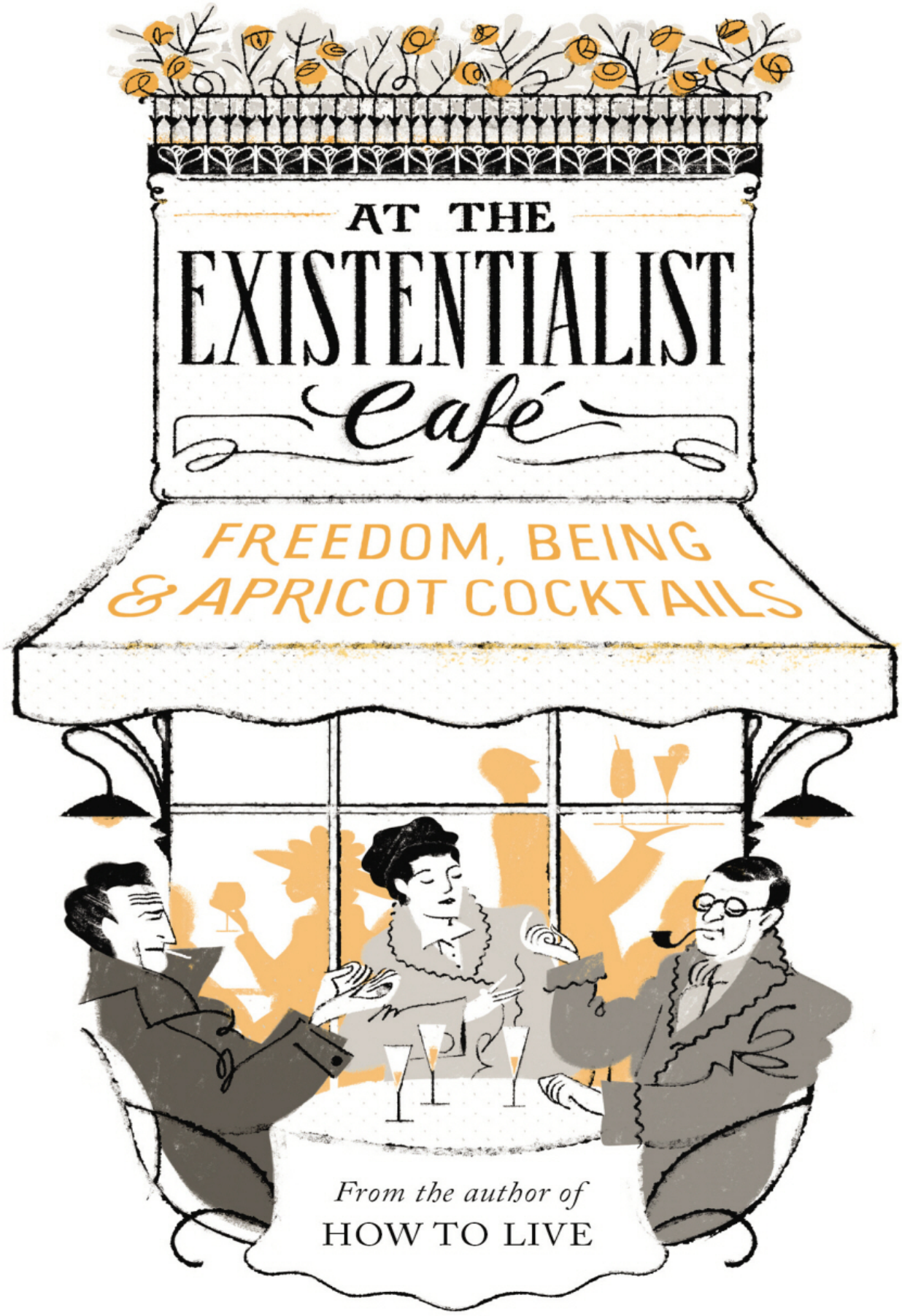
SARAH BAKEWELL



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Paris, near the turn of 1933. Three young friends meet over apricot cocktails at the Bec-de-Gaz bar on the rue Montparnasse. They are Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and their friend Raymond Aron, who opens their eyes to a radical new way of thinking. Pointing to his drink, he says, “You can make philosophy out of *this cocktail*!”

