I   Introduction

STEVEN CROWELL

1 Existentialism and its legacy

In a conversation recorded shortly before his death, Maurice Natanson reports an encounter he had in 1951, when he was lecturing to a philosophical society on Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*. A philosopher stood up and indignantly exclaimed, "I came here with my wife! And whether it's in the regulations [of the Society] or not, I think matters of this kind should not be discussed in front of ladies!"[1] This air of scandal has accompanied existentialism wherever it has appeared: Kierkegaard was the target of a nasty press campaign in nineteenth-century Copenhagen; Nietzsche's first book was vilified by the academic establishment and he had to self-publish several others; Heidegger's early critics called him "death-obsessed"; and Sartre never held an academic position at all, cultivating an oppositional stance to bourgeois values as a matter of principle. This air of scandal – together with an extraordinary cultural reach by way of literature, art, and film – is no doubt largely responsible for the fact that existentialism, almost alone among philosophical "isms," has never disappeared from the public imagination as a stance toward the world. It is hard to imagine "rationalism," say, or "utilitarianism" being revived by each new generation, and by name, as a way of life. But this has been existentialism's fate. David Cooper cites Simone de Beauvoir's recollection that "a set of young people really did … label themselves 'existentialists,' wear an all-black uniform, frequent the same cafés, and assume an air of *ennui*" – and there have been such ever since.

But this very fact, while certainly emblematic of *one* aspect of existentialism, tends to obscure other aspects. If closer inspection of philosophical movements such as rationalism and utilitarianism shows that they, too, had (and have) their notorious side – that

3

their emergence in their own place and time was hardly the dry academic affair that their entombment in textbooks can make it seem – closer inspection of existential thought reveals that it by no means exhausts itself in being a protest against philosophical business as usual. With other movements in the history of philosophy, students first become familiar with a certain set of ideas in the abstract and are often less familiar with the way such ideas challenged or otherwise engaged with the broader culture: modern rationalism's entanglement with the social and political tensions attendant upon the emergence of Copernican astronomy and Galileo's physics, for example, or the connection between utilitarian ethics and the social implications of an emergent economic liberalism. In the case of existentialism, however, it is the reverse: the cultural attitude is what is most familiar, while the philosophical content of existential thought is rather less so. Authenticity, commitment, *Angst*, death, alienation, nothingness, the absurd: can these notions, so familiar as slogans, be seen to do any real philosophical work? Is existentialism the repository of an identifiable set of philosophical ideas that might not merely have a history, but also a future? In his contribution to the present volume David Cooper offers a set of such ideas, an existentialist "manifesto" that other chapters will confirm, enhance, and in some cases contest. But more generally, *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism* has been conceived as an argument for the thesis that existential concepts and ideas have much to teach us as we pursue philosophy in a climate quite removed from the one in which they initially appeared. Existentialism is as much a *legacy* as it is a history.[2]

The legacy of existentialism is widespread, and it shows up in some unlikely places. For example, a central concept of classical existentialism is commitment. Drawing on Kierkegaard's reflections on faith, Heidegger developed the idea more systematically and phenomenologically in his analysis of authenticity as resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*), and Sartre followed suit with his own concept of *engagement*. Initially both Heidegger and Sartre understood commitment mainly in relation to their own political involvements – with National Socialism in Heidegger's case, and with Marxism in Sartre's. Thus one might expect to find the legacy of this idea in contemporary social and political thought, and one does. It may

come as a surprise, however, to find it deployed in philosophy of science and philosophy of mind.

