Condemned to be Free

When Paris was liberated in August, 1944, everything was possible. A new world needed to be created to protect their regained freedom. The philosophy that epitomized this desire for freedom was “existentialism.” The term, originally used in a derogatory sense to characterize those who followed the philosophical concept of the primacy of “being,” was grudgingly accepted by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir as a description of their thinking. Existentialism fitted easily with the idea of the absurd proposed by Albert Camus. These concepts became the main focus of both art and philosophy in the decade that followed the end of World War II.

Existentialism

Although there were precursors, existentialism was largely the work of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). They met in 1929 and became lifelong companions, although they were never married and never monogamous (Bakewell, 2016; Seymour-Jones, 2008). Women should be just as free as men (de Beauvoir, 1949). In the a*grégation en philosophie* of 1930, a national exam organized by the French civil service, Sartre and de Beauvoir placed first and second. Sartre was short – about 5 feet – and the exotropia of his right eye (caused by a childhood infection) gave him a disconcerting appearance; de Beauvoir was tall – about 5 feet 10 inches – and elegant.

Sartre and de Beauvoir were the leading intellectuals of France during the war. In a break with tradition, they were as much creative artists as philosophers. The theory of Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant (Being and Nothingness)* was illustrated in the novel *La Nausée* (1938), and in the plays and *Les Mouches* (1943) and *Huis Clos* (1944). Since art is far more convincing than theory y, existentialism became more popular than any previous philosophy.

The main tenets of existentialism were summarized by Sartre in a lecture in October 1945, subsequently published as *Existentialisme est un humanism* (1946). The key to the philosophy is the idea that "existence precedes essence:"

> What do we mean here by "existence precedes essence"? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and onlv afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, iust as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism. (Sartre, 1946)

We could therefore not look to God for guidance as to what was right. Instead, we must create our own morality. In her essay *Existentialisme et la sagesse des nations* (1945), de Beauvoir wrote:

> I throw myself without help and without guidance into a world where I am not installed ahead of time waiting for myself. I am free, and my projects are not defined by pre-existing interests; they posit their own ends. … Man may not be naturally good, but he is not naturally bad either; he is nothing at first. It is up to him to make himself good or bad depending on whether he assumes his freedom or renounces it. (de Beauvoir, 1945).

In addition to being responsible for his own actions, a person must by his or her example be responsible for the actions of others. The recognition of others is part and parcel of the

existential being:

> Therefore, the man who becomes aware of himself directly in the *cogito* also perceives all others, and he does so as the condition of his own existence. He realizes that he cannot be anything (in the sense in which we say someone is spiritual, or cruel, or jealous) unless others acknowledge him as such. I cannot discover any truth whatsoever about myself except through the mediation of another. The other is essential to my existence, as well as to the knowledge I have of myself. (Sartre, 1946).

And so, we are "condemned to be free:"

> If, however, God does not exist, we will encounter no values or orders that can legitimize our conduct. Thus, we have neither behind us, nor before us, in the luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone and without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. (Sartre, 1946).

The existentialism of Sartre was atheistic. If there is no Creator, there is no design that defines the essence of man and that determines how he should act. Man defines his own essence. However, although most existentialists tended to atheism, several religious thinkers promulgated a Christian variant of existentialism (Marcel, 1949,1951; Macquarrie, 1965). In this philosophy existence is a gift – we are allowed rather than condemned to be free. Faith is an act of freedom.

Being

Sartre had studied the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger in the period when he was appointed to the *Institut français*

d'Allemagne in Berlin (1933-34). The title of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) clearly alluded to Martin Heidegger's, *Being and Time* (1927). The concept of existence preceding essence was likely derived from Heidegger's philosophy, which distinguished man from other beings in terms of his freedom. Heidegger (§10) did claim that *existentia* preceded *essentia,* but for him the latter was simply the properties of a being, without Sartre's connotation of a design used in the creation of particular examples (Flynn, 2014, p 237; Webber, 2018, p 8). For Heidegger, human beings were distinct from other beings since their consciousness granted them a particular point of view within the world – a *Da-Sein* or "being-there." One of Heidegger's numerous neologisms described this as *Jemeinigkeit* – always being my own being. *Da-Sein* was characterized by embodiment, location in space and time, and an awareness of mortality. Heidegger denied that he was an existentialist, though many have so described him (e.g., Kaufmann, 1963; Macquarie, 1965; Flynn, 2006).

