

At the Existentialist Cafe: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails

Sarah Bakewell (2016). New York: Other Press

For me, December is a month for several things: my father's birthday, holiday-season gift-giving panic, and the annual 'Best Books of the Year' round-ups. This concurrence is convenient, because my father wants for nothing in life but reads voraciously. Invariably behind schedule and pressed for time, I never read the book reviews at length but proceed largely based on what sounds good from the titles, populating my own wish list concurrently. If the same book crops up on the lists of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Observer*, it's usually a safe bet. That's how I encountered Sarah Bakewell's *At the Existentialist Café* (2016), an unusually philosophical entry on nonfiction lists that are usually filled with history, popular-science and political titles.

Having trained as an existential psychotherapist long ago, I popped *At the Existentialist Café* onto my own list because I felt that I ought to want to read it. Perhaps because everyone thinks I should read 'for fun' more and was suspicious that a book about philosophers couldn't possibly be amusing, no one bought it for me, but a few months later I found a used, slightly coffee-stained copy at a fittingly bohemian bookshop-cum-café. I didn't know what to expect, not having read the reviews in full, but I thought it could be a series of whimsical imaginary dialogues or overheard conversations, or something drier, like those biographies of Heidegger or Sartre that sit on shelves in my study, each read about 15% of the way through. It wasn't either one of those things. By the time I'd finished it, I had cried over it on the Tube at least twice; had seized my phone to order four further books I was now desperate to read; and had dug out my old copy of *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), which will shortly transform from its pristine, uncracked-spine condition to being a dog-eared mess. I had experienced pity for Heidegger, sisterhood with de Beauvoir, bemusement at Sartre, grief over *Camus*, and annoyance and astonishment at half a dozen petty squabbles. Most importantly, I was thoroughly unintimidated by everyone, in the best possible way.

What Sarah Bakewell has produced is a book on existentialists and existentialism that cuts through our jadedness, our I'm-not-worthy awe, and our collective inferiority complex about the lofty, superhuman intellectual heights that we assume these thinkers must have occupied. She reveals both the sparkle and the mundanity of the better-known and lesser-known figures in this philosophical movement; their sometimes-glamorous and sometimes-pedestrian lives; the evolutions, interactions and downright clashes of their ideas; and the jockeying of their politics and personalities. She illustrates beautifully that although existentialism was a product of and response to the many personal, political

and social contextual factors surrounding its birth, it was far from just being a mid-century craze or fad, characterised by existentialist haircuts (yes, really), paparazzi-hounded French philosopher-celebrities, and the strains of jazz in smoky clubs. She blows the dust off the decades-old texts on our shelves and shows us, rather than telling us, why and how existentialism matters and how it still applies, now as much as ever.

I say ‘our’ and ‘us’, and you might be included in that plural pronoun too, but for the moment I’m talking about Sarah Bakewell and me, because a background thread of this book is autobiographical, charting one woman’s journey of discovery from her beginnings as a teenage suburban existentialist who was in love with ideas. When I read the following passage, on the penultimate page of the book, I wished I were in a café with her, talking over apricot cocktails, because I would have thoroughly enjoyed the face-to-face ‘I know, right?!?’ moment of shared experience that I think we might have had.

When I first read Sartre and Heidegger, I didn’t think the details of a philosopher’s personality or biography were important. This was the orthodox belief in the field at the time, but it also came from my being too young myself to have much sense of history. I intoxicated myself with concepts, without taking account of their relationship to events and to all the odd data of their inventors’ lives. Never mind lives; ideas were the thing. Thirty years later, I have come to the opposite conclusion. Ideas are interesting, but people are vastly more so

(Bakewell, p 326)

This is her conclusion and mine too, and I would instantly challenge anyone who reads this book and thinks differently to a debate, if not a duel. I feel an intense kinship with Bakewell’s experience. In my 20s, when I was training at the existentially-orientated Regent’s College (as it was then), Sartre and Heidegger formed the twin pillars of my education as a psychotherapist. Existential practitioners and lecturers seemed to favour one or the other. I inhaled a heady atmosphere of ideas, but I studied very little of the life and times of the philosophers who had shaped them. There was a bit of this, of course, and indeed sometimes this led to debates about whether one *should* consider ideas as separate from context. I recall, for example, grappling with Heidegger’s connection to National Socialism, and during my course there was a considerable amount of hand-wringing – sometimes communal, sometimes personal – about whether it was morally suspect to see genius or to find pleasure in Heidegger’s work. Many of us concluded that considering Heidegger’s ideas as separate from the man was both possible and desirable. As far as other lives went, I knew about

the bond between de Beauvoir and Sartre, of course, but aside from picturing them at Les Deux Magots and being aware of a certain cult of personality surrounding them, I knew little of the details, and, like Bakewell, I didn't think that it was necessary to learn them. As she says, the ideas were the thing. She doesn't believe that anymore.

