

Rethinking Existentialism

Jonathan Webber (2018). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

After having had about eighty years in which to make up our minds, no one is still quite sure what existentialism is. Gabriel Marcel offered philosophers the word itself in the 1940s. Jean-Paul Sartre eventually said ‘*Oui*’, Martin Heidegger said ‘*Nein*’ and the rest is history. In his book *Rethinking Existentialism*, Jonathan Webber, Professor of Philosophy at Cardiff University, sets out his case for becoming certain what the word means.

This is a must-read for anyone interested in the philosophy of Sartre, Simone Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon, whom Webber anoints as the true prophets of canonical existentialism and for whom the one commandment is existence precedes essence. The key gospels are Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*, Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* and Sartre’s *Saint Genet*. Existentialism, he summarises, “is the theory that the reasons we each respond to in our thought and behaviour reflect the values enshrined in our own projects, which we can change but which become progressively sedimented as they are deployed in cognition and action”.

In Webber’s eyes, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Camus and perhaps others traditionally included as existentialists commit heresies of various kinds against this orthodoxy. Camus rejected it outright with his belief that humans do have character; Merleau-Ponty screwed up his understanding of Sartre’s theory of freedom; and Heidegger’s ontology misses the point of Sartre and Beauvoir’s psychology. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard were of course long dead before the virgin birth of existentialism.

All in all, Webber articulates his position brilliantly. His writing is precise, careful and intelligent, but it is not for the casual reader – you will need some intellectual stamina. He helpfully explains Sartre, Beauvoir and Fanon in their own right and meticulously untangles some complex points of agreement and disagreement between them during the historical development of their thinking. He elegantly outlines Beauvoir’s argument for the ethical imperative of authenticity. If you enjoy philosophy, this is the kind of book that will make you want to be a philosophy professor.

The book starts with Sartre and Beauvoir’s existential commandment and their initially differing views of freedom, including some helpful explanations of Beauvoir’s introduction of the idea of sedimentation and the various meanings of essence. Along the way, Webber introduces Sartre’s critique of Freudian analysis and suggests the way in which existentialism improves upon, rather than replaces, Freud’s theory of mind. Webber also sets up the outlines of his discussion of existentialist ethics, founded on the virtue of authenticity.

After this, Webber dives into his exegesis of key texts, starting with *The*

Outsider, to demonstrate Camus' departure from the faith. Next is Merleau-Ponty's mistaken critique in *Adventures of the Dialectic* of Sartre's theory of freedom, based on confusing meanings with reasons as features of the mind that Sartre believes depend on an individual's freely chosen projects. This is followed by an account of Beauvoir's understanding of sedimentation, illustrated in her novel *She Came to Stay*.

Webber then turns to an exploration of the differences between Freudian and existential psychoanalysis, incorporating their very different views of Cartesian dualisms, and founded respectively on Freudian drives, or Sartrean projects as described in *Being and Nothingness*. He shows how Beauvoir develops this in *The Second Sex* with her incorporation of the sedimentation of social meanings and values into understanding the experience and social construction of women.

After this, we are treated to a close reading of *Huis Clos*, in which Webber argues that Sartre did not believe relational conflict was inevitable but that it is a product of bad faith. He then looks at the later development of Sartre's thinking to incorporate Beauvoir's theory of sedimentation of values in *Saint Genet*.

Fanon's work appears in the next couple of chapters, first in a detailed analysis of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Webber argues that Fanon's eclectic use of various intellectual and cultural traditions to understand the situation of black colonised people – and set out an existentialist ethical, social and political outlook – is in keeping with the freedom-with-sedimentation position finally agreed upon by Sartre and Beauvoir. In the next chapter, Webber shows how the eudaemonist argument (authenticity makes you feel better) put forward by Fanon and Sartre does not quite work in grounding a normative ethical imperative to value freedom.

In the penultimate chapter, Beauvoir comes to the rescue to set out an ethical case for authenticity founded on the structure of human existence itself. Webber's extraction and clarification of this argument from her *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is a lovely example of the capacity of his precision to make philosophy clearer, if not necessarily easier.

Webber's concluding chapter uses his interpretation of canonical existential philosophy, psychology and ethics to look ahead at the future of existentialism in which "the virtue of authenticity is morally required and has therapeutic value". The point of defining canonical existentialism is, he argues, that it then has contributions to make not just to philosophy but to the social psychology of attitudes and motivation (for example, in gender and racial stereotyping), to psychotherapy (in terms of the internalisation of social meanings) and the interpretation of literary texts (in terms of authors' pursuit of their chosen values). Covering a lot of ground in short order, it is a somewhat superficial ending to an otherwise rigorous and substantial book.

Among the elements of the book that I found valuable, as a non-academic,

were Webber's clear and deeply considered explanations of aspects of existential thought that I was familiar with but had not considered in any detail. This includes his very helpful explanations of what Sartre meant by projects and essence, how sedimentation operates and what 'Hell is other people' really means. While they may not have an immediate impact on my therapeutic practice, I suspect an emphasis on projects and sedimentation in understanding people's situations and the ethical imperative to value freedom will continue to sediment further into my understanding of therapy over time.

As for Webber's attempt to purify the definition of existentialism, I am doubtful that this will gain much traction in the long run. Attempts to trim other baggy creeds and concepts – Christianity? psychotherapy? philosophy? – seem generally not to succeed.

Having said that, all serious rethinking contributes value to the mess in any case. Webber's book provides a welcome provocation and successfully brought my attention to some neglected or vaguely articulated ideas in my therapeutic and philosophical churches. I will still use the word existentialism in a looser sense than he would wish, but not without a better understanding of the meaning and ethical value of 'existence precedes essence'.

Andrew Miller

Living Well and Dying Well: Tales of Counselling Older People

Helen Kewell (2019). Ross-on-Wye: PCCS.

The publisher's summary on the back of this book promises a collection of case studies. I suppose this is so, but it all depends on what is meant by case study. A case study is a way of reflecting on practice. As such, it is a research method and there are many different sorts of research methods. Their value depends on the question being asked as well as the skill of the researcher. Traditionally favoured by psychoanalysis, the case study is a hybrid method, part biography, part literature review, part autobiography, part phenomenological research and part natural science. Our closest association with them is usually when we write them as part of our training and, because they are assessed, the case study itself can easily get contaminated with notions of success and failure. We cannot help asking 'What effect did I have?', 'Did my client get better?', 'Will my tutor like it?'

The case study is where two people who previously knew nothing of each other's lives come together, meet and then part. In addition, case studies are usually only written by one person, the therapist. Those written by clients only see the light of day as novels and rarely get on to course reading lists. As therapists, we know nothing of what happens after and