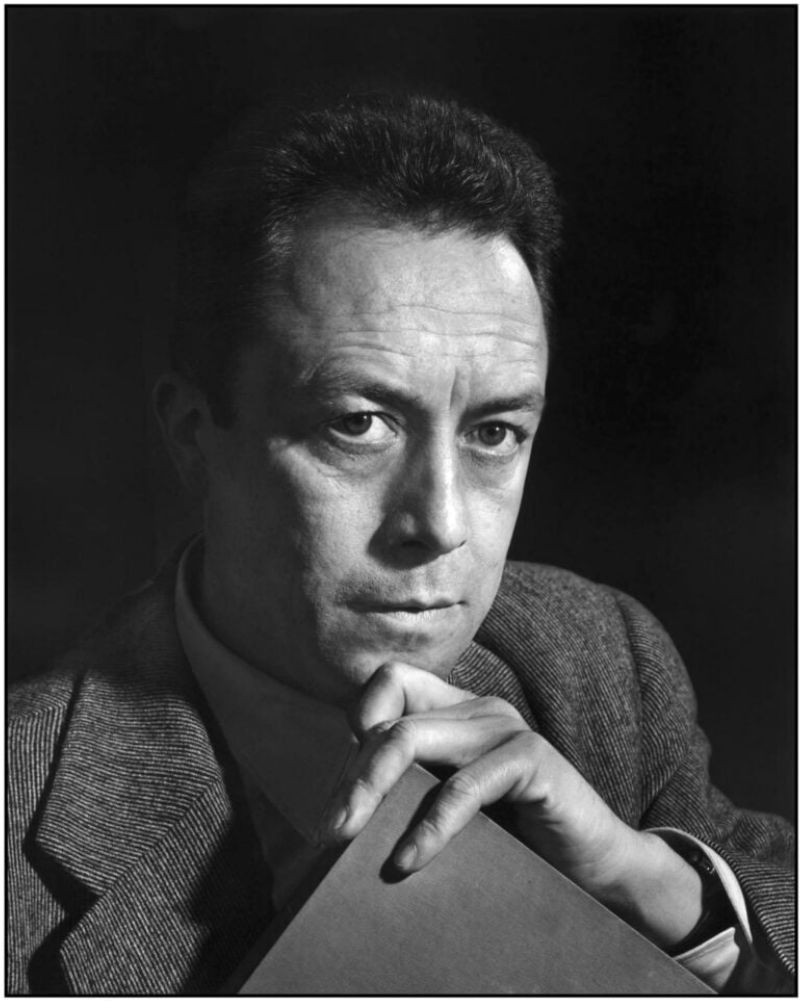
Heidegger (1889-1976) had become Professor of Philosophy at the University of Freiburg in 1928, and was elected Rector in 1933, the year that Hitler came to power. Heidegger was entranced by the idea of the German *Volk* and became an enthusiastic member of the Nazi Party. He claimed to have been blind to the racism and warmongering of the party, but his reputation was forever tainted by his support of Hitler. Heidegger was a philosopher who recognized the importance of being, and realized the freedom it entailed. Yet he failed to exercise that freedom with responsibility. One of the main ideas of the existentialism proposed by Sartre and de Beauvoir was the necessity that actions freely chosen must be held accountable.

The Absurd

At the opening night of *Les Mouches* in 1943, Albert Camus (1913-1960) introduced himself to Sartre. Camus had just published a novel *L'Étranger* and a book of philosophical

essays entitled *Le mythe de Sisyphe*. Sartre had been impressed by these works, and he was charmed by the young author. Sartre and Camus became fast friends (Aronson, 2004; Zaretsky, 2013).