From this moment of inspiration, Sartre will create his own extraordinary philosophy of real, experienced life – of love and desire, of freedom and being, of cafés and waiters, of friendships and revolutionary fervour. It is a philosophy that will enthral Paris and sweep through the world, leaving its mark on post-war liberation movements, from the student uprisings of 1968 to civil rights pioneers.

At the Existentialist Café tells the story of modern existentialism as one of passionate encounters between people, minds and ideas. From the ‘king and queen of existentialism’ – Sartre and de Beauvoir – to their wider circle of friends and adversaries including Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Iris Murdoch, this book is an enjoyable and original journey through a captivating intellectual movement. Weaving biography and thought, Sarah Bakewell takes us to the heart of a philosophy about life that also *changed* lives, and that tackled the biggest questions of all: *what we are and how we are to live*.

About the Author

Sarah Bakewell was a teenage existentialist, having been swept off her feet by reading Sartre's *Nausea*, aged 16. She is the author of three biographies, including the bestselling *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne*, which won the Duff Cooper Prize for Non-Fiction and the National Books Critics Circle Award for Biography in the US, and was shortlisted for the Costa Biography Award and the Marsh Biography Award.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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For Jane and Ray

AT THE EXISTENTIALIST CAFÉ

Freedom, Being and Apricot Cocktails

with

Jean-Paul Sartre
Simone de Beauvoir
Albert Camus
Martin Heidegger
Edmund Husserl
Karl Jaspers
Maurice Merleau-Ponty
and others

Sarah Bakewell

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

1

Sir, What a Horror, Existentialism!

In which three people drink apricot cocktails, more people stay up late talking about freedom, and even more people change their lives. We also wonder what existentialism is.

IT IS SOMETIMES said that existentialism is more of a mood than a philosophy, and that it can be traced back to anguished novelists of the nineteenth century, and beyond that to Blaise Pascal, who was terrified by the silence of infinite spaces, and beyond that to the soul-searching St Augustine, and beyond that to the Old Testament's weary Ecclesiastes and to Job, the man who dared to question the game God was playing with him and was intimidated into submission. To anyone, in short, who has ever felt disgruntled, rebellious, or alienated about anything.

But one can go the other way, and narrow the birth of modern existentialism down to a moment near the turn of 1932–3, when three young philosophers were sitting in the Bec-de-Gaz bar on the rue du Montparnasse in Paris, catching up on gossip and drinking the house speciality, apricot cocktails.

The one who later told the story in most detail was Simone de Beauvoir, then around twenty-five years old and given to watching the world closely through her elegant hooded eyes. She was there with her boyfriend, Jean-Paul

Sartre, a round-shouldered twenty-seven-year-old with down-turned grouper lips, a dented complexion, prominent ears, and eyes that pointed in different directions, for his almost-blind right eye tended to wander outwards in a severe exotropia or misalignment of the gaze. Talking to him could be disorienting for the unwary, but if you forced yourself to stick with the left eye, you would invariably find it watching you with warm intelligence: the eye of a man interested in everything you could tell him.

Sartre and Beauvoir were certainly interested now, because the third person at the table had news for them. This was Sartre's debonair old school friend Raymond Aron, a fellow graduate of the École normale supérieure. Like the other two, Aron was in Paris for his winter break. But whereas Sartre and Beauvoir had been teaching in the French provinces – Sartre in Le Havre, Beauvoir in Rouen – Aron had been studying in Berlin. He was now telling his friends about a philosophy he had discovered there with the sinuous name of phenomenology – a word so long yet elegantly balanced that, in French as in English, it can make a line of iambic trimeter all by itself.

Aron may have been saying something like this: traditional philosophers often started with abstract axioms or theories, but the German phenomenologists went straight for life as they experienced it, moment to moment. They set aside most of what had kept philosophy going since Plato: puzzles about whether things are real or how we can know anything for certain about them. Instead, they pointed out that any philosopher who asks these questions is *already* thrown into a world filled with things – or, at least, filled with the appearances of things, or 'phenomena' (from the Greek word meaning 'things that appear'). So why not concentrate on the encounter with phenomena and ignore the rest? The old puzzles need not be ruled out forever, but they can be put in brackets, as it were, so that philosophers can deal with more down-to-earth matters.

