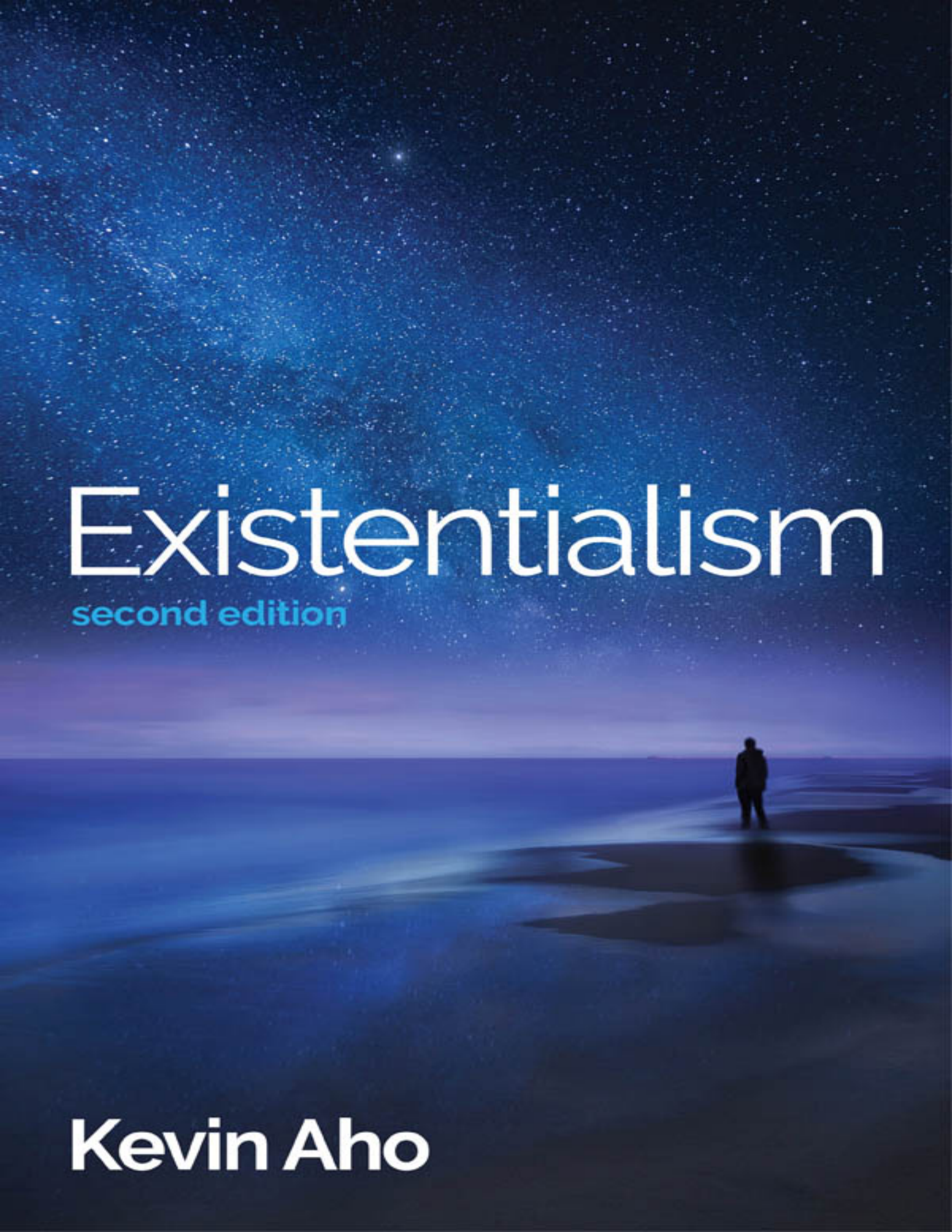
Existentialism
second edition
Kevin Aho

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An Introduction

Second Edition

Kevin Aho

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Preface

What is Existentialism?

