

BOOK REVIEWS

In this issue we again have a wide variety of reviews. Philosophers will find reviews of books on Heidegger and three recent books on Sartre as well as a book about the application of Wittgenstein's ideas to therapy. The theme of opening to life is addressed in one way in a book by Kirk Schnieder and in an entirely different way in a book by Natascha Kampusch about her imprisonment and its aftermath. Both are impressive accounts of resilience in extreme circumstances. Also reviewed is an important book on 'Asbergers Syndrome'. Readers interested in psychotherapy integration will find a book which looks for links between the existential and gestalt perspectives. Insights represented and echoed in more mainstream non-academic books are represented by two of the Sartre books, by the Kampusch book and also by a review of *Delusions of Gender*, which challenges the current fad for neurological explanations for existential issues, in this case so-called gender differences. These books remind us of the value of non-academic books if only because they are more firmly anchored in our experience in- the-world.

The Sartre Dictionary

Gary Cox. (2008). London: Continuum.

Sartre and Fiction

Gary Cox. (2009). London: Continuum.

How to be an Existentialist or How to Get Real, Get a Grip and Stop Making Excuses

Gary Cox. (2009). London: Continuum.

It is obvious from the titles of the first two books that Gary Cox is a Sartre scholar. He is an academic who now works as a writer and teacher in both academic and non-academic contexts and this is apparent because he knows how to write for different audiences. All these books are clearly written although all have rather different writing styles and they all fill much needed gaps in the Existential literature

The remit of the first book, *The Sartre Dictionary*, is clear from the title. The back cover says that it is '*a comprehensive and accessible guide to the world of Jean-Paul Sartre.[...]More than 350 A-Z entries include clear definitions of all the key terms used in Sartre's writing and detailed synopses of his key works, novels and plays.*' Also some of the entries are for Sartrean phrases like '*consciousness is consciousness of.....*' and '*condemned to be free*'. It also includes key features of his life for example the circumstances around his refusal of the Nobel Prize for literature. This

is one of its most useful features, that it includes features not just from his philosophical writings but also his literature and his life. The way Sartre lived is probably more important for our understanding of his life and work than his writing. He did not just write about existentialism, he lived existentially in public view – in-the-world. Although philosophers are often carefully to cover their historical tracks – they like to present their ideas as all new - no one exists in isolation and this is as true for Sartre as for anyone else. This stance is also reflected in the way Cox contextualises Sartre's career and writing with frequent references to other writers that describe both Sartre's indebtedness to them and his differences with them. Many of them also get their own entry. In the entry on '*will to power*' he describes the similarities and differences between Nietzsche's and Sartre's position. '*Eternal recurrence*' also has a separate entry. Nietzsche crops up on many occasions in the cross-referencing. As a rough guess I would say that at least half the entries have references to other writers.

Cox is not uncritical – he refers to some of the often public debates that Sartre had with Merleau-Ponty and describes the way in which Sartre can reasonably be criticised for his position on the nature of freedom. Like many writers of his stature Sartre wrote an enormous amount and his position evolved over time, as it would, and by and large the entries do not take a historical stance to his work rather than a whole career stance. An exception to this is the entry on ethics which notes that Sartre did not get round to coherently enlarging on his theory of personal ethics as he promised to do in *Being and Nothingness*. There are many ideas from Sartre that are incompletely understood both by students but also by people who ought to know better, like, '*radical freedom*', the relationship between '*bad faith*' and '*self deception*', and the subtle and illuminating complexity of the '*en-soi*' and the '*pour-soi*' as applied to relationships, and the centrality of the significance of idea of the '*fundamental project*' as applied to psychotherapy practice. This book clarifies and contextualises them.

People usually encounter Sartre either from the direction of his philosophy or from his fiction and then stay where they are. This is an academic conceit since it is obviously the same person who wrote both. Consequently other books about Sartre tend to concentrate on the philosophy as philosophy or the fiction as fiction. I suspect that most readers of this journal will be more familiar with the philosophy. This is their loss. Sartre found that the different genres illuminated the same issues differently and therefore his work needs to be read as a whole. *Sartre and Fiction* does something almost unique which is to reveal the extent to which Sartre's fictional writings are an integral part of his overall intellectual vision. The genre of the philosophical novel is problematic and is fraught with obstacles, the most common of which is that the characters simply represent philosophical positions and do not become believable as

