1 What Is Existentialism?

1.1 Definitions and Debates, Paradigms and Patterns

One problem with defining existentialism is that although there are many definitions, there is no definitive statement of what it is. This is maybe apt: after all, perhaps the most famous existentialist slogan is that existence precedes essence. So one should not bat an eyelid at existentialism preceding any particular definition of what it is. Another famous slogan is that man is nothing else but what he makes of himself, and certainly, it can be said that there are instances in which existentialism has been taken to be little more than what we make of it.

There have been enough attempts to define existentialism that they can themselves be sorted into various paradigms. One is to see existentialism in terms of family resemblance. However, this has often led to thinkers being forcibly adopted into this family rather than being naturally begotten members of it. Thus, we find many members of this unhappy family unhappy in their own ways, all linked, usually through shared unhappiness, to existentialism. Yet enough differences remain that any cohesive account of existentialism is doomed, appropriately, to further unhappiness.

Amongst those seen as existentialists in the family resemblance sense are figures as diverse as Socrates, Augustine, Blaise Pascal, Friedrich Schelling, and G. W. F. Hegel, whose differences override their similarities. Søren Kierkegaard is particularly illustrative of this difficulty, existing almost as Schrödinger’s existentialist: simultaneously the paradigmatic existentialist and not one at all. Whilst I would say that Nietzsche is not an existentialist, existentialism is unthinkable without him. Gabriel Marcel is claimed to have first used the term, yet when he labelled Jean-Paul Sartre as an existentialist, Sartre rejected it. In turn, when Sartre labelled Marcel a Christian existentialist, he disavowed the philosophy. In that same lecture, 1945’s ‘Existentialism Is a Humanism’, Sartre enveloped Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers into existentialism, resulting in Heidegger’s repudiation of existentialism and Jaspers distancing his Existenzphilosophie from existentialism.\footnote{There is significant interplay between the terms existential, existentialism, and philosophy of existence. In German philosophy, they were largely, but not consistently, separated out: existenziell analysis explores the concrete, factual aspects of human existence; Existentialphilosophie analyses the ontological structures of human existence; and Existenzphilosophie analyses human experience.}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Cooper} Cooper 1990, 6–10, 2012, 28–30; Earnshaw 2006, 1–2; Flynn 2006, 8; Grimsley 1960, 1–11; Joseph et al. 2011, 3–4; Macquarrie 1972, 14–18; Reynolds 2006, 2–3; Warnock 1967, 1–2.
\bibitem{Beauvoir} Beauvoir reports that Marcel coined the term and that in 1943, she associated existentialism with Kierkegaard and Heidegger (Beauvoir 1962, 547–548; Contat and Rybalka 1974, 12).
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This lecture formed part of the so-called existentialist offensive and became foundational for public perceptions of existentialism. It is the source of the two definitions mentioned at the beginning of this Element. Yet Sartre came to regret his presentation of existentialism here, and its arguments were contested, not least by his collaborator in the offensive, Simone de Beauvoir. Their contemporary, Albert Camus, writing under similar influences and on similar themes, is often claimed as an existentialist despite his own fulsome disagreements with Sartre.

Existentialism was also a literary and cultural movement: Dostoevsky’s novels figure prominently in discussions of existentialism; Marcel, Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus wrote novels and plays that expressed their philosophical ideals and wrote on literary figures such as Jean Genet. For some authors, only certain works are considered existentialist: Tolstoy’s *Death of Ivan Ilyich* is allowed, *War and Peace* and *The Kreutzer Sonata* are not.

If describing existentialism as a family only creates unhappiness, then one could define existentialism in an atmospheric sense. Here, a number of concepts and conditions are set for what constitutes the atmosphere of existentialism. However, there is a sense of diminishing returns here as the conditions and concepts pile up, some of which cohere with each other and some of which do not. Flynn lists five key themes for existentialism: existence preceding essence, time being of the essence, humanism, freedom and responsibility, and ethical considerations as paramount (2006, 8). Yet this elides a number of other concepts that appear regularly in the existentialist literature: a focus on the absurdity of the world and of individual human existence within it, a rejection of a unified, given human nature or essence, seeing despair and anxiety as symptomatic of human existence, freedom as the key feature of the human condition, and a stress on revaluing and creating one’s own values.