In his novel *The Pale King*, David Foster Wallace offers a powerful example of the existentialist attitude, illuminating the free-floating anxiety and confusion that we all experience in the modern age. He writes:

The next suitable person you're in light conversation with, you stop suddenly in the middle of the conversation and look at the person closely and say, "What's wrong?" You say it in a concerned way. He'll say, "What do you mean?" You say, "Something's wrong. I can tell. What is it?" And he'll look stunned and say, "How did you know?" He doesn't realize that something's always wrong, with everybody. Often more than one thing. He doesn't know everybody's always going around all the time with something wrong and believing they're exerting great willpower and control to keep other people, for whom they think nothing's ever wrong, from seeing it. (Foster Wallace 2012, 38)

What Foster Wallace describes here is not an abstract or intellectual event, but a visceral sense that something's not right with us; that we are not "real" or "at home" in this world; that our existence is inescapably finite and absurd; and that there are no moral absolutes that can tell us how to live. These are the elemental expressions of the human condition that existentialism grapples with. It is an attitude that confronts the unnerving givens lurking below the surface of our everyday lives, and it has the power to jolt us affectively out of our routines, compelling us to engage critically with the choices and actions that make us who

and what we are. But what does “existentialism,” as a philosophical movement, refer to?

One of the initial difficulties in writing a book about existentialism is the word itself. It is an “ism” that gives the misleading impression of a coherent and unified philosophical doctrine – or, worse, school. The word was officially coined by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel in 1943 and was quickly adopted by his compatriots Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. But many of the major twentieth-century philosophers, figures such as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Albert Camus, rejected the label, while its nineteenth-century pioneers, for example Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, had never heard of it. Existentialism’s representative thinkers are anything but unified in their views. There are secular existentialists such as Sartre, Nietzsche, and Camus, whose philosophies are informed by the idea of the death of God; but there are also prominent theistic existentialists, for example Marcel, Paul Tillich, and Martin Buber. There are existentialists who claim that we are radically free and morally responsible for our actions, but also others like Nietzsche, who contend that free will and moral responsibility are a fiction. Some, such as Kierkegaard, Beauvoir, and Sartre, maintain that existentialism is a form of subjectivism, while others, such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, reject this idea as an equivocation and posit the centrality of intersubjectivity or being-in-the-world. And there are both existentialists who argue that our relations with others are invariably tainted with alienation, self-deception, and conflict and existentialists who develop notions of mutual dependency, selfless love, and genuine communion with others.

Given these conflicting views, there are clear indications of a new philosophical orientation emerging in modern Europe and centering specifically on the question of what it

means to be human. As early as the seventeenth century, the French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal coined the phrase “logic of the heart” (*logique du coeur*) in an attempt to give an account of the mystery of the affective side of human existence – a mystery that traditional reason and logic could never access. In his *Pensées*, Pascal offers one of the first expressions of the existentialist attitude:

Let man, returning to himself, consider what he is in comparison with what exists; let him regard himself as lost, and from this little dungeon, in which he finds himself lodged, I mean the universe, let him learn to take the earth, its realms, its cities, its houses and himself at their proper value. … Anyone who considers himself in this way will be terrified at himself. (Pascal 1995, 199)

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard would take Pascal’s experience of existential isolation and dread and develop an entire philosophy around it, stressing the importance of the singular and concrete passions of the “existing individual” over any abstract or objective truth. A generation later, Nietzsche would promote the ideals of “life philosophy” (*Lebensphilosophie*), which emphasized the incalculability of human experience and the impossibility to explain the inchoate forces of life by appeals to reason. In the 1920s, Heidegger was introducing his own “existential analytic” or “analytic of Dasein” (*Daseinsanalytik*), and his contemporary Karl Jaspers was developing a “philosophy of existence” (*Existenzphilosophie*). Both engaged with the inexpressible freedom of the individual and the human states of anxiety and being-toward-death, which defy rational apprehension. Thus, long before the word “existentialism” was officially introduced and the uniform of black sweaters, black pants, and cigarettes populated the cafés of Boulevard St.