The phenomenologists' leading thinker, Edmund Husserl, provided a rallying cry, 'To the things themselves!' It meant: don't waste time on the interpretations that accrue upon things, and especially don't waste time wondering whether the things are real. Just look at *this* that's presenting itself to you, whatever *this* may be, and describe it as precisely as possible. Another phenomenologist, Martin Heidegger, added a different spin. Philosophers all through history have wasted their time on secondary questions, he said, while forgetting to ask the one that matters most, the question of Being. What is it for a thing to *be*? What does it mean to say that you yourself *are*? Until you ask this, he maintained, you will never get anywhere. Again, he recommended the phenomenological method: disregard intellectual clutter, pay attention to things and let them reveal themselves to you.

'You see, *mon petit camarade*,' said Aron to Sartre – 'my little comrade', his pet name for him since their schooldays – 'if you are a phenomenologist, you can talk about this cocktail and make philosophy out of it!'

Beauvoir wrote that Sartre turned pale on hearing this. She made it sound more dramatic by implying that they had never heard of phenomenology at all. In truth, they had tried to read a little Heidegger. A translation of his lecture 'What Is Metaphysics?' had appeared in the same issue of the journal *Bifur* as an early Sartre essay in 1931. But, she wrote, 'since we could not understand a word of it we failed to see its interest'. *Now* they saw its interest: it was a way of doing philosophy that reconnected it with normal, lived experience.

They were more than ready for this new beginning. At school and university, Sartre, Beauvoir and Aron had all been through the austere French philosophy syllabus, dominated by questions of knowledge and endless reinterpretation of the works of Immanuel Kant. Epistemological questions opened out of one another like the rounds of a turning kaleidoscope, always returning to the same point: I think I know something, but how can I *know* that I know what I know? It was demanding, yet futile, and all three students – despite excelling in their exams – had felt dissatisfied, Sartre most of all. He hinted after graduation that he was now incubating some new 'destructive philosophy', but he was vague about what form it would take, for the simple reason that he had little idea himself. He had barely developed it beyond a general spirit of rebellion. Now it looked as though someone else had got there before him. If Sartre blanched at Aron's news about phenomenology, it was probably as much from pique as from excitement.

Either way, he never forgot the moment, and commented in an interview over forty years later, 'I can tell you that

knocked me out.’ Here, at last, was a real philosophy. According to Beauvoir, he rushed to the nearest bookshop and said, in effect, ‘Give me everything you have on phenomenology, now!’ What they produced was a slim volume written by Husserl’s student Emmanuel Levinas, *La théorie de l’intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, or *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*. Books still came with their leaves uncut. Sartre tore the edges of Levinas’s book open without waiting to use a paperknife, and began reading as he walked down the street. He could have been Keats, encountering Chapman’s translation of Homer:

> Then felt I like some watcher of the skies,
> When a new planet swims into his ken;
> Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
> He star’d at the Pacific – and all his men
> Look’d at each other with a wild surmise –
> Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Sartre did not have eagle eyes and was never good at being silent, but he was certainly full of surmises. Aron, seeing his enthusiasm, suggested that he travel to Berlin in the coming autumn to study at the French Institute there, just as he had done. Sartre could study the German language, read the phenomenologists’ works in the original, and absorb their philosophical energy from near at hand.

With the Nazis just coming to power, 1933 was not the perfect year to move to Germany. But it was a good time for Sartre to change the direction of his life. He was bored with teaching, bored with what he had learned at university, and bored with not yet having developed into the author of genius he had been expecting to become since childhood. To write what he wanted – novels, essays, everything – he knew he must first have Adventures. He had fantasised about labouring with dockers in Constantinople, meditating

with monks on Mount Athos, skulking with pariahs in India, and battling storms with fisherman off the coast of Newfoundland. For now, just not teaching schoolboys in Le Havre was adventure enough.