lives which are being lived. The other is to tack the philosophy on as a running commentary. Part of Sartre's genius was to transcend this and write novels and plays about real people who are encountering and struggling with the dilemmas and paradoxes of existence. The book opens with a short introduction to Sartre's non-academic writing. As Cox states '*there is no better way to capture philosophically the existential realities of human life than through literary fiction*'. I became familiar with his literature long before I was able to read his philosophy. Maybe one day there will be a module on Existential training courses that only uses novels and dispenses with overtly philosophical texts entirely. If other existential writers were as able as Sartre to transcend boundaries so skilfully I am sure we would have a better understanding of what their ideas actually mean when they are lived. The second chapter is an exposition of the main points of Sartre's philosophy, presumably written for the non-philosophers. There may be a temptation for people who think they know Sartre's philosophy to skip this chapter but this is not recommended as it is impressively clear and also flags up some references to what is in store in the rest of the book. The next chapter is devoted to Sartre's short stories. Sartre is a master of the short story and his first was published in 1939, the year after *Nausea*. As any writer knows, it is easier to write something long than something short. To write a short story the themes have to be kept simple but not simplistic. In art there is a world of difference between a sketch and a cartoon. The best short stories are sketches where a delicate balance is maintained between detail and ambiguity. Sartre does this and each story takes a different theme. *The Wall* explores the psychology of prisoners of war facing execution, *Erostratus* enters the mind of a psychopath detailing the progression from fantasy to violent action. What many consider to be his most accomplished story, *Childhood of a Leader*, has a strongly political theme that shows the interlocking of the personal and the political in the sense that '*the slide into anti-Semitism[.....]is not[...]a political journey but a personal journey into[...]bad faith*'.

The next chapter tackles the novels, *Nausea* and the *Roads to Freedom* series, all published before 1950. *Nausea* was published in 1939 after being rejected and re-written a number of times but it achieved almost immediate success. It is a curious book in which almost nothing happens in a conventional sense, but it is also an example of a truly philosophical novel because it does not depart from its core narrative to make philosophical reflections. It inspired Camus' *The Stranger* and has achieved cult status as the archetypal existential novel. It was also the second novel I read in my novel reading career. Cox quotes Iris Murdoch who says, '*its power resides in its character as a philosophical myth, which shows us in a memorable way the master-image of Sartre's thinking*'. But *Nausea's* timeless strength shows up a weakness of the *Roads to Freedom* which Cox says are becoming more period pieces, being set before and during

World War 2 and recounting the occupation of Paris. But none the less worth reading. The first of the series, *The Age of Reason*, takes place over a period of two days and vividly describes how the various characters see themselves not as dynamically co-constituted in-the-world, but rather as objects who are caused by the world, but are unable to see their way out. The second, *The Reprieve*, Cox says '*dispenses with a continuity of place and action – though not continuity of time – to produce a multifaceted view of a Europe teetering on the brink of total war*'. In the third, *Iron in the Soul*, Paris has been occupied and we catch up with some of the characters from the first book. They have been changed though, in the same way as Sartre was changed by the war. He started writing *The Roads to Freedom* at the same time as he wrote *Being and Nothingness*, during the war, and the series shows his evolving ethic of political action as being an integral part of the existential life. Sartre used his own experience to inform his philosophy and his fiction as he would - what else is there - and it is interesting to read his philosophy, his fiction and the excellent biographies in parallel.

For Sartre, who had always an interest in drama, his plays were the best way of expressing his resistance to the Nazi occupation. Consequently all his plays are overtly political in intent but allegorical in content and narrative and in this way they were able to be staged in occupied Paris. *The Flies* (1943), for example, is based on the Greek legend of Orestes and explores the theme of freedom and responsibility through the conversion of one of the characters from peace loving intellectual to warrior, while *No Exit* is rather more abstract but still deals with the theme of imprisonment. Readers will recall that Sartre's quote '*hell is other people*' is from this play. *The Respectable Prostitute* resulted from Sartre's first visit to the USA and is about racism and double standards in that country.

One book not given the consideration it deserves, although it is mentioned, is *Words*, presumably because it is autobiography rather than fiction. Written and revised over a period of ten years and eventually published in 1964 it is the work that was to have given him the Nobel prize. It is a complex multi-layered book that is simultaneously autobiography, biography, novel and philosophy and has stood the test of time and needs to be more widely known. It opens up the question, 'Existentially, what is the best way to describe a life?' I think would have been worthwhile stretching the remit of *Sartre and Fiction* to include it.