Germain in Paris, the core ideas of the movement had already been articulated. This helps explain David Cooper's remark that "none of the great existentialist tomes contain the word 'existentialism'" (1999, 1).

Although existentialism cannot be reduced to a unified doctrine or school of thought and its major representatives differ widely in their views, the common thread that ties these thinkers together is their concern for the human situation as it is lived. This is a situation that cannot be reasoned about or captured in an abstract system; it can only be felt and made meaningful by the concrete choices and actions of the existing individual. From this shared concern, a number of overlapping themes emerge in the writings that make it possible for us to group the latter together under the common descriptor "existentialism."

Existence Precedes Essence Existentialists promoted the idea that humans exist differently from other things such as trees, cultural artifacts, and animals. We humans cannot be understood as mere things that are objectively present; this is because we exist, which is to say that we make choices and take action all throughout our lives. This means that there is no pre-given "essence" that determines who and what we are. We are self-making beings and we become what we are on the basis of the choices and actions we make as our lives unfold. On this view, there is no definitive or complete account of being human, because there is nothing that grounds or secures our existence; we are a "not yet," always in the process of realizing who we are as we press forward into future projects and possibilities.

The Self as a Tension By interpreting existence as a process of self-making rather than as an object or thing, existentialists are saying that the structure of the self involves a tension or struggle between what they call "facticity" and "transcendence." On the one hand, we

humans are determined by the limitations of our factual nature: our physiology, our sexuality, our socio-historical situation. This is our facticity. On the other hand, insofar as we are self-conscious and aware of these limitations, we can transcend or surpass them by taking a stand on them, that is, by choosing to interpret them in certain ways, by giving them meaning, and thus we create our own identities. This is our transcendence.

The Anguish of Freedom As beings that can take a stand on our facticity, existentialists generally agree that we are free and responsible for who we are and what we do. But this realization is often accompanied by anguish because it reminds us that we alone are responsible for the choices and actions we make in our lives. Existentialists reject the idea that there are moral absolutes, utilitarian calculations, or natural laws that can explain or justify our actions. As Sartre (2001, 296, slightly modified) writes, when it comes to human actions, “there are no excuses behind us or justifications before us.”

The Insider’s Perspective Because human existence is not a thing that can be studied from a perspective of detached objectivity, existentialists hold the view that we can understand ourselves only by taking what might be called an insider’s perspective. That is, before engaging in any disinterested theorizing about who or what we are, we must come to grips with the experience of being human *as it is lived* within the context of our own situation. For this reason existentialists reject the idea that objectivity is possible when it comes to giving an account of human existence. Any account of what it means to be human is already mediated by the contextual interweaving of our social involvements, our bodily orientations, our emotions, and our perceptual capacities.

Moods as Disclosive According to existentialists, we do not gain knowledge of the human situation through detached thought or rational demonstration, but through the visceral experiences of the individual. We understand what matters in our lives through our moods, through the ways in which we feel about things. Some moods, such as *anxiety* (Heidegger), *nausea* (Sartre), *guilt* (Kierkegaard), and *absurdity* (Camus), are especially important for the existentialists, on the grounds that they have the capacity to shake us out of our everyday complacency and self-deception by disclosing the fundamental freedom and finitude of our situation. This, in turn, allows us the opportunity to be honest with ourselves and to commit to our lives with renewed passion, intensity, and focus.

The Possibility for Authenticity Because we have a tendency to conform to the leveled-down roles and identities of the public world, the question of authenticity, of being true to oneself, is central to the existentialists. The idea is formulated in many different ways, for example as being a “knight of faith” (Kierkegaard), an “overman” (Nietzsche), a “rebel” (Camus), or an “authentic individual” (Heidegger). In this way existentialists develop the possibility of living a meaningful, committed, and fulfilling life in the face of absurdity and death. The idea of authenticity serves as a powerful rejoinder to the criticism that existentialism is a kind of nihilistic, “anything goes” philosophy.