He made the arrangements, the summer passed, and he went to Berlin to study. When he returned at the end of his year, he brought back a new blend: the methods of German phenomenology, mixed with ideas from the earlier Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and others, set off with the distinctively French seasoning of his own literary sensibility. He applied phenomenology to people's lives in a more exciting, personal way than its inventors had ever thought to do, and thus made himself the founding father of a philosophy that became international in impact, but remained Parisian in flavour: modern existentialism.

The brilliance of Sartre's invention lay in the fact that he did indeed turn phenomenology into a philosophy of apricot cocktails – and of the waiters who served them. Also a philosophy of expectation, tiredness, apprehensiveness, excitement, a walk up a hill, the passion for a desired lover, the revulsion from an unwanted one, Parisian gardens, the cold autumn sea at Le Havre, the feeling of sitting on overstuffed upholstery, the way a woman's breasts pool as she lies on her back, the thrill of a boxing match, a film, a jazz song, a glimpse of two strangers meeting under a street lamp. He made philosophy out of vertigo, voyeurism, shame, sadism, revolution, music and sex. Lots of sex.

Where philosophers before him had written in careful propositions and arguments, Sartre wrote like a novelist – not surprisingly, since he was one. In his novels, short stories and plays as well as in his philosophical treatises, he wrote about the physical sensations of the world and the structures and moods of human life. Above all, he wrote about one big subject: what it meant to be free.

Freedom, for him, lay at the heart of all human experience, and this set humans apart from all other kinds of object. Other things merely sit in place, waiting to be pushed or pulled around. Even non-human animals mostly follow the instincts and behaviours that characterise their species, Sartre believed. But as a human being, I have no predefined nature at all. I create that nature through what I choose to do. Of course I may be influenced by my biology, or by aspects of my culture and personal background, but none of this adds up to a complete blueprint for producing me. I am always one step ahead of myself, making myself up as I go along.

Sartre put this principle into a three-word slogan, which for him defined existentialism: 'Existence precedes essence'. What this formula gains in brevity it loses in comprehensibility. But roughly it means that, having found myself thrown into the world, I go on to create my own definition (or nature, or essence), in a way that never happens with other objects or life forms. You might think you have defined me by some label, but you are wrong, for I am always a work in progress. I create myself constantly through action, and this is so fundamental to my human condition that, for Sartre, it *is* the human condition, from the moment of first consciousness to the moment when death wipes it out. I am my own freedom: no more, no less.

This was an intoxicating idea, and once Sartre had fully refined it – that is, by the last years of the Second World War – it had made him a star. He was feted, courted as a guru, interviewed, photographed, commissioned to write articles and forewords, invited on to committees, broadcast on the radio. People often called on him to pronounce on subjects outside his expertise, yet he was never lost for words. Simone de Beauvoir too wrote fiction, broadcasts, diaries, essays and philosophical treatises – all united by a philosophy that was often close to Sartre's, though she had developed much of it separately and her emphasis differed.

The two of them went on lecture and book tours together, sometimes being set up on throne-like chairs at the centre of discussions, as befitted the king and queen of existentialism.

Sartre first realised what a celebrity he had become on 28 October 1945, when he gave a public talk for the Club Maintenant (the ‘Now Club’) at the Salle des Centraux in Paris. Both he and the organisers had underestimated the size of the crowd that would show up for a talk by Sartre. The box office was mobbed; many people went in free because they could not get near to the ticket desk. In the jostling, chairs were damaged, and a few audience members passed out in the unseasonable heat. As a photo-caption writer for *Time* magazine put it, ‘Philosopher Sartre. Women swooned.’

The talk was a big success. Sartre, who was only about five foot high, must have been barely visible above the crowd, but he delivered a rousing exposition of his ideas, and later turned it into a book, *L’existentialisme est un humanisme*, translated as *Existentialism and Humanism.* Both lecture and book culminated in an anecdote which would have sounded very familiar to an audience fresh from the experience of Nazi Occupation and Liberation. The story summed up both the shock value and the appeal of his philosophy.