Existentialism is therefore ‘an interchange amongst a group of thinkers from different regions who came to share a vocabulary for naming a set of problems in the shared setting of modernity’ (2012, 2). Debates also range over to what extent existentialism can be described as a philosophy. Kaufmann argues that it is instead ‘a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy’, where the one essential feature is a ‘perfervid individualism’ (1995, 11). Dreyfus emphasises ‘opposition to the philosophical tradition’ (Dreyfus 2006, 137) alongside the centrality of despair. Pierre Hadot sees aspects of existential thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger as being concerned with a Socratic account of philosophy as a way of life, which Flynn also notes. Solomon echoes this, claiming that ‘nothing could be further from the existential attitude than attempts to define existentialism, except perhaps a discussion about the attempts to define existentialism’ (1974, xix). That judgement I leave to the reader.

A small survey: Grene sees that Jaspers and Marcel are not proper existentialists as they lack ‘the terrible realisation of dread as the core of human life’ (1948, 138). Murdoch includes freedom,
draw out the connections between the concepts. For example, although existentialist freedom and responsibility may be overwhelming, they are also the possibility of authentic existence as that must be chosen by the individual rather than given to them by someone or something external.

As I shall explore in the Section 3, other attempts to define existentialism have been made genealogically, ethically, and sociologically. In order to give a clear account of the relationship of monotheism to existentialism, I will distinguish between proto-existentialism and existentialism proper. The former category includes thinkers who I consider to be forerunners to, and influential on, existentialism without themselves being existentialists. In the latter category, I include thinkers who explicitly describe themselves as existentialists. And to return to the beginning of this Element, I will focus on thinkers who explicitly engage with the ontological statement that existence precedes essence.

The distinction between the proto-existentialist and the existentialist proper is not always easy to maintain. It is the aim of this Element to illustrate why. Existentialism is incredibly broad but also quite specific, and teasing out why exactly it is both will show how a concern with monotheism can be enfolded within these definitions. I will be able to incorporate a history of how monotheism acted as a spur, as well as a challenge, to questions seen as particular to existentialism: questions of value, existence, and the human condition.

This Element does not seek a new definition of existentialism – there are enough of them out there. It does, however, argue for a new understanding of existentialism. This new understanding adds another concept to the atmospheric definition and strengthens the branches in the family tree. I will argue that a relation and concern with God is part of the definition of existentialism. I will also argue that those who base their philosophy on God can be understood as existentialists as much as those who reject God: even, and especially, if they argue that existence precedes essence. As I am arguing that existentialism proper always relates to that statement, I will make the point that this statement itself is one that is inherently concerned with monotheism. The inclusion of this...
concept enables me to make distinctions between the proto- and existentialist proper that are attentive to genealogical accounts of existentialism whilst not tying it to particular reception histories.

1.2 Is Existentialism an Atheism?

The popular view of existentialism is that it is resolutely atheistic. Yet if there is one religion that existentialism engages with, both positively and negatively, it is Christianity. To put it simply: the charge is that monotheism entails a set, unchanging essence or nature for both God and humanity. God is the stable, unchanging substance that grounds human existence. Humanity therefore has a set essence and purpose given to it by God. The statement that existence precedes essence is a rejection of this. The focus on monotheism in this text will explore how questions of being and essence relate to existence and whether existence preceding essence is compatible with monotheism.

As old scholarship has noted and recent scholarship has underscored, a preoccupation with God is not merely an undercurrent in existentialist philosophies, explicitly atheistic or otherwise. This preoccupation comes out in varying ways, which often mix in and amongst each other. Perhaps there is a debt to religious accounts of the human condition and existence or a sense in which the concept of God either provides stability or represents a psychological or ontological horizon; maybe there are tensions between the implied stability that monotheism provides in contrast to the finite, limited temporality of existence. Even, and perhaps especially, in accounts that reject monotheism, the trappings cannot be simply cleared away.

Despite this, concern with God is rarely seen as a defining feature of existentialism. Instead, in the popular vision of existentialism, God is de trop. It is this reading that I wish to contest in this Element, both through bringing out

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6 Although there is some engagement between Buddhism and existentialism in the Kyoto School, their focus was more on Meister Eckhart and Heidegger’s use of nothingness than questions of essence and being associated with Christianity.