Camus was an Algerian of French origin (derogatively known as a "pied noir," though no one is completely sure of the origin of the term). After graduating from university, he joined the Algerian Communist Party and wrote for a leftist newspaper in Algiers. When this was banned by the new government of occupied France in 1940, Camus moved to Paris. There he worked for *Combat*, the clandestine newspaper of the French Resistance, becoming its editor in 1944. Throughout his life he suffered from chronic tuberculosis. The 1954 portrait below is by Karsh.



Camus' *Le Mythe of Sisyphe* has the most striking opening of any work of philosophy:

> There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest – whether or not the world has three dimensions whether the mind has nine of twelve categories – comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.

Camus points out the paradox of the question. What makes life worth living – whether it be freedom, truth, love, beauty –is also that for which one is willing to die. The absurd rests at the heart of the human condition (Carroll, 2007). The word derives from the Latin *ab* (from, out of) and *surdus* which means deaf (and by association, silent) and generally means lacking in reason or meaning. Nagel (1971) describes our sense of the absurd as the discrepancy between how seriously we attempt to understand the universe and how arbitrarily the universe actually proceeds. Camus describes it:

> What, then, is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life? A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (Camus, 1942).

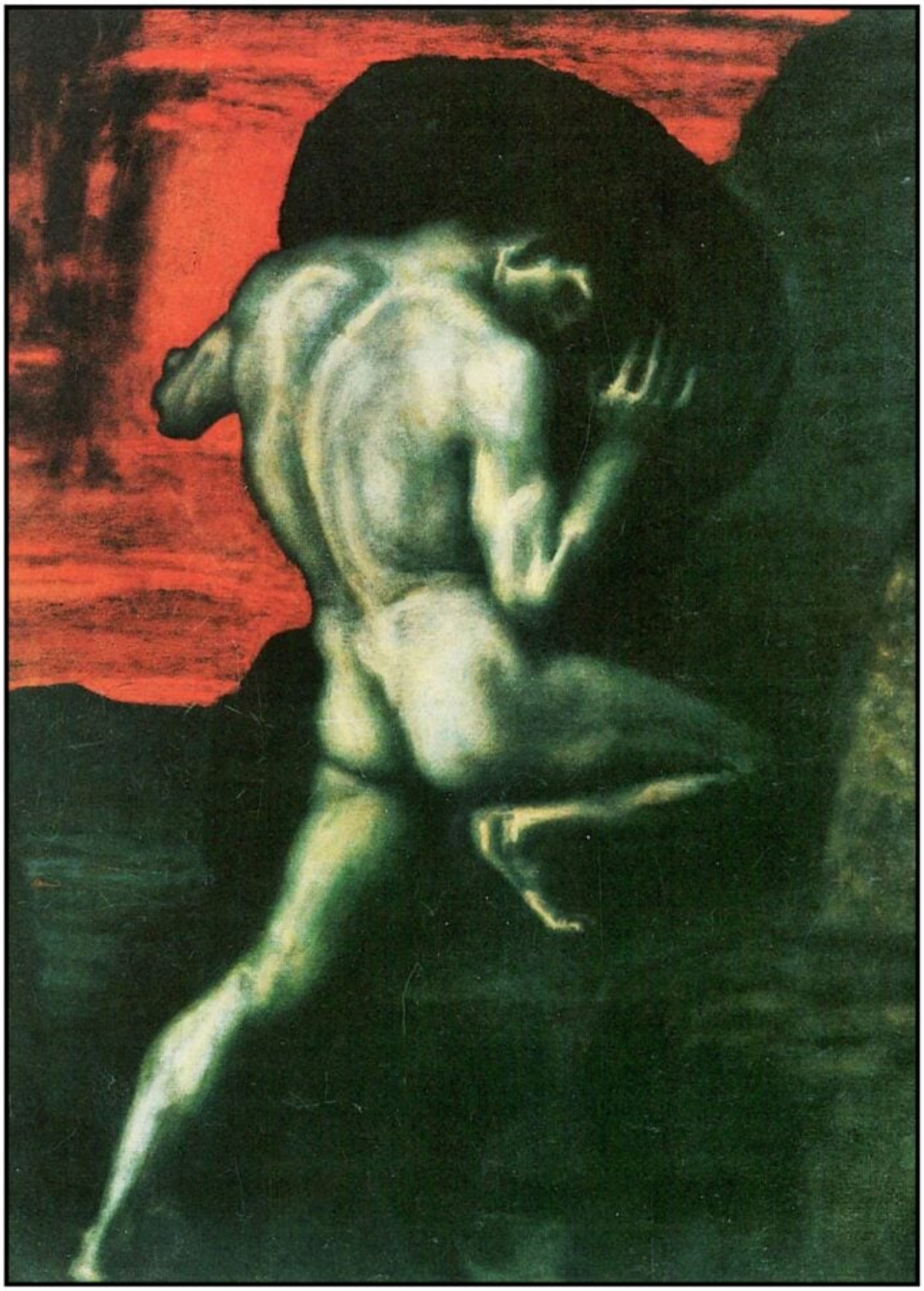
Camus traces the idea of absurdity in Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche and Kafka. (The chapter on Kafka was removed from the initial edition of the book by the censors since Kafka was Jewish). Camus finds that the absurdity of the human condition is what makes artistic creation necessary. He quotes Nietzsche (from the *Nachlass*)