Beginning not with Sartre or Heidegger, but with analytic philosophy and debates over the nature of mental content, John Haugeland argues that "existential commitment" – that is, the "freedom … to take responsibility for the norms and skills in terms of which one copes with things" – is a necessary condition for all determinate thinking or cognition, including scientific cognition.[3] Scientific truth is possible only where there are social practices that involve norms governing what counts as objects, evidence, and acceptable forms of dispute. Such norms are necessarily general and public, but, as norms, they operate only if I, from my first-person standpoint, embrace them as binding on my thought and behavior. In Haugeland's work, the legacy of existentialism shows up in his demonstration that such normative commitment cannot be parsed into a combination of beliefs and desires but is an irreducible form of self-understanding in which I constitute both myself and my world.[4] At the same time, I do not *create* natural things, and in science everything depends on allowing those things to have the last word ("objectivity"). Here too one finds the legacy of existential thought in Haugeland's analysis, for though the norms of scientific practice are *binding* on me, they are "ungrounded," i.e., their validity is not rationally established. And indeed, for science to be radically beholden to objects, it must be possible for the whole "world," the whole edifice of meaning sustained by my commitments, to collapse. From the first-person perspective this is to experience the *death* of my way of life, and part of my existential self-understanding must involve being prepared to endure the "nothingness" of my commitments.[5]

Haugeland's project holds itself to the standards of analytic philosophy of science, but it flies under the banner of a "new existentialism." That it is "new" reflects another aspect of the legacy of existentialism that the present volume would highlight, namely, the ability to "become what it is" through encounters with more recent developments in philosophy. Reflecting on the classics of existentialism from the vantage point of contemporary thought reveals new dimensions in them, which in turn may suggest further perspectives on contemporary problems. By developing existential themes in dialogue with philosophers such as Daniel Dennett, John

Searle, and John McDowell, for instance, Haugeland is able to read
Heidegger in a way that reveals more to this thinker's project than
he himself might have imagined – or appreciated. The legacy of
existentialism is not always identical to the legacy that the canon-
ical authors may have imagined for themselves – a point that they,
in turn, often exploited in their own dealings with their historical
predecessors. Indeed, the very idea that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche –
or Pascal or Augustine or Montaigne or even Socrates – belong to an
extended tradition of "existentialism" is something of an artifact
of how these figures were interpreted by Heidegger, Sartre, Marcel,
Jaspers, and other canonical existentialists. Whatever suspicions
this might engender from a purely historical point of view, it is
unobjectionable as philosophy – especially *existential* philosophy,
with its insistence that thinking is always a free, creative response
to its own history.

Today this phenomenon – using existential concepts to address
contemporary questions, thereby revealing new dimensions in
existentialism's founding texts – can clearly be seen in the field of
ethics. Each of the major existentialists represented in this volume
(with the notable exception of Simone de Beauvoir) has been accused
either of lacking an ethics or else of paying insufficient attention to
the distinction between ethics and politics. One might expect, then,
that the legacy of existentialism would contain little of importance
for contemporary ethical debates. But the matter is a good deal more
complicated. Writing in the 1970s, as the heyday of existentialism's
social and intellectual impact was waning and in an effort to hasten
its demise, Karl-Otto Apel noted that in the ideological landscape
of the West (primarily Western Europe, England, and the United
States), positivism and existentialism – commonly thought to be
profoundly antagonistic – actually constituted a complementary
"division of labor."[6] As understood at the time, both existentialism
and positivism agreed that the realm of objectivity – of cognitive
validity, or truth – is exhausted by the individual empirical and for-
mal sciences, while the realm of "value" (ethics, politics, aesthetics)
is a matter of subjective conviction or decision. Thus the classical
existential idea that ethics is ultimately political and relative to
rationally ungrounded contingencies of history found its correlate
in the ethical "emotivism" that arose from positivism's preferred
approach to value – namely, the rejection of first-order investigation

of ethical phenomena in favor of "meta-ethics," a second-order
analysis of ethical *language*. But the actual *legacy* of existential
ideas – for instance, the constitutive significance of choice and
commitment, the potential conflict between meaning and virtue,
the priority of self-responsibility over rational grounding, and the
refusal to define "human being" as "rational animal" – rendered
this division of labor obsolete. If Thomas Kuhn's critique of positiv-
ist philosophy of science opened a space for a "new existentialism"
in that field, the collapse of positivism also brought with it a new
estimation of the domain of value and meaning – which in turn ena-
bled a more nuanced appropriation of existential ideas than could be
found within the scope of the "division of labor."