Ethics and Responsibility Existentialism does not require adherence to any normative moral principle. Yet the accusation that existentialism is an amoral philosophy is undeserved. Existentialism centers around two of the most fundamental of moral questions there are. What should I do? How should I live? Moreover, in acknowledging our fundamental freedom, its representatives recognize that we are not free from responsibility for our actions or from the

obligation to cultivate the ideal of freedom for others. From this angle, existentialism offers a clear vision of what a valuable or praiseworthy way of life means. It is a life that faces up to the inescapable freedom and vulnerability of the human situation and takes responsibility for the fact that our actions have consequences that impact the lives of others.

Why this Book?

It is difficult to justify a new introduction to existentialism, given the number of high-quality monographs published on it over the past six decades. Beginning with William Barrett's (1958) path-breaking *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*, a number of early secondary works in English stand out, notably Calvin O. Schrag's (1961) *Existence and Freedom*, Robert Olson's (1962) *An Introduction to Existentialism*, John Macquarrie's (1972) *Existentialism*, and Robert Solomon's (1972) *From Rationalism to Existentialism: The Existentialists and Their Nineteenth-Century Backgrounds*. Despite their significant contribution, these texts are now quite outdated. More recently, Thomas Flynn has written a crisp and engaging little book called *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Flynn 2006), but, because of its brevity, it is unable to engage a wide range of thinkers or develop key issues in sufficient detail. And Jonathan Webber's (2018) *Rethinking Existentialism* offers a novel and compelling treatment of existentialism as an ethical theory, but the book's narrow focus on Sartre and Beauvoir and their respective influence neglects other major figures and the broader philosophical and historical contours of the movement. In my view, it is David Cooper's (1999) *Existentialism: A Reconstruction* (originally published in 1990) that has set the standard in terms of comprehensiveness and of bringing existentialism

up to date and into conversation with core themes in mainstream anglophone philosophy. My aim in this book is to follow Cooper's lead in emphasizing existentialism's enduring relevance to contemporary philosophy, but I try to draw on a wider range of philosophical and literary figures and to address themes that are often neglected or underdeveloped in other introductory works.

There is a tendency in introductory texts on existentialism to focus narrowly on the "big four" – Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre. This approach is understandable, given their enormous philosophical and cultural impact, but it tends to overlook the significance of religious and literary existentialists such as Dostoevsky, Camus, Tolstoy, Marcel, Unamuno, Rilke, and Buber, as well as feminist existentialists such as Beauvoir. In some introductions the influence of Nietzsche's philosophy is minimized, because he rejects one of the central tenets of existentialism, namely that human beings are radically free and therefore morally responsible for their actions. There are also crucial themes of embodiment and being-in-the-world that are often undeveloped, and there is sometimes a failure to situate existentialism within the historical context of modernity. Finally, there is the issue of the significant influence that existentialism has exercised in the applied fields of medicine, psychiatry, and psychotherapy – an impact that is often glossed over in introductory texts.

Since the first edition of the present book was published in 2014, readers have brought to my attention a number of concerns. For instance, the coverage of Beauvoir seemed too limited, given the explosion of scholarship in feminist phenomenology in recent years; there was interest in an expanded discussion of the role of moods and the possibility of love and authentic being-with-others in existentialist thought; and some readers wanted to see a more robust treatment of existentialism's influence on the

emergence and development of critical race theory. But the most important critique of the first edition involved its failure to address the Marxist critique of existentialism, especially as these criticisms played a powerful role in shaping the transformation in Sartre's later philosophy. This second edition attempts to address these concerns through revised and expanded discussions of these issues; it also offers an entirely new chapter entitled "Marxist, Feminist, and Black Existentialism" that engages critically with existentialism's narrow emphasis on individual freedom and with its apparent neglect of the material conditions of life that oppress and constrain us.