> We have art in order not to die of the truth.

And proceeds to describe the process of art in an absurd world:

> The problem for the absurd artist is to acquire this savoir-vivre which transcends savoir-faire. And in the end, the great artist under this climate is, above all, a great living being, it being understood that living in this case is just as much experiencing as reflecting. The work then embodies an intellectual drama. The absurd work illustrates thought’s renouncing of its prestige and its resignation to being no more than the intelligence that works up appearances and covers with images what has no reason. If the world were clear, art would not exist.

Camus concludes his book with an essay on Sisyphus. The illustration below shows a 1920 painting by Franz von Stuck. Sisyphus refused to accept death and insisted on living. For this love of life, the gods condemned him forever to roll an immense boulder up a hill only to have it roll back as soon as it reached the top, so that he must continuously begin again. Camus sees in Sisyphus the artist in an absurd world:



I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one’s burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

Darkness at Noon

Between the liberation and the elections leading to the Fourth Republic in 1946, France was governed by the Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Française, consisting of representatives from the communist party, the socialists, and the Christian democrats. Given the economic debacle of the 1930s and the war against the fascists, politics tended toward the left and many considered the possibility of joining the international communist revolution. However, the institution of the Marshall Plan in 1947 led the French government to exclude the communists from the governing coalition. The Cold war was beginning.

Everyone remembered Stalin's Great Purge of 1937 and 1938, wherein countless members of the military and the government were put on trial for being traitors to the revolution, and either executed or sent to forced-labor camps in the Gulag. The most striking of these trials was that of Nikolai Bukharin, who had written *The ABC of Communism* (the "communist bible"), and who had served on the Politburo and the Comintern. The illustration below shows Bukharin with Stalin in 1929 on the tribune of the Lenin Mausoleum on Red Square in Moscow.

At his trial Bukharin confessed to his crimes against the Revolution, but did not acknowledge any specific acts of treason. His confession is often interpreted as the last act of a true believer – one who willingly sacrificed himself so that the revolution might prosper.

In 1940, Arthur Koestler published *Darkness at Noon*, a novel that is based on the interrogation and trial of Bukharin. The title, derived from Job 5:14 by Koestler's translator and mistress, Daphne Hardy, described the state of moral confusion that surrounded the trial.

> They meet with darkness in the day time, and grope in the noonday as in the night.

The novel's main character, Rubashov, undergoes three interrogations and finally admits to betraying the revolution, and is executed. The issue is whether it is justified to

abrogate present morality for the sake of a future utopia. Should one deny truth and justice in order to bring about a paradise promised, but certainly not guaranteed, by the revolution. As the epitaph for the second interrogation Koestler quoted from Dietrich von Nieheim's 1410 history of the Avignon papacy:

> When the existence of the Church is threatened, she is released from the commandments of morality. With unity as the end, the use of every means is sanctified, even deceit, treachery, violence, usury, prison, and death. Because order serves the good of the community, the individual must be sacrificed for the common good.

