



The Anguish of Freedom

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR AND
ALBERT CAMUS

If you could travel back in time to 1945 and to a café in Paris called *Les Deux Magots* ('The Two Wise Men'), you would find yourself sitting near a small man with goggly eyes. He is smoking a pipe and writing in a notebook. This man is Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), the most famous existentialist philosopher. He was also a novelist, playwright and biographer. He lived most of his life in hotels and did most of his writing in cafés. He didn't look like a cult figure, but within a few years that's what he would become.

Quite often Sartre would be joined by a beautiful and highly intelligent woman, Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86). They'd known each other since they met at college. She was his long-term companion, though they never married and never lived together. They had other lovers too, but theirs was a long-lasting relationship – they described it as 'essential' and all their other relationships as 'contingent' (meaning 'not necessary'). Like

Sartre, she was a philosopher and a novelist. She wrote an important early feminist book called *The Second Sex* (1949).

During much of the Second World War that had just ended Paris had been occupied by the Nazi forces. Life had been very difficult for the French. Some had managed to join the Resistance fighters and had fought the Germans. Others had collaborated with the Nazis and betrayed their friends to save themselves. Food had been in short supply. There had been gun battles in the streets. People disappeared and were never seen again. The Jews of Paris had been sent to concentration camps, where most were murdered.

Now that the Allies had defeated Germany it was time to start life afresh. There was both relief that the war was over and also a sense that the past had to be left behind. It was time to think through what sort of society there should be. After the terrible things that had happened in the war, all kinds of people were asking themselves the sorts of questions philosophers ask, like 'What is the point of living?', 'Is there a God?', 'Must I always do what others expect me to do?'

Sartre had already written a long and difficult book called *Being and Nothingness* (1943) which was published during the war. The central theme of the book was freedom. Human beings are free. This was an odd message in occupied France when most French people felt like – or really were – prisoners in their own country. What he meant, though, was that, unlike, say, a penknife, a human being wasn't designed to do anything in particular. Sartre didn't believe there was a God who could have designed us, so he rejected the idea that God had a purpose for us. The penknife was designed to cut. That was its essence, what made it what it is. But what was a human being designed to do? Human beings don't have an essence. We aren't here for a reason, he thought. There is no particular way we have to be to

be human. A human being can choose what to do, what to become. We are all free. No one but you can decide what you make of your life. If you let other people decide how you live, that is, again, a choice. It would be a choice to be the kind of person other people expect you to be.

Obviously if you make a choice to do something, you might not always succeed in doing it. And the reasons why you don't succeed may be completely outside your control. But you are responsible for wanting to do that thing, for trying to do it, and for how you respond to your failure to be able to do it.

Freedom is hard to handle and many of us run away from it. One of the ways to hide is to pretend that you aren't really free at all. If Sartre is right, we can't make excuses: we are completely responsible for what we do every day and how we feel about what we do. Right down to the emotions we have. If you're sad right now, that's your choice, according to Sartre. You don't have to be sad. If you are sad, you are responsible for it. That is frightening and some people would rather not face up to it because it is so painful. He talks about us being 'condemned to be free'. We're stuck with this freedom whether we like it or not.

Sartre described a waiter in a café. This café waiter moves in a very stylized way, acting as if he is a kind of puppet. Everything about him suggests that he thinks of himself as completely defined by his role as a waiter, as if he has no choice about anything. The way he holds the tray, the way he moves between the tables, are all part of a kind of dance – a dance that is choreographed by his job as a waiter, not by the human being performing it. Sartre says this man is in 'bad faith'. Bad faith is running away from freedom. It is a kind of lie you tell yourself and almost believe: the lie that you aren't really free to choose what to do with your life, when, according to Sartre, whether you like it or not, you are.

In a lecture he gave just after the war, 'Existentialism is a Humanism', Sartre described human life as full of anguish. The anguish comes from understanding that we can't make any excuses but are responsible for everything we do. But the anguish is worse because, according to Sartre, whatever I do with my life is a kind of template for what anyone else should do with their life. If I decide to marry, I'm suggesting that everyone should marry; if I decide to be lazy, that's what everyone should do in my vision of human existence. Through the choices I make in my life I paint a picture of what I think a human being ought to be like. If I do this sincerely it is a great responsibility.

Sartre explained what he meant by the anguish of choice through the true story of a student who had come to ask his advice during the war. This young man had to make a very difficult decision. He could either stay at home to look after his mother; or he could run off and try to join the French Resistance and fight to save his country from the Germans. This was the most difficult decision of his life and he wasn't sure what to do. If he left his mother, she would be vulnerable without him. He might not succeed in getting to the Resistance fighters before being caught by the Germans, and then the whole attempt to do something noble would be a waste of energy and of a life. But if he stayed at home with his mother, he'd be letting others do the fighting for him. What should he do? What would you do? What advice would you give him?

Sartre's advice was a bit frustrating. He told the student that he was free and that he should choose for himself. If Sartre had given the student any practical advice about what to do, the student would still have had to decide whether or not to follow it. There is no way to escape the weight of responsibility that comes with being human.

'Existentialism' was the name that other people gave to Sartre's philosophy. The name came from the idea that we find ourselves first of all *existing* in the world, and then have to decide what we will make of our lives. It could have been the other way round: we could have been like a penknife, designed for a particular purpose. But, Sartre believed, we aren't. In his way of putting it, our existence comes before our essence, whereas for designed objects their essence comes before their existence.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir gave this existentialism a different twist by claiming that women are not born women; they become women. What she meant was that women tend to accept men's view of what a woman is. To be what men expect you to be is a choice. But women, being free, can decide for themselves what they want to be. They have no essence, no way given by nature that they have to be.

Another important theme of existentialism was the absurdity of our existence. Life doesn't have any meaning at all until we give it meaning by making choices, and then before too long death comes and removes all the meaning that we can give it. Sartre's version of this was to describe a human being as 'a useless passion': there is no point to our existence at all. There is only the meaning each of us creates through our choices. Albert Camus (1913–60), a novelist and philosopher also linked with existentialism, used the Greek myth of Sisyphus to explain human absurdity. Sisyphus' punishment for tricking the gods is that he has to roll a huge rock to the top of a mountain. When he reaches the top, the rock rolls down and he has to begin from the bottom once more. Sisyphus has to do this again and again for ever. Human life is like Sisyphus' task in that it is completely meaningless. There is no point to it: no answers that will explain everything. It's absurd. But Camus didn't think we should

despair. We shouldn't commit suicide. Instead we have to recognize that Sisyphus is happy. Why is he happy? Because there is something about the pointless struggle of rolling that huge rock up the mountain that makes his life worth living. It is still preferable to death.

Existentialism became a cult. Thousands of young people were drawn to it and would discuss the absurdity of human existence late into the night. It inspired novels, plays and films. It was a philosophy that people could live by and apply to their own decisions. Sartre himself became more politically involved and more left wing as he got older, and he tried to combine the insights of Marxism with his earlier ideas – a difficult task. His existentialism of the 1940s focused on individuals making choices for themselves; but in his later work he tried to make sense of how we are part of a larger group of people and how social and economic factors play a role in our lives. Unfortunately his writing got more and more difficult to understand, perhaps in part because much of it was written while he was high on amphetamines.

Sartre was probably the best-known philosopher of the twentieth century. But if you ask philosophers who was the most important thinker of the last century, many of them will tell you that it was Ludwig Wittgenstein.