One day during the Occupation, Sartre said, an ex-student of his had come to him for advice. The young man’s brother had been killed in battle in 1940, before the French surrender; then his father had turned collaborator and deserted the family. The young man became his mother’s only companion and support. But what he longed to do was to sneak across the border via Spain to England, to join the Free French forces in exile and fight the Nazis – red-blooded combat at last, and a chance to avenge his brother, defy his father, and help to free his country. The problem was, it would leave his mother alone and in danger at a time when

it was hard even to get food on the table. It might also get her into trouble with the Germans. So: should he do the right thing by his mother, with clear benefits to her alone, or should he take a chance on joining the fight and doing right by many?

Philosophers still get into tangles trying to answer ethical conundrums of this kind. Sartre's puzzle has something in common with a famous thought experiment, the 'trolley problem'. This proposes that you see a runaway train or trolley hurtling along a track to which, a little way ahead, five people are tied. If you do nothing, the five people will die – but you notice a lever which you might throw to divert the train to a sidetrack. If you do this, however, it will kill one person, who is tied to that part of the track and who would be safe if not for your action. So do you cause the death of this one person, or do you do nothing and allow five to die? (In a variant, the 'fat man' problem, you can only derail the train by throwing a hefty individual off a nearby bridge onto the track. This time you must physically lay hands on the person you are going to kill, which makes it a more visceral and difficult dilemma.) Sartre's student's decision could be seen as a 'trolley problem' type of decision, but made even more complicated by the fact that he could not be sure either that his going to England would actually help anyone, nor that leaving his mother would seriously harm her.

Sartre was not concerned with reasoning his way through an ethical calculus in the traditional way of philosophers, however – let alone 'trolleyologists', as they have become known. He led his audience to think about it more personally. What is it like to be faced with such a choice? How exactly does a confused young man go about dealing with such a decision about how to act? Who can help him, and how? Sartre approached this last part by looking at the question of who could *not* help him.

Before coming to Sartre, the student had thought of seeking advice from the established moral authorities. He considered going to a priest – but priests were sometimes collaborators themselves, and anyway he knew that Christian ethics could only tell him to love his neighbour and do good to others, without specifying which others – mother or France. Next, he thought of turning to the philosophers he had studied at school, supposedly founts of wisdom. But the philosophers were too abstract: he felt they had nothing to say to him in his situation. Then, he tried to listen to his inner voice: perhaps, deep in his heart, he would find the answer. But no: in his soul, the student heard only a clamour of voices saying different things (perhaps things like: I must stay, I must go, I must do the brave thing, I must be a good son, I want action, but I'm scared, I don't want to die, I have to get away. I will be a better man than Papa! Do I truly love my country? Am I faking it?). Amid this cacophony, he could not even trust himself. As a last resort, the young man turned to his former teacher Sartre, knowing that from him at least he would not get a conventional answer.

Sure enough, Sartre listened to his problem and said simply, 'You are free, therefore choose – that is to say, invent.' No signs are vouchsafed in this world, he said. None of the old authorities can relieve you of the burden of freedom. You can weigh up moral or practical considerations as carefully as you like, but ultimately you must take the plunge and do something, and it's up to you what that something is.

Sartre doesn't tell us whether the student felt this was helpful, nor what he decided to do in the end. We don't know whether he existed, or was an amalgam of several young friends or even a complete invention. But the point Sartre wanted his audience to get was that each of them was as free as the student, even if their predicaments were less dramatic. You might think you are guided by moral laws, he was saying to them, or that you act in certain ways

because of your psychological make-up or past experiences, or because of what is happening around you. These factors can play a role, but the whole mixture merely adds up to the ‘situation’ out of which you must act. Even if the situation is unbearable – perhaps you are facing execution, or sitting in a Gestapo prison, or about to fall off a cliff – you are still free to decide what to make of it in mind and deed. Starting from where you are now, you choose. And in choosing, you also choose who you will be.

If this sounds difficult and unnerving, it’s because it is. Sartre does not deny that the need to keep making decisions brings constant anxiety. He heightens this anxiety by pointing out that what you do really *matters*. You should make your choices as though you were choosing on behalf of the whole of humanity, taking the entire burden of responsibility for how the human race behaves. If you avoid this responsibility by fooling yourself that you are the victim of circumstance or of someone else’s bad advice, you are failing to meet the demands of human life and choosing a fake existence, cut off from your own ‘authenticity’.