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the emergence of "moral
psychology" as a vibrant field of inquiry – one that did not so much
as exist when Apel described the division of labor – and the resur-
gence of normative ethics on its basis. Without making reductive
claims for historical causality – and the full story would cer-
tainly have to take into account the rise of feminism, a topic that
is also not unconnected with the legacy of existentialism[7] – much
of the most interesting work being done in ethics today draws on
themes that will be quite familiar to readers of the classical exist-
ential philosophers. When Bernard Williams reflects on tensions
that exist between the issues at stake in ethical inquiry and the
"impartial standpoint" demanded by traditional philosophical ana-
lysis – between "experience" and "theory," as it were – he ranges
widely over the history of philosophy.[8] But the tension itself was
first sharply formulated by existential thinkers such as Kierkegaard
and Nietzsche. And the texture of Williams's own philosophical
approach – keen argument supported by fine-grained descriptions
of concrete moral life – is very much in line with the existential-
ists' embrace of the descriptive phenomenological method.[9] In turn,
Williams's acute moral-psychological analysis of the distinction
between what is meaningful and what is rationally groundable
allows us to see more clearly what is at stake in Heidegger's notion
of authenticity or Camus's notion of the absurd.

Similar points can be made regarding Harry Frankfurt's deploy-
ment of the concept of "care" in discussions of moral obligation and
responsibility; Richard Moran's treatment of first-person authority
in terms of "avowal"; Charles Taylor's appeal to a kind of "strong

evaluation" that undergirds anything that can be contested ration-
ally; Stephen Darwall's argument that moral philosophy must take
the authority of the other person into account in the phenomena of
address and claim; and many others.[10] The contrast between such
work and the dominant trends in ethics even forty years ago could
not be greater. The charge made against philosophical ethics at
that time by Iris Murdoch in her untimely book, *The Sovereignty
of Good* (1970)[11] – namely, that it was in full flight from any of the
real ethical and political issues facing human beings – could never
be made today. And be the "official" stance toward existentialism
taken by these and other thinkers what it may, the change itself
belongs in part to the legacy of the existential approach to ethics
and value.

One particularly influential example is Christine Korsgaard's
inquiry into the sources of moral normativity. If one places the
emphasis on Kant's rationalism – his insistence that moral obliga-
tion derives from pure reason and is strictly universal – then one
can find a stark contrast between Kantian ethics and the existen-
tialist emphasis on choice "in situation," an ethical stance that
seems to align better with the Aristotelian tradition of *phronesis*.[12]
And it is certainly true that Kantian ethics was a prime target for
many existential thinkers. Nevertheless, Kant's rationalism was
inseparable from doctrines of freedom and self-determination – the
"primacy of *practical* reason" – that have genuine affinities with
those notions as they appear in the writings of canonical existential
philosophers. Exploiting such connections, Korsgaard agreed with
Thomas Nagel's assessment of her work as "rather existentialist."[13]
What makes it so?

Above all, it is the idea that the self is not something simply
given – as substance or even as "subject" – but is something *made* or
constituted through my choices and commitments. My inclinations
and instincts, for instance, are not brute facts but part of my "facti-
city," i.e., are present in my experience ever only as opportunities or
challenges that take on meaning – become *mine* – through my iden-
tification with or refusal of them.[14] Korsgaard's concept of practical
identity ("a description under which you value yourself,"[15] the source
of practical reasons) – tracks Haugeland's idea of "self-understand-
ing" because both of them channel the existentialist idea of commit-
ment, where commitment is not an act of consciousness, a mental

process or disposition, but my fundamental stance, or "being," in the world. Korsgaard's employment of the notion, in turn, allows for a deeper understanding of *Kant*. One can now better appreciate how the "anthropological" features of his view (emphasizing the contingent psychological and situational factors in *human* life, in contrast to the life of a purely rational agent) are essential to his moral psychology, rather than being inconsistent appendages. Kant is more existential than we knew!