This second edition continues to focus largely on the big four; but I cast a much larger net, drawing on a wide range of philosophical and literary figures as they become relevant to the issues discussed. The first chapter, "Existentialism and Modernity," is devoted to the historical roots of the western self, as it emerges from the tension between Greek reason and Hebraic faith, and explains how this tension is recast in modernity. In conformity with this orientation, Nietzsche's work is placed center-stage; it frames the situation of nihilism and the death of God, two themes that become crucial to twentieth-century existentialists. There is also a brief discussion of the broader cultural impact of existentialism outside philosophy.

Chapter 2, "The Insider's Perspective," engages existentialism's critique of methodological detachment and objectivity by arguing that any account of human existence must begin from inside one's own finite and situated perspective. Here different accounts of the insider's perspective are introduced, for example Kierkegaard's conception of subjective truth, Nietzsche's perspectivism, and phenomenological accounts as they emerge in the work of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty.

Chapter 3, “Being-in-the-World,” addresses the ways in which existentialism undermines traditional philosophical dualisms – namely by interpreting the human being not as an encapsulated thing or substance, but in terms of pre-reflective involvement in the world. Although the chapter draws largely on the seminal work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty to articulate how we already embody an understanding of intra-worldly things, it also engages with the work of the likes of Frantz Fanon and Iris Marion Young, to show how this tacit understanding can break down as a result of racial and sexual difference.

The remainder of the book deals with the key issues of selfhood, freedom, authenticity, and ethics. Chapter 4, “Self and Others,” describes the existentialist configuration of the self as a struggle between facticity and transcendence. With wide-ranging references to Sartre, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Tolstoy, and Ortega y Gasset, as well as to contemporary English language philosophers such as Harry Frankfurt and Charles Taylor, the chapter illustrates how human beings are always *making* or *creating* themselves by interpreting and giving meaning to their factical situation. This chapter also addresses issues of embodiment and how the process of self-creation is often compromised by our tendency to conform to the calcified identities and roles of the public world.

Chapter 5 introduces freedom as the central idea of existentialism and identifies the ways in which existential freedom is distinct from more conventional views. Using Dostoevsky’s classic novella *Notes from the Underground* to frame the idea, the chapter discusses the radical or unconditioned forms of freedom promoted by Sartre, as well as the situated forms of freedom developed by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Beauvoir. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Nietzsche’s views on freedom. Although he breaks with other existentialists by

criticizing the idea of free will and moral responsibility, Nietzsche can be viewed as offering his own version of situated freedom: a kind of freedom rooted in the polymorphous impulses of the body but that also reflects the goal of self-creation, which is crucial to the existentialist project.

Chapter 6, "Authenticity," builds on the discussion of freedom by exploring what it means to be true to oneself. Here the significance of transformative moods such as anxiety, absurdity, and guilt is developed: they have the power to pull us out of self-deception and to bring us face to face with the existential givens of freedom and death. This discussion also explores how the existentialist account of moods breaks decisively with the romantic tradition. The second half of the chapter is framed around the core tension between being ethical (doing what is right) and being authentic (being true to oneself) and focuses on the influential accounts of authenticity offered by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre.

Chapter 7, "Ethics," challenges the view that existentialism promotes a brand of "anything goes" philosophy. The chapter begins by showing how existentialists like Sartre and Beauvoir support a notion of moral responsibility and of cultivating freedom for others. The discussion then shifts to Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, who argue that there are moral demands that are already placed on us through our involvement in a shared historical situation (Heidegger) and through our intercorporeality (Merleau-Ponty). The chapter concludes by showing how religious existentialists like Buber and Levinas challenge modern attitudes of selfishness and individualism and develop a moral orientation rooted in the affective recognition of human vulnerability and suffering.