Along with the terrifying side of this comes a great promise: Sartre’s existentialism implies that it *is* possible to be authentic and free, as long as you keep up the effort. It is exhilarating to exactly the same degree that it’s frightening, and for the same reasons. As Sartre summed it up in an interview shortly after the lecture:

> There is no traced-out path to lead man to his salvation; he must constantly invent his own path. But, to invent it, he is free, responsible, without excuse, and every hope lies within him.

It’s a bracing thought, and was an attractive one in 1945, when established social and political institutions had been undermined by the war. In France and elsewhere, many had good reason to forget the recent past and its moral compromises and horrors, in order to focus on new beginnings. But there were deeper reasons to seek renewal.

Sartre's audience heard his message at a time when much of Europe lay in ruins, news of Nazi death camps had emerged, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been destroyed by atom bombs. The war had made people realise that they and their fellow humans were capable of departing entirely from civilised norms; no wonder the idea of a fixed human nature seemed questionable. Whatever new world was going to arise out of the old one, it would probably need to be built without reliable guidance from sources of authority such as politicians, religious leaders, and even philosophers – the old kind of philosophers, that is, in their remote and abstract worlds. But here was a new kind of philosopher, ready to wade in and perfectly suited to the task.

Sartre's big question in the mid-1940s was: given that we are free, how can we use our freedom well in such challenging times? In his essay 'The End of the War', written just after Hiroshima and published in October 1945 – the same month as the lecture – he exhorted his readers to decide what kind of world they wanted, and make it happen. From now on, he wrote, we must always take into account our knowledge that we can destroy ourselves at will, with all our history and perhaps life on earth itself. Nothing stops us but our own free choosing. If we want to survive, we have to *decide* to live. Thus, he offered a philosophy designed for a species that had just scared the hell out of itself, but that finally felt ready to grow up and take responsibility.

The institutions whose authority Sartre challenged in his writings and talks responded aggressively. The Catholic Church put Sartre's entire works on its *Index of Prohibited Books* in 1948, from his great philosophical tome *Being and Nothingness* to his novels, plays and essays. They feared, rightly, that his talk of freedom might make people doubt their faith. Simone de Beauvoir's even more provocative feminist treatise *The Second Sex* was also added to the list. One would expect political conservatives to dislike

existentialism; more surprisingly, Marxists hated it too. Sartre is now often remembered as an apologist for Communist regimes, yet for a long time he was vilified by the party. After all, if people insisted on thinking of themselves as free individuals, how could there ever be a properly organised revolution? Marxists thought humanity was destined to move through determined stages towards socialist paradise; this left little room for the idea that each of us is personally responsible for what we do. From different ideological starting points, opponents of existentialism almost all agreed that it was, as an article in *Les nouvelles littéraires* phrased it, a ‘sickening mixture of philosophic pretentiousness, equivocal dreams, physiological technicalities, morbid tastes and hesitant eroticism … an introspective embryo that one would take distinct pleasure in crushing’.

Such attacks only enhanced existentialism’s appeal for the young and rebellious, who took it on as a way of life and a trendy label. From the mid-1940s, ‘existentialist’ was used as shorthand for anyone who practised free love and stayed up late dancing to jazz music. As the actor and nightclubber Anne-Marie Cazalis remarked in her memoirs, ‘If you were twenty, in 1945, after four years of Occupation, freedom also meant the freedom to go to bed at 4 or 5 o’clock in the morning.’ It meant offending your elders and defying the order of things. It could also mean mingling promiscuously with different races and classes. The philosopher Gabriel Marcel heard a lady on a train saying, ‘Sir, what a horror, existentialism! I have a friend whose son is an existentialist; he lives in a kitchen with a Negro woman!’