The third book, *How to be an Existentialist or How to Get Real, Get a Grip and Stop Making Excuses*, is a different kettle of fish entirely. It is the nearest thing yet to an existential self-help book. But if this seems to you like dumbing down, don't let this put you off. Although it is clearly informed by Sartrean ideas, and Sartre is mentioned from time to time the ideas are all talked about in a disarmingly clear way. He takes the central ideas of freedom and responsibility and links them to bad faith and shows

how these are endemic in popular thinking. As he says in the introduction, *'If this book doesn't change the way you think, feel and act for the better then don't blame me. I am responsible for writing the book, you are responsible for reading it[...]we live in a blame culture, or rather blame everyone but myself culture'*. This theme and tone recurs. The first chapter is called *What is an Existentialist?* And he reminds us although *'existentialism is a fiercely honest philosophy that confronts human life for what it is'*, not only is it not necessary know about existential philosophy to be an existentialist, but also that someone may know all about it intellectually but fail miserably to live by it. The second chapter is called *What is Existentialism. Brief overview and quick history lesson*. It is here that Cox gets into his stride. Although it is important to remember that he is writing for the person who is interested but uninformed, I suspect that those who imagine themselves to be informed would get a great deal from this book if they let themselves. There have been enough philosophy books written for philosophers, he wants to write one for everybody else. Subheadings in this chapter are *'Existentialism and Consciousness'*, *'Temporality'*, *'Being-for-others'*, *'Freedom and Responsibility'*, *'Freedom and Disability'*, *'Possible Limits to Freedom'*, and, *'Freedom and Anxiety'*. All recognisable existential ideas that could have come from a standard textbook. But the way he writes about them is a way I suspect you will never have encountered. If you get his sense of humour, and I do, you will find it as funny as it is enlightening. It is funny in a way that at first can appear just crass and deliberately shocking but is actually calculatedly clever and subtle. It makes you question orthodoxy. To make you say *'that's rubbish... or is it...? But superficial it is not*. He manages to explain some extremely complex ideas in simple language. This is the way philosophy should be taught. In simple language with examples and prompts so that you see the world and your place in it differently.

Chapter 3 is called *'How not to be an Existentialist'* and the set of ideas he expands on here revolve around the many ways we can be and are frequently in bad faith. And there are many. In chapter 4 – *'How to be Authentic'* – Cox refers to Sartre's *War Diaries*. This little known work is pivotal in understanding a crucial change in Sartre's thought because it was written as a response to his time as a prisoner of war and therefore documents the evolving political dimension of his vision of the existential life to which he was to devote the rest of his life.

Nietzsche is referred to in this chapter too in a section called *'Nietzsche on Authenticity – Regret Nothing'*, where he talks clearly, as always, about the everyday meaning of eternal recurrence. Chapter 5 is called *'Existential Counselling'*. This short chapter has the feeling of an afterthought, but a necessary one considering what sort of market the book has in mind and there is nothing in it that is misleading. For a philosopher, he has understood the project of existential counselling well enough. Not

surprisingly but necessarily, he draws here on Sartre's life of Flaubert and the significance of the need to re-evaluate ones original project in order to make more context appropriate choices.

I have recommended '*How to be an Existentialist....*' to many people and all have gained a clearer understanding of Sartre than they had before.

Not only is it easier to write something long rather than short, it is easier to write something complicated rather than something simple. Cox has achieved something extremely impressive here. He has written something short and simple while not losing any of the depth and subtlety.

All three books complement each other well. *Sartre and Fiction* is a book I always wanted to write sometime, *How to be an Existentialist....* is a book I would have liked to have written, but to write them both I would need *The Sartre Dictionary*.

Martin Adams

Delusions of Gender

Cordelia Fine. (2010). London: Icon Books.

A few days before I wrote this review, two so-called 'alpha-males' - the former governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the head of the IMF, Dominique Strauss-Khan - were exposed as a philandering loverat who secretly fathered a child with the family housekeeper, and an alleged rapist, respectively. The former lost his marital tie to the Kennedy clan; the latter was arrested and briefly banged up in New York's notorious Riker's prison. Why did they do it? According to the media's favourite expert on male/female behaviour, John Gray (of the *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus* franchise), the culprit is male hormones which make it difficult for powerful men to be faithful. 'Men,' he opined, '*are basically wired up to be polygamous*'; therefore, in a loving, monogamous (perhaps he meant monotonous?) relationship, the man's testosterone level [goes] down, so he's inclined to seek out risky behaviour to push it back up again.'

If you think that's a lot of hooey, you will relish Fine's *Delusions of Gender*: a fiercely argued and witty expose of what she calls neurosexism. As she reminds readers, neurosexism has form; it's the 21st century version of using cod-science to justify male privilege. From Aristotle's wandering womb to Victorian patriarchs measuring and weighing male and female brains to prove that higher education for women causes infertility and/or insanity, votes for women, promiscuity, its function was and remains to push Nora back into her doll's house. Based on supposedly unbiased, peer-reviewed research and cutting-edge technology (positron emission tomography [PET]; functional magnetic resonance imaging [fMRI] brain scans), neurosexism is tainted old wine in shiny new bottles,