7 Wahl notes that philosophies of existence all relate to transcendence. Heidegger ends up with a (slightly pagan) view of the holy and Sartre attributes to humanity the freedom of a God and an impotent desire to be God (1969). Kaufmann remarks that ‘religion has always been existentialist’ in that it is ‘preoccupied with suffering, death, and dread, with care, guilt, and despair’ (1975, 49). Martin’s opinion is that ‘even among the atheists, who today are better remembered, the questions addressed by existentialism look suspiciously akin to religious (or perhaps better, spiritual) questions’ (2006, 188). Stewart notes the desire of Camus to ‘preserve the actual content of Christian ethics and values whilst rejecting their metaphysical grounding’ (2010, 181). Whilst Warnock remarks that God’s existence makes little difference to existentialist theory as ‘in practice there is no help to be found in believing in God’ (1970, 134), Grene notes that the absence of God in Sartre is what makes his philosophy possible (1948, 42), and Cochrane notes that Sartre’s existentialism is ‘tortured by the thought that God might not be and yet must be’ (1956, 11).
the monotheistic impetus behind and within existentialism and by detailing how the atheistic existentialists are not quite able to escape from God. After all, certain key existentialist concepts hinge on monotheism: absurdity, for instance, arises from the lack of inherent meaning in existence that God would grant. Yet the centrality of absurdity in existentialism comes from Kierkegaard, who was very much a theist: indeed, belief arises by virtue of the absurd. Atheistic existentialists may argue that God’s existence limits human freedom by giving humanity a nature and an essence, but Marcel’s philosophy, grounded on God, contradicts that judgement. The non-theistic thinkers chiefly associated with existentialism, namely Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus, are not casual about the non-existence of God nor its effects.

Therefore, a particular concern with God marks existentialism. The existence of God, the limits, possibilities, and problems of monotheism are foundational to the formation of distinctively existentialist understandings of ontology, freedom, and ethics. Existentialists proper, those who found their philosophy on the statement that existence precedes essence, will formulate their ontology differently depending on that statement’s relation to God. That ontology will then ground their understanding of freedom; that freedom will define their ethics in relation to other people. The majority of those who have been subsumed into the existentialist family or enveloped in the existentialist atmosphere have a relationship with monotheism. That relationship is such that even when it is reacted against negatively, it is illustrative and even foundational, and when positively, it opens up new possibilities. Existentialism cannot be understood without reference to monotheism, although the engagement is such that, again, there is no single definitive approach.

I will explore the relationship between existentialism and monotheism in three key areas: genealogy, ontology, and ethics. The questions and concepts that arise in discussing these incorporate accounts of the nature and quality of human existence. These include how to understand freedom and responsibility: both individually and in relation to others, alongside questions of the primacy of activity or passivity. The following section explores the genealogy of existentialism proper by looking at six proto-existentialists: Augustine, Pascal, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Jaspers. The majority of these proto-existentialists are theistic and grapple with the nature of human existence in relation to God. Although some of these thinkers reject theism, they still engage with monotheism and its implications for human existence, and explore what human existence is in light of that lack. Their own navigation of the relationship of God to existence provides the essential context for exploring how the statement that existence precedes essence is one that is concerned with monotheism.
Section 3 will explore three thinkers associated with both existentialism proper and atheism: Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus. This section will look at how Sartre and Beauvoir came to develop and define existentialism and how Camus is connected with and yet separate from existentialism proper. In their definitions and rejections of existentialist concepts, the way in which each thinker grapples with monotheism will be explored. Sartre’s philosophy grapples with God as an impossible ideal, whereas Beauvoir’s explicitly ethical existentialism rejects God as a ground in favour of freedom. That, however, raises issues of abstraction and instability. Camus’s famous Sisyphean defiance belies his enduring engagement with Christianity. The similarities and differences between these three thinkers, on questions of human nature and existence, ethics, and monotheism, will show that existentialism, even in its most proper form, cannot be separated from a concern with God. Indeed, none of these thinkers found a way, successfully, of being saints without God.