The existentialist subculture that rose up in the 1940s found its home in the environs of the Saint-Germain-des-Prés church on the Left Bank of Paris – an area that still milks the association for all it is worth. Sartre and Beauvoir spent many years living in cheap Saint-Germain hotels and writing all day in cafés, mainly because these were warmer

places to go than the unheated hotel rooms. They favoured the Flore, the Deux Magots and the Bar Napoléon, all clustered around the corner of the boulevard Saint-Germain and the rue Bonaparte. The Flore was the best, for its proprietor sometimes let them work in a private room upstairs when nosy journalists or passers-by became too intrusive. Yet they also loved the lively tables downstairs, at least in the early days: Sartre enjoyed working in public spaces amid noise and bustle. He and Beauvoir held court with friends, colleagues, artists, writers, students and lovers, all talking at once and all bound by ribbons of cigarette or pipe smoke.

After the cafés, there were subterranean jazz dives to go to: in the Lorientais, Claude Luter's band played blues, jazz and ragtime, while the star of the club Tabou was the trumpeter and novelist Boris Vian. You could undulate to a jazz band's jagged parps and bleats, or debate authenticity in a dark corner while listening to the smoky voice of Cazalis's friend and fellow muse, Juliette Gréco, who became a famous chanteuse after her arrival in Paris in 1946. She, Cazalis and Michelle Vian (Boris's wife) would watch new arrivals at the Lorientais and Tabou, and refuse entry to anyone who did not look suitable – although, according to Michelle Vian, they would admit anyone 'so long as they were interesting – that is, if they had a book under their arm'. Among the regulars were many of the people who had written these books, notably Raymond Queneau and his friend Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who both discovered the nightclub world through Cazalis and Gréco.

Gréco started a fashion for long, straight, existentialist hair – the ‘drowning victim’ look, as one journalist wrote – and for looking chic in thick sweaters and men’s jackets with the sleeves rolled up. She said she first grew her hair long to keep warm in the war years; Beauvoir said the same thing about her own habit of wearing a turban. Existentialists wore cast-off shirts and raincoats; some of them sported what sounds like a proto-punk style. One youth went around with ‘a completely shredded and tattered shirt on his back’, according to a journalist’s report. They eventually adopted the most iconic existentialist garment of all: the black woollen turtleneck.

In this rebellious world, just as with the Parisian bohemians and Dadaists in earlier generations, everything that was dangerous and provocative was good, and everything that was nice or bourgeois was bad. Beauvoir delighted in telling a story about her friend, the destitute alcoholic German artist known as Wols (from Alfred Otto *Wol*fgang *S*chulze, his real name), who hung around the area living on handouts and scraps. One day, he was drinking with Beauvoir on the terrace of a bar when a wealthy-looking gentleman stopped to speak to him. After

the man had gone, Wols turned to Beauvoir in embarrassment, and said, ‘I’m sorry; that fellow is my brother: a banker!’ It amused her to hear him apologise exactly as a banker might on being seen speaking to a tramp. Such topsy-turvydom may seem less odd today, following decades of such counter-cultural inversions, but at the time it still had the power to shock some – and to delight others.

Journalists, who thrived on salacious tales of the existentialist milieu, took a special interest in the love lives of Beauvoir and Sartre. The pair were known to have an open relationship, in which each was the primary long-term partner for the other but remained free to have other lovers. Both exercised this freedom with gusto. Beauvoir had significant relationships later in life, including with the American writer Nelson Algren and with Claude Lanzmann, the French film-maker who later made the nine-hour Holocaust documentary *Shoah*. As a woman, Beauvoir was judged more severely for her behaviour, but the press also mocked Sartre for his serial seductions. One story in *Samedi-soir* in 1945 claimed that he tempted women up to his bedroom by offering them a sniff of his Camembert cheese. (Well, good cheese was hard to get in 1945.)

In reality, Sartre did not need to dangle cheese to get women into his bed. One may marvel at this, looking at his photos, but his success came less from his appearance than from his air of intellectual energy and confidence. He talked enthrallingly about ideas, but he was fun too: he sang ‘Old Man River’ and other jazz hits in a fine voice, played piano, and did Donald Duck imitations. Raymond Aron wrote of Sartre in his schooldays that ‘his ugliness disappeared as soon as he began to speak, as soon as his intelligence erased the pimples and swellings of his face’. Another acquaintance, Violette Leduc, agreed that his face could never be ugly because it was illuminated by the brilliance of his mind, as well as having ‘the honesty of an erupting

volcano’ and ‘the generosity of a newly ploughed field’. And when the sculptor Alberto Giacometti sketched Sartre, he exclaimed as he worked, ‘What density! What lines of force!’ Sartre’s was a questioning, philosophical face: everything in it sent you somewhere else, swirling from one asymmetrical feature to another. He could wear people out, but he wasn’t boring, and his clique of admirers grew and grew.