When published in France in 1944, Koestler's novel initiated extensive discussion. Could the show trials, the executions and the labor camps of the USSR be justified by the goals of the communist revolution? How far can the ends justify the means? In the years that followed World War II, the USSR continued to restrict the freedom of its artists, and to conduct show trials of those who had supposedly betrayed the revolution. In his 1947 essay on *Humanism and Terror*, Merleau-Ponty attempted to justify the purges and the labor camps. Merleau-Ponty later recanted, but Sartre continued his steadfast support of the communists, despite the Berlin blockade (1948-9) and the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution (1956). Only when the USSR invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, did he finally renounce the USSR's claim to represent the true course of history

Man in Revolt

In 1951, Camus published *L'homme révolté*. The title is usually translated as *The Rebel*, though Camus is more concerned with revolution than rebellion – with changing society for the future rather than reacting against the past. In this work, Camus considered whether violence can be justified in order to

alter the course of history toward a better future. The book poses a question complementary to that posed in *Le mythe de Sisyphe*:

> In the age of negation, it was to some avail to examine one's position concerning suicide. In the age of ideologies, we must examine our position in relation to murder.

In his book Camus reviews the history of revolution and terror as treated by philosophers and writers. He considers Ivan's story of the "Grand Inquisitor" in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* as representative of how revolutions end with loss of freedom:

> the Grand Inquisitors who imprison Christ and come to tell Him that His method is not correct, that universal happiness cannot be achieved by the immediate freedom of choosing between good and evil, but by the domination and unification of the world. The first step is to conquer and rule. The kingdom of heaven will, in fact, appear on earth, but it will be ruled over by men – a mere handful to begin with, who will be the Caesars, because they were the first to understand – and later, with time, by all men. (Camus, 1951).

Camus castigates the totalitarian movements of the 20th Century – communism and fascism – for promising freedom but, in reality, making the people mindless slaves. The future must not be used to justify violence in the present. In opposition to totalitarianism he proposed, albeit not very forcefully, the need for solidarity and moderation.

Camus, the one-time communist, had come to realize that the cult of history can support crimes against humanity. He had thus distanced himself from many of his intellectual friends who supported the ideals of the communist revolution. His book was lauded by right-wing critics, and led to a complete

rupture with Sartre (Aronson, 2004; Forsdick, 2007)

Sartre, the editor of *Les Temps Modernes* disliked the book's conclusions, but did not wish to review it personally because of his friendship with Camus. Ultimately, he arranged for a very negative review by Francis Jeanson to be published in the journal. Jeanson's critique infuriated Camus, who immediately wrote a rebuttal. He felt it inappropriate to be described as "being separated from reality" given his activity with the Résistance:

> I am beginning to get a little tired of seeing myself – and even more, of seeing former militants who have never refused the struggles of their time – endlessly receive lessons in efficacy from critics who have never done anything more than turn their seats in the direction of history.

Jeanson replied to Camus, and Sartre then published a patronizing public letter to Camus, beginning "My dear Camus," wherein he accuses him of a "dismal self-importance" and claimed:

> If you really hope to prevent any movement of the people from degenerating into tyranny, don't begin by condemning it without appeal, and threatening to retreat to a desert.

Camus and Sartre never talked again.

The Death of Camus

On January 4, 1960, Camus died in a car accident. After celebrating the New Year in Lourmarin, he accepted a ride back to Paris with his publisher Michel Gallimard. Gallimard was driving, Camus was in the front and Gallimard’s wife and daughter were in the back. The car suffered a punctured tire at high speed and crashed into a tree. Camus was killed instantly and Michel Gallimard died several days later. Gallimard’s wife and daughter survived.

There has been some speculation that the tire was sabotaged by the KGB to silence Camus as a critic of international communism (Catelli, 2020). However, there is little hard evidence. It is easier to accept the crash as another example of the arbitrary absurdity of human life. Camus had intended

to take the train back to Paris, before Michel Gallimard offered him a ride in his luxurious Facel Vega.

In his eulogy for his old friend, Sartre, who had not been in contact with Camus since 1952 wrote:

> He represented in our time the latest example of that long line of *moralistes* whose works constitute perhaps the most original element in French letters. His obstinate humanism, narrow and pure, austere and sensual, waged an uncertain war against the massive and formless events of the time. (Sartre, 1960).

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