As Bakewell's own journey was important for how and why she wrote the book, my context is important for why and how I read it with so much appreciation. Some might argue that this book is aimed at and appropriate for a general audience, and its appearance on the best-book lists of the mainstream media would seem to suggest this. Although he has little background in philosophy, could I have gifted it to my father as well as earmarking it for myself? Would he have enjoyed it? I don't know. I sensed early on that, although beautifully written in an accessible style, and mostly comprehensible to the 'intelligent layperson', the book might prove a slight challenge to someone utterly unversed in existential philosophy. It features a 'Who's Who' at the back, but not a 'What's What' for existential ideas and terminology. Furthermore, though, for me much of the pleasure of *At the Existentialist Café* came from re-engaging with figures whose ideas I knew well, at a different point in my life, and through the lens of Bakewell's warm, affectionate and detailed take on their lives. It was the sensation of encountering something both familiar and fresh, the feeling being gently challenged, the disrupting of prior assumptions in light of new information. There were little shocks of fascination about just how germane to today's world some of the ideas of existentialism are, partly because of current social developments and geopolitical rumblings that mirror the events of those times. There were surprises to do with the humanity and the flaws of some philosophers, and with the unexpected relevance of others, some of whom I had formerly regarded as peripheral also-rans. I am astonished now, having experienced Bakewell's perspective, that I ever saw Simone de Beauvoir as a bit player – the woman behind the man – and some of the books that I grabbed my phone to order were hers. I also cannot believe that I never really bothered with Merleau-Ponty, the 'dancing philosopher' who (uniquely) gets a chapter all to himself in this book. Perhaps I was too exhausted and sated from *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962) and *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 2003) to even contemplate making space for *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). I intend to redress the balance now, however, for Merleau-Ponty's work strongly supports a passionate belief of mine, which is that physiology and neuropsychology warrant far more attention than they often receive on existential training courses.

Had Bakewell's book been a mere account of the interesting lives of existential philosophers, I would not have cried over it on the Tube, so clearly it is more than this. My tears came about because *At the Existentialist Café*, at various

lovely points, eloquently expresses how powerfully existentialism and phenomenology can connect us to the beauty, poignancy, and transience of life. For reasons too numerous to count, such a philosophy is as important as it ever was.

References

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Elaine Kasket

The Legacy of R.D.Laing

M.Guy Thompson (ed) (2015). London: Routledge.

Towards the end of the 1970s a cluster of us, including Mike Thompson, the cheerleader in chief who has so skilfully brought together the various contributors to this book, would gather at the weekend cottage of one of the other essayists, Steve Gans, up in the hills north of Aylesbury. Amidst the wine and the spliff the conversation would invariably follow a well-worn trajectory: What would be the effect of the initiatives of Laing in the years to come? In other words what would the legacy look like... indeed would there even be one? Perhaps to some degree responding to the bittersweet spin of Clancy Sigal's 'The Zone of the Interior' where the figure of Laing was entitled 'Dr Willie Last'.

In order to glimpse what might purport to be something of any such legacy it feels important to be crystal clear as to what was at stake with regard to Laing's ideas. After all let us set aside his unequivocal status as an iconic, mesmeric presence amidst a number of 1960s counter-cultural heroes, potentially all stemming from the initiatives of the Beat generation, Ginsberg, Kerouac and the like. To break free from the stultifying constraints of prevailing convention. Whatever else might be said this cannot be taken away from him. Put another way, his place within that firmament is incontestable. Whilst it feels important to recognise, indeed celebrate this, there are times when some of the ideas appear to get a little lost in the shuffle of these varied contributions.

Fundamental to the grand project, whether the emphasis was on psychiatry or psychoanalysis, was the unrelenting advocacy of careful listening. And this is never quite such a simple point. After all, an insistent phenomenological trope is the underscoring of prepositions, and what was being advocated