For Sartre and Beauvoir, their open relationship was more than a personal arrangement; it was a philosophical choice. They wanted to *live* their theory of freedom. The bourgeois model of marriage had no appeal for them, with its strict gender roles, its hushed-up infidelities, and its dedication to the accumulation of property and children. They had no children, they owned little, and they never even lived together, although they put their relationship before all others and met almost every day to work side by side.

They turned their philosophy into the stuff of real life in other ways, too. Both believed in committing themselves to political activity, and put their time, energy and fame at the disposal of anyone whose cause they supported. Younger friends turned to them for help in starting their careers, and for financial support: Beauvoir and Sartre each maintained protégés. They poured out polemical articles and published them in the journal they established with friends in 1945, *Les Temps modernes*. In 1973, Sartre also co-founded the major left-wing newspaper *Libération*. This has undergone several transformations since, including moving towards a more moderate politics and nearly going bankrupt, but both publications are still going at the time I’m writing this.

As their status grew and everything conspired to tempt them into the Establishment, Sartre and Beauvoir remained fierce in their insistence on remaining intellectual outsiders. Neither became academics in the conventional sense. They lived by school-teaching or freelancing. Their friends did likewise: they were playwrights, publishers, reporters, editors or essayists, but only a handful were university

insiders. When Sartre was offered the Légion d’honneur for his Resistance activities in 1945, and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1964, he rejected them both, citing a writer’s need to stay independent of interests and influences. Beauvoir rejected the Légion d’honneur in 1982 for the same reason. In 1949, François Mauriac put Sartre forward for election to the Académie française, but Sartre refused it.

‘My life and my philosophy are one and the same’, he once wrote in his diary, and he stuck to this principle unflinchingly. This blending of life and philosophy also made him interested in other people’s lives. He became an innovative biographer, publishing around two million words of life-writing, including studies of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Genet and Flaubert as well as a memoir of his own childhood. Beauvoir too collected the minutiae of her own experience and that of friends, and shaped it all into four rich volumes of autobiography, supplemented by one memoir about her mother and another about her last years with Sartre.

Sartre’s experiences and quirks found their way even into his most serious philosophical treatises. This could make for strange results, given that his personal take on life ranged from bad mescaline flashbacks and a series of embarrassing situations with lovers and friends to bizarre obsessions with trees, viscous liquids, octopuses and crustaceans. But it all made sense according to the principle first announced by Raymond Aron that day in the Bec-de-Gaz: *you can make philosophy out of this cocktail.* The topic of philosophy is whatever you experience, as you experience it.

Such interweaving of ideas and life had a long pedigree, although the existentialists gave it a new twist. Stoic and Epicurean thinkers in the classical world had practised philosophy as a means of living well, rather than of seeking knowledge or wisdom for their own sake. By reflecting on life’s vagaries in philosophical ways, they believed they

could become more resilient, more able to rise above circumstances, and better equipped to manage grief, fear, anger, disappointment or anxiety. In the tradition they passed on, philosophy is neither a pure intellectual pursuit nor a collection of cheap self-help tricks, but a discipline for flourishing and living a fully human, responsible life.

As the centuries went by, philosophy increasingly became a profession conducted in academies or universities, by scholars who sometimes prided themselves on their discipline's exquisite uselessness. Yet the tradition of philosophy as a way of life continued in a sort of shadow-line alongside this, often conducted by mavericks who had slipped through the gaps in traditional universities. Two such misfits in the nineteenth century had a particularly strong influence on the later existentialists: Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Neither was an academic philosopher: Kierkegaard had no university career, and Nietzsche was a professor of Greek and Roman philology who had to retire because of ill health. Both were individualists, and both were contrarians by nature, dedicated to making people uncomfortable. Both must have been unbearable to spend more than a few hours with. Both sit outside the main story of modern existentialism, as precursors, but had a great impact on what developed later.