At the same time, the existentialists are more Kantian than we knew. Where Kant emphasizes self-*legislation* as the key to moral-ity, Korsgaard alters the emphasis. It is *self*-legislation that counts; my valuing myself under a certain description, my practical iden-tity, is what gives normative force to anything that purports to bind me morally. In Sartre's terms, the "exigency" of the alarm clock, its power to influence my behavior, is bestowed on it by me precisely in the act of getting up.[16] For Sartre, once I begin to *reflect* on whether to get up, I confront my vertiginous freedom. Korsgaard makes a similar point: when I reflect, my inclinations are inevitably "dis-tanced" from me, called into question, and I must decide whether to take them as reasons to act.[17] Such reasons are provided by my practical identity: because I value myself as a teacher, I have a rea-son to resist my inclination to stay in bed and a motivating reason to get up and do my job. But this Kantian appeal to reasons may give out: is there a reason for me to value myself as a teacher? For Sartre, I ultimately choose such identities "without justification and with-out excuse."[18] Korsgaard, in contrast, claims that there is a practical identity that you *must* value, if you value anything at all – "your own humanity"[19] – one which therefore provides you with ultim-ately justifying reasons. The hypothetical character of this "must" leads straight to the existential problem of suicide, however, and the question of the meaning of life.[20] Must I value anything at all?

Another example of the legacy of existentialism is found in the work of Richard Rorty, the title of whose *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* could practically serve as the teaser for a course in exist-entialism. The idea that the self is "contingent" – that existence precedes essence, that human nature is self-making – is central to classical existential thought. This legacy of existentialism is both challenged and advanced when Rorty argues that self-making is more akin to poetic imagination than to instrumental deliberation.

If earlier existentialists like Sartre and Heidegger pictured the self in its social, natural, and historical situation as a heroic originator of "worlds," Rorty – drawing on Wilfrid Sellars's critique of the Myth of the Given and on Donald Davidson's coherentist philosophy of language – deflates this heroic individualism by redescribing self-making as the permanent possibility of "redescribing" things in ways that make them more one's own. Contingent selfhood thus entails dependence on linguistic material that is shared with others, together with a refusal of the idea that there is One True Description.[21]

But if there is no One True Description what remains of philosophy, which since Plato has sought precisely the Truth? Rorty's concept of "irony" is meant to address this question, and here too he advances the legacy of existentialism. On the one hand, Rorty follows the existentialist critique of traditional philosophy ("metaphysics") found above all in Nietzsche and Heidegger. Philosophy is not an abstract theory of ultimate reality carried out from some God's-eye view but the passionate struggle to express one's understanding of the world precisely from *within* one's contingent, historical, first-person situation. In contrast to existentialists like Heidegger and Sartre, however, who treat such expressions as having something of the cognitive force of traditional philosophy, Rorty argues that the construction of "final vocabularies" is *authentic* only if pursued with a certain irony. In crafting a "final" vocabulary within a contingent historical situation, I must realize that there can be no such finality and so I stand, or ought to stand, at a certain ironic distance from my project – doubt about the possibility of such a project being endemic to the project itself. It follows – in contrast to the hopes of traditional philosophy and some existential thought as well – that no final vocabulary can be called upon to *justify* what we do. In Rorty's hands, then, the legacy of existentialism entails a radical public/private split, where irony – "play" with one's final vocabularies, the pursuit of the big picture – belongs to the private sphere, while "hope" – but not rational justification – supports one's political commitments in public.[22]

On Rorty's view, practical social and political problems do not call for philosophical analysis but for expanding our sense of *solidarity* with others, and this is best achieved through literature, since the imaginative encounter with diverse possibilities of the human condition found there enhances our capacities for empathy