistical Classification* (ICD-10), a diagnosis subsumed into the broader category of Autistic Spectrum Disorder in DSM-5.

strengths. These features are currently thought to result from a combination of genetic inheritance and childhood development. It follows that an individual's character, particularly in relation to social interaction, might result partly from such fixed qualities even if these do not warrant diagnosis as a disorder. Must existentialism classify these features as departures from normal human existence, even if they turn out to be fairly common? Or could such structural features of an individual's cognition be accommodated within the theory that existence precedes essence?

7. Existentialist Reading and Writing

These challenges and refinements concern the form of existentialism, the basic theory that an individual's motivations are ultimately grounded in the projects they have adopted and can change. Works that draw on and develop this theory could also extend its content beyond the specific social meanings analysed by Beauvoir, Fanon, and Sartre. The existentialist focus on the interaction of the individual's specific embodiment and their social context in shaping their outlook and self-image may provide useful insights into a wide range of issues raised by racial and gender stereotypes, class structures, bodily and cognitive differences, and illnesses, across cultural contexts. These applications of existentialism stand at the intersection of the social sciences, empirical psychology, psychiatry, and psychotherapy, to be informed by research in each of these domains and reciprocally to influence the conceptualisation and design of that research. As the classical existentialists themselves emphasise, however, there is an important source of insights into these domains in addition to the empirical and the clinical. This source is literature, both fictional and theoretical, in both its content and its style.

For according to existentialism, all of an individual's undertakings manifest their values and the social meanings internalised in pursuit of these values. There is no reason why writing should be an exception. Beauvoir's theory that literary fiction articulates its author's metaphysical vision, which we considered in chapter 4, is therefore part of her existentialism. For the metaphysical vision she has in mind here is an understanding of the nature of human existence itself. In her own case, this is an existentialist conception arrived at through careful philosophical analysis. If it is true, as Sartre claims, that the denial of human freedom in bad faith is a widespread social phenomenon, then other authors may have internalised this alternative conception of human existence without careful scrutiny. The existentialist theory of sedimentation explains how a vision of human existence can be synthesised and then expressed without the author explicitly thinking

about it. But the same theory predicts that even carefully formulated views of human existence can incorporate unexamined assumptions that reflect the ideas prevalent in the author's social context.

Texts that express a vision of human existence, whether explicitly or implicitly, are thus not simply sites of the coalescence of social meanings that had surrounded their authors, according to existentialism, but are rather driven by the values that their authors have chosen to pursue in the context of those social meanings, values whose own contours or expression might incorporate such meanings in ways that the author is unaware of and might even disavow. A text may well embody genuine original insights reflecting the author's pursuit of their particular values, but also have aspects that have been silently shaped by the author's social context. Beauvoir's analysis of motherhood in *The Second Sex* provides a nice example. Women have largely been confined to raising their children, she notes, which leaves no time for paid employment. 'In a properly organised society', Beauvoir argues, 'the child would in great part be taken care of by the group', allowing mothers to work outside the home (SS: 582). The idea that the fathers should take an equal share of childcare and domestic duties does not appear in Beauvoir's argument. She assumes implicitly that men belong in full-time employment, which is why she can only gesture vaguely at 'the group' as a potential provider of childcare.

Fanon's existentialist analyses of texts focus on claims they make and imply about people living in colonial conditions. Sartre extends this kind of analysis to the literary surface of the text itself. He describes Negritude poetry as an explicitly chosen effort to explore the internalised collective memory of the violence of slavery through the destruction and reconstitution of the French language (BO: 280-7). His analysis of Genet's poetry aims to explain not only the poet's conscious decisions, but also his aesthetic taste in words, images, metaphors, and other literary devices (SG: 584). This develops a point Sartre has made since his first philosophical publications, that 'there is not a taste, a mannerism, or a human act that is not revealing' of the individual's projects (B&N: 589; see also STE: 11). In his initial form of existentialism, this was the claim that a person's tastes all reflect their values. But once he had accepted the idea of sedimentation, he held that tastes can also manifest social meanings incorporated into the individual's projects.

To take an existentialist approach to reading a theoretical or literary text, therefore, is to understand that text neither as expressing only its author's ideas nor as embodying only a set of cultural influences, but as resulting from the author's pursuit of their chosen values,

where this pursuit is more or less tempered by social influences. It is to accept Beauvoir's claim that both theoretical and literary texts are explorations of the author's outlook, originating in explicit thought and research and in background cultural influences. It is to ask, as Fanon and Sartre ask, why this author with these particular goals and this particular cultural background wrote this particular work. If the existentialists are right, this kind of analysis can be applied to both the content and the form of a text and offers insight not only into that specific text, but more broadly into the ways in which an individual's cultural context interacts with their chosen values to shape their outlook. Indeed, if the existentialists are right, then reading a text in this way thus provides insight into nothing less than the basic human condition itself.

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