Chapter 8, “Marxist, Feminist, and Black Existentialism,” addresses the objection that existentialism’s sustained focus on individual freedom fails to account for the myriad ways in which material conditions oppress and limit the possibilities for agency and self-realization. The chapter explores how Sartre’s thought evolved in the wake of Marxist criticisms. It describes his move away from the idea of unconditioned freedom of consciousness, which was central to his early work, to a more situated or mediated conception of freedom, one invariably shaped by socioeconomic forces. The chapter concludes by highlighting how the conceptual tools of existentialism as well as its sharpened sensitivity to oppressive social conditions are reflected in Beauvoir’s feminist phenomenology and in the contemporaneous emergence of critical race theory or black existentialism.

Chapter 9 engages existentialism’s enormous contribution to psychiatry and psychotherapy. Drawing on the work of existential therapists such as R. D. Laing, Irvin Yalom, and Rollo May, it explores the value of existentialism in psychiatry by showing how the patient’s experience of psychopathology always needs to be situated and contextualized. On this view, the therapist does not regard the patient as an object of scientific investigation and does not necessarily interpret psychic suffering as a medical disease but as an existential given that has the power to disclose who we are as human beings. When anxiety overwhelms us by bringing us face to face with our own freedom and death, the therapist does not simply want to manage or control this feeling with medication or psychiatric techniques. The aim is rather to accept and integrate the unsettling experience into our lives. This acceptance can, in turn, free us from everyday forms of self-deception and open deeper and more meaningful ways of living for us.

The final chapter, “Existentialism Today,” addresses important aspects of existentialism that continue to shape the current intellectual landscape. The chapter begins with a discussion of existentialism’s role in environmental philosophy. Drawing largely on the work of Heidegger, the discussion centers on the dangers of dualistic thinking when it comes to interpreting nature and shows how the existentialist understanding of the self as being-in-the-world has helped environmental philosophers reconfigure our relationship to technology and to the earth itself. This discussion leads to an account of existentialism’s impact on the emergence and legitimation of comparative philosophy in the West and throws some light on the affinities between Buddhist conceptions of “suffering” (*dukkha*) and their counterparts in the existentialist tradition. The discussion goes on to show how Buddhism can be used to address some potential shortcomings of existentialism, as it offers specific practices designed to end the suffering instead of romanticizing it. The chapter concludes with an assessment of existentialism’s legacy in contemporary medicine and its focus on the lived experience of illness rather than on the objective nature of disease. In questioning the viability of the scientific position of detachment and objectivity, existentialism calls for healthcare professionals not just to “fix” the diseased body but to help patients give meaning to and make sense of their own experiences.

This brief summary gives an indication of the purpose of my book. It is meant to offer not only an accessible scholarly introduction to the central themes of existentialism. With references to a broad range of thinkers and drawing on the work of leading anglophone commentators, it aims to show that existentialism is by no means a moribund or outdated mode of thinking. Its ideas remain fresh and vital because they speak to the most pressing concerns that we face in the secular age. Who am

I? How should I live? These are the central questions of existentialism.

In the following chapters I will engage with the core ideas of existentialism, all the while keeping in view the difficulty in demarcating the boundaries of the movement. It is important to remind the reader that, among the myriad thinkers traditionally included under the label "existentialist," only Sartre and Beauvoir explicitly identified themselves as such. The term, as I am using it, designates a diverse group of philosophers and literary figures who were concerned with what it means to be human. And, although the lineage of thinkers with such preoccupations can be traced back to Stoics and Epicureans in the Hellenistic and Roman world – and, after Seneca and Epictetus, to late antique and early modern authors such as Augustine, Shakespeare, Michel de Montaigne, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Pascal – my focus will be on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and on those who followed Kierkegaard.