Section 4 will explore three theists whom I consider to be existentialists proper: Gabriel Marcel, Nikolai Berdyaev, and Paul Tillich. They all engage with the premise that existence precedes essence, and they all respond to the atheistic existentialists. Gabriel Marcel’s thought sparked the existentialism that was popularised by Sartre, but his philosophy challenges the conclusions of Sartre and Beauvoir. Although the key themes of Nikolai Berdyaev’s thought developed through a different lineage from their phenomenological reception, he embraces himself as an existentialist, finding creativity and freedom sourced in, rather than opposed to, God. Paul Tillich takes seriously the ontological challenges of atheistic existentialism. These thinkers all develop, in differing ways and through their different theological traditions, theistic existentials that accept, but then transcend, existentialist visions of human existence and its condition. They show as well that monotheism can help, rather than hinder, human freedom and existence.

I will conclude by identifying and exploring three key areas in which monotheism is concerned with existentialism, positively and negatively. These are passivity and activity, freedom and responsibility, and ontology and relationality.

2 Climbing the Existentialist Tree: Six Proto-Existentialists

Figure 1 depicts Emanuel Mounier’s existentialist tree. This early genealogy of existentialism emphasises its religious heritage. Whilst the roots of the tree draw from Christians and Ancient Greeks, the body and many of the branches are formed of religious thinkers. In his Introduction, amongst themes such as the contingency of human being, the failure of reason in the face of human
existence, anguish at responsibility, the agony of choice, and truth as subjectivity, Mounier also identifies a stress on a divine inner transcendence that grounds human relationality. This may be why Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre are placed on their own rather lonely, diverging branch.

Mounier’s tree is useful: it shows that the genealogy of existentialism was being written and debated as existentialism itself made its steps into popularity. The following section explores six thinkers on this tree. Perhaps the overwhelming similarity that unites the following, quite disparate thinkers is that they describe human existence as characterised by anxiety and despair. There are
other features of their thought that entail they lean more into agreement than not, such as a focus on the self and the individual, and their lack of unity with the world and others. It is from these disjunctions that feelings of anxiety and despair arise.

Yet I would hesitate to refer to the following thinkers simply as existentialists or to overly stress the anxiety and despair. Often the following thinkers are smuggled into existentialism, but I am loathe to do so here. I would instead say that atmospheric aspects of existentialism are present in their thought, often as a part of the whole. This distinguishes them from the existentialist proper, whose thought I see as orientated more overtly around the premise that existence precedes essence. However, giving a clear account of themes that are taken up in existentialism and their treatment in thinkers who have been brought into the existentialist canon is helpful. Whilst existentialism has been observed to stretch back to Socrates and Plato, in keeping with my monotheistic concern, this survey of proto-existentialists begins with Augustine.

2.1 Augustine (354–430)

Although Augustine’s thought is diffused throughout Western philosophy, it is particularly pertinent to existentialism. His presentation of the human condition is key to his influence on and incorporation into existentialism. His autobiographical analysis of human existence in the *Confessions* presents the self that has ‘become to myself a vast problem’ (1961, IV.4): restless, anxious, and fallen, searching for meaning and purpose in a world filled with distractions and temptations. Existence is marked by the disjunction of the self and its idea of itself to the world that surrounds it, its expectations, and the others that dwell within it. The self conflicts with and fails them, as it does also with God. God, as the source of being and goodness, calls the self to that goodness but is hidden behind the distractions, cares, and concerns of everyday life.

Having been created by God from nothing, the self is situated between God and nothingness. The self therefore lacks ontological wholeness, unlike God. The lack and instability in human nature means that whilst we are created to desire and seek happiness in God as the source of our being, we tend towards sin, turning away from the source of goodness and towards nothingness. Our

8 Wahl writes that Augustine ‘replaced pure speculation with a kind of thinking closer to the person, the individual’ (1949, 9).

9 (2003, X.xx.29). Augustine writes that ‘man did not fall away to the extent of losing all being; but when he had turned towards himself his being was less real than when he adhered to him who exists in a supreme degree. And so, to abandon God and to exist in oneself, that is to please oneself, is not immediately to lose all being; but it is to come nearer to nothingness’ (2003, XIV. xiii.572–573).
will turns towards sin through a self-deception that is sourced in our pride. Pride presents us with an ameliorated picture of ourselves, which prevents us from truly engaging in self-examination. We can only examine ourselves truthfully by turning our love and regard from ourselves towards God. We are then able to see and know ourselves clearly and truthfully.