In order to cast the net wide and to bring literary and religious aspects of existentialism into the discussion, I reject the notion that existentialism is a "relatively systematic philosophy" (Cooper 1999, 8); as some commentators have pointed out, such a view invariably excludes seminal literary figures like Camus, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Rilke, and Kafka – and perhaps even Kierkegaard and Nietzsche themselves, whose indirect and aphoristic styles were anything but systematic (see Malpas 2012). In fact I want to suggest that these literary approaches are one of the major reasons why existentialism became the cultural phenomenon it is. With little or no training in academic philosophy, readers were provided with vivid and accessible points of entry into the ultimate questions of meaninglessness, freedom, and death. By broadening the term in this way, I can draw on a more

comprehensive range of figures as they become relevant to particular topics, regardless of whether or not they were philosophers or literary figures and whether or not they were inclined to identify themselves as “existentialists.” For the purposes of this project, if a work captures the struggle of the human condition, the anguish of confronting our own finitude and the loss of moral absolutes, and the vertiginous freedom of self-creation, it can be called *existentialism*.

1
Existentialism and Modernity

I look around in every direction and all I see is darkness … The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread.

Blaise Pascal

Roots of the Western Self

In order to situate the movement of existentialism within the context of recent European thought, we first have to go back to the earliest philosophical and religious currents that shaped the western worldview. Understanding that it is impossible to compress the complexities of the last three millennia into a few pages, one can make the broad claim that the conflicting traditions of Hebraic faith on the one hand and Greek reason on the other have informed our sense of who we are. Both traditions offer the idea of the human being as unique to the extent that we are self-conscious and have “higher” potentialities, which allow us to surpass or transcend our finite earthly existence (e.g. Dreyfus 2009; 2012). In the tradition of Greek philosophy, transcendence was achieved from a position of rational detachment, which allowed the philosopher to rise above the temporal particularities of existence in order to gain knowledge of the universal, that is, of timeless and abstract forms or essences. In the Hebraic tradition, the experience of transcendence is understood not in terms of detached reason but in terms of an intense faith and trust in an incomprehensible God. This kind of faith can lead to confusion and despair, because the Hebrew God is beyond rational understanding and is often cruel and violent. This

is why, as William Barrett points out, there is a certain "uneasiness" in the biblical interpretation of the human condition that is not found in Greek philosophy (1958, 71). The human creature depicted there is one that is frail and finite, standing naked and exposed before an unknowable God. In this sense, Job is the paradigmatic biblical figure. He confronts the calamitous trials that God has put before him, and he does so not with detached reason but with the involved fullness of his whole being and all the confusion, rage, and despair that comes with it. But, through it all, his commitment to God remains passionate and unwavering, and it is by means of his faith that he is transformed. His anguish turns to awe in the face of God's infinite and incomprehensible majesty. In this way we are introduced to the idea that the infinite and eternal can be revealed in passionate commitments that are finite and temporal. Thus there is little discussion of heaven, the immortality of the soul, or the afterlife in the Hebrew Bible. Transcendence is found not in an otherworldly realm but in the concrete commitments of the whole person, body and soul, who inhabits this world. This idea of transcendence conflicts radically with the views of Plato and the traditions of Greek philosophy.

For Plato (429–347 bc), transcendence is not attained by the passionate faith of the whole person. It is achieved when reason, the "higher" or divine part of the soul, rises above the "lower," animal part, above the fleeting perceptions and passions of the body. This rational detachment makes theoretical knowledge possible, where "contemplation" (*theōria*) is understood as a kind of disembodied seeing or reflection. For Plato, the essential truths that philosophy discovers have the same form as the immutable truths of geometry and arithmetic. In this way the philosopher becomes a disinterested spectator who transcends the contingent sensations of the body and

comes to have a God's-eye view of reality. This view allows him access to abstract Forms (*eidē*), which represent the timeless and eternal essence of things. Under Plato's influence, the cognizing mind becomes the absolute authority by discovering an unchanging "reality" that lies behind the transitory "appearances" of the temporal body.