Turning towards God is Augustine’s solution to our restlessness, anxiety, and despair. We find our rest in the fullness of God’s goodness and being rather than entrenching ourselves further into nothingness and self-regard. It is in God that ‘our good abides and it has no blemish’ (1961, IV.16). Augustine’s vision of human existence outside of God contains the germ of existentialism. His description of human existence and the human condition prior to salvation: as fallen, individual, anguished, and self-deceptive, will re-emerge in later proto-existentialists as well as in existentialism proper. Augustine’s philosophy offers us a relief from fraught human nature, a rest in the being of God. As we shall see in later thinkers, the possibility of rest or the promise of fullness becomes either impossible or another deception.

2.2 Blaise Pascal (1623–1662)

Due to his association with Jansenism, Pascal is seen to stand within the Augustinian tradition. His own philosophical work moves in different directions, and although there are similarities to Augustine’s vision of existence, Pascal anchors the existentialist vision in other ways. Nietzsche, who was deeply dismissive of Augustine, lauded Pascal, listing him as amongst those philosophers whose blood mingles with his in sacrifice and from whom and on whom ‘I will accept judgement . . . [and] fix my eyes and see theirs fixed on me’ (Nietzsche 1996, 408). Sartre read Pascal in his youth, and referring to his wager Beauvoir’s student diaries comment that Pascal formulates the only true, unsolvable problem, that ‘I would want to believe in something – to meet with total exigency – to justify my life. In short, I would want God’ (Beauvoir 2006, 262).

Pascal’s thought dwells on the human condition, his thought emphasising more fervently than Augustine’s the impossibility of human effort and true self-knowledge. Channelling Socrates, he sees we are enjoined to begin the process of knowing by knowing ourselves. However, this is frustrated by our very nature as the human condition is that of ‘inconstancy, boredom, anxiety’ (1995, L24/B127). In this boredom, one ‘feels his nothingness, his desertion,

10 ‘Confronted with the disclosure of that anxiety which relates to nothing in the world but arises from his own being, man has an alternative to that flight into an inauthentic existence of surrender to the world – namely recourse to God, who is the ground of being, Creator of both man and the world’ (Macquarrie 1955, 71).
his insufficiency, his dependence, his weakness, his emptiness’. When self-knowledge is attempted ‘immediately from the depth of his heart will emerge ennui, gloom, sadness, distress, vexation, despair which inhibits this’ (L622/B131).

In a frequently quoted fragment, Pascal laments this contradictory, irreconcilable, and irresolvable state of humanity:

> What a chimera then is man! What a novelty! What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy! Judge of all things, imbecile worm of the earth; depositary of truth, a sink of uncertainty and error; the pride and refuse of the universe! (L131/B434)

Yet, despite the fact that ‘man is only a reed, the weakest in nature’, he is a ‘reed that thinks’ (L6/347).

In Pascal’s measure, we are such because we are caught between two impossible poles. We are ‘a nothingness with respect to the infinite, an everything with respect to nothingness’, and therefore ‘a place between everything and nothing’ (L199/B72). We also long for love and respect, both from ourselves and others. Yet this is an impossible longing as we cannot know the truth about ourselves. Suffering from our self-deceptive narratives, we narrate our own self to ourselves and others, desiring a complete narrative and wholeness. However, instead we constantly come up against the ‘nothingness of our own being’ (L806/B147).

What can satisfy us if we can never find satisfaction from ourselves or others? Only God and the fullness of God’s being and love can satisfy our longing. But our nature prevents us from seeking out the correct solution to our inherent problem. Therefore, Pascal sees that before God, we must be passive and accept our nothingness, our fallenness, and the inadequacy of our attempts to overcome this. Only then we may be granted grace, but this is not at all guaranteed. Even our rest is hemmed in by anxiety and despair, compounded by our impotence in the face of existence.\(^\text{11}\) Pascal’s vision of human existence and his response to it foreshadow several conundrums that will plague existentialism proper: whether humanity’s passivity is something to be rejected or worked around and whether truly authentic existence can be given or can only be chosen.

2.3 Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855)

We turn from the more distant ancestors to the man described often as the Father of Existentialism. Kierkegaard is illustrative as a thinker who is not as directly...