We see, then, that – to simplify the picture – the tradition of Greek reason conflicts with the Judaic worldview in two important ways. First, philosophy à la Plato provides a kind of intellectual protection or salvation from the experience of anguish and dread that is so vital to the Hebrew interpretation of faith. By focusing on knowledge of abstract forms, the philosopher rises above the horrifying predicament that biblical figures such as Job had to face. Second, Greek reason privileges a conception of transcendence that is attained from a disembodied theoretical position. Indeed, for Plato, what distinguishes us as human beings is not our impassioned faith in an unknowable and fearsome God but the soul's ability to rationally detach from these emotional upheavals. It is only when such detachment is attained that we arrive at a domain of truth that is immutable and timeless. The consequence of these conflicting versions of transcendence is a tension between two conceptions of selfhood in the West, one where the God of Abraham tells us to live one way and the God of Greek reason tells us to live another (Dreyfus 2012, 97). The self, in the words of the Spanish existentialist Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936), emerges as a "conflict" or "contradiction," pulled apart by an inner struggle between "the heart and the head," between faith and reason (1954, 260). For figures such as Unamuno, the tragedy of being human lies in part in the fact that this contradiction cannot be eradicated or overcome by separating the abstract truths of reason from the concrete commitments of faith. Such a separation is a denial of the

wholeness of the human being and of the anguished uncertainty and doubt at the core of our situation.

From its origins in the ancient Greek world, western philosophy has long perpetuated this separation by regarding the cognizing mind as the essential substance that gives us knowledge of eternal truths and, as a result, the mind itself is conceived of as a substance that is eternal, providing an escape from the temporal vicissitudes of the body. As Plato says in the *Phaedo*, "[i]f we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must escape from the body, and contemplate things by themselves with the soul itself" (66e). On this view, reason came to be regarded as the supreme and defining characteristic of the human being, and this philosophical assumption remained relatively unscathed until the nineteenth century, when existential philosophers and literary figures began to exhume embodiment, emotion, and historical contingency as being central to the human situation. Indeed, even with the historical rise and spread of Christianity through the Middle Ages, the vision of the human as *animal rationale* ("rational animal") endured.

Although early church fathers such as Paul (5 bc–ad 67) and Tertullian (ad 160–220) were still deeply committed to the principle of Hebraic faith, the cultural and political impact of Hellenistic philosophy compelled Christians to come up with an "apologetics," that is, a discipline of producing rational defenses of their own religious positions and beliefs. Whereas for the Jews and the Greeks faith and reason occupied two incompatible domains, Christians were confronted with both sources of transcendence. And, beginning with St. Augustine (ad 354–430) and continuing over more than a thousand years, Christian theologians engaged with this tension via the Augustinian expression "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*), by showing how the timeless, universal truths of reason

work in relation to and in harmony with personal faith (Barrett 1958, 97).

Unfortunately, as Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), father of existentialism *avant la lettre*, would make clear, the aim of bringing together the conflicting domains of faith and reason was absurd. How, for instance, can one make rational sense of God's command to Abraham to kill his own son, or of the senseless suffering of Job, or of the intrinsic sinfulness of human beings, or of the incarnation of the God-man? "The problem," as Kierkegaard writes, "is not to understand Christianity, but to understand that it cannot be understood" (1959, 146). Indeed, Kierkegaard can be viewed as a philosopher who attempts to resuscitate the Hebraic experience of vulnerability and dread, and of transcendence as passionate commitment, by articulating the qualitative difference between the impersonal and objective truths of reason on the one hand and what he calls "the highest truth attainable for an existing individual" (1941, 182) on the other. Truths of the latter kind are subjective, fundamentally uncertain, and inaccessible to logic or reason. Subjective truths cannot be thought; they can only be *felt* with inward intensity in the course of living one's life.

We will explore together how Kierkegaard engages with the tension between "subjective" and "objective" truth in chapter 2, but at this point I want to make clear that at least one thing remained consistent in the historical transition from Hellenism to Christianity. This was the belief that human beings belong to and are dependent upon a divine, value-filled cosmos that provided an enduring moral order, a "great chain of being" that determined the proper function and place of things and how humans ought to act. On this view, the people of Graeco-Christian Europe inhabited an enchanted world filled with magic, deities, and supernatural meaning. This conception of a divine cosmos