Existentialism Here and Now

By Alfie Kohn

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ago, existentialism was a hot piece of intellectual property. A wide reading public was buying up such new books as William Barrett’s Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy and Viktor Frankl’s From Death Camp to Existentialism (later republished under the title Man’s Search for Meaning). American psychologists were being introduced to the movement by a brilliant anthology entitled Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology, edited by Rollo May and others. The 1958 International Congress of Psychotherapy chose existential psychology as its theme. And the twentieth-century existentialists themselves were all still alive: Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus, Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel and Paul Tillich.

Today all six men are dead and, from first appearances, so is the movement for which they are known. One recent essay in a religious journal referred to existentialism in the past tense, and virtually nothing has been published on the subject in any popular magazine during the whole of the last decade. W.W. Norton reissued some of May’s introductory essays from Existence last fall, and a Boston Globe review of the collection began: “Remember existentialism?”

Is such a book, in fact, no more than an exercise in nostalgia? Should existentialism be dispatched to a museum along with bobby sox and the U-2 affair? This view is inaccurate, I would contend: Existentialist thought has not so much blown away as decomposed in order to fertilize various fields of thought. To argue for this proposition and, more generally, to examine what has become of existentialism in the 1980s, I think it useful to begin with a conceptual résumé of the philosophy. After distilling its themes and identifying several widespread misunderstandings about existentialism, we can proceed to survey the intellectual landscape to determine the movement’s current status.

What Existentialism Is and Is Not

Camus spoke of a dialectical tension between, on the one hand, human beings, desperate for a sense of coherence to their lives, who cry out to the heavens for answers, and, on the other hand, the stubborn silence that greets such pleas. This may serve as a somewhat strained metaphor for the quest to understand existentialism itself. A taste for neatly packaged definitions. . . . and the maddening ambiguity of the subject in question: here, too, are ingredients for the absurd — or at least for a generous measure of misunderstanding.

To start with the former, Maurice Friedman began his introduction to The Worlds of Existentialism by sounding a note of annoyance:

“Give me a one-sentence definition of existentialism.” This statement is often more a ritual defense against the insecurity aroused by not being au courant than a genuine desire for knowledge. . . . The very notion that existentialism is something that can be defined in a catch
phrase, or that one can merely know about it without understanding it from within, has made it, for some people, into an intellectual fad and robbed it of its proper seriousness.[2]

In its own fulsome way, Time magazine may have been on to something in 1958: “There is no sign that [existential psychology] will become a frothy success like Freudian analysis or hula hoops...[because] any understanding of it requires the most rigorous intellectual exercise.”[3] A book on the subject likely to sell today would have to be entitled The One-Minute Existentialist. Indeed, I was reminded of Rabbi Hillel, asked for the meaning of life while standing on one foot, when a middle-aged student of mine conceded recently that she wanted to learn about philosophy so long as she did not have to read too much.

The other half of the equation is existentialism’s peculiar resistance to being defined. This is not merely a function of its complexity or even of the diversity of ideas offered under its umbrella, though the latter is noteworthy: A Danish theologian, struggling against Hegel and against the dilution of his Christian faith, is tossed under the same rubric with a twentieth-century atheist who edited newspapers, directed plays, and criticized this very theologian.

Existentialism is difficult to define primarily because its essence, so to speak, is to oppose the kind of analytic reduction that definition entails. It is not a system of philosophy to be learned or subscribed to (I am always at a loss to answer the question “Are you an existentialist?”); it is not properly an “ism” at all, at least in the sense that Catholicism or Communism is. Perhaps the best one can do is define the term ostensively: “Read Sartre and Kierkegaard and you’ll understand.” (This is admittedly unsatisfying, though, since we need a set of criteria to justify putting Sartre and Kierkegaard on the list and keeping others off.) What analytic philosophers call ostensive definition, a method, here becomes a clue to content; it recalls the watchword of phenomenology: “Zu den Sachen selbst!” — “To the things themselves!”

To argue that existentialism’s death has been greatly exaggerated is to suggest that its presence is still discernible. But how are we to recognize this presence? Only the vaguest sketch of the movement can be offered here.

For the existentialist, the fact of existing becomes not simply declarative but exclamatory (“Imagine! I am!”) and then interrogatory (“...and what am I to make of that?”) “Man becomes a question to himself,”[4] and the question begets more questions, all of which concern the issues inherent to being human. The issues of interest do not concern my being a male or an Ohioan, a laborer or a Protestant or a neurotic; the focus instead is on those problems common to every human being by virtue of that status: What does it mean to choose? What shall serve as meaning for me? What am I to make of my fellows? And, in Ionesco’s haunting words, “Why was I born if it wasn’t forever?”

The existentialists may offer different answers, but they have the questions in common — as well as the passion with which they ask them. The existential style, moreover, is to address such questions to the whole person rather than to our rational faculties alone. In fact, an opposition to what is seen as a disproportionate emphasis on reason is one of the defining characteristics of existentialism — not merely because rationalism, like one of the blind men, feels a tail and calls out that he now knows what an elephant is, but because reason ultimately sees the individual as an exemplar of something larger and prior. To the existentialist, the living subject comes first — a position that engenders opposition to Platonic essentialism, Cartesian dualism, Hegelian idealism, modern scientism, and a great deal more.

To complete this painfully abbreviated overview, it may be helpful to say something about what existentialism is not. This endeavor is particularly appropriate given that much of the American
response to the movement — both its initial infatuation and subsequent loss of interest — has been based on a distorted view. Even in its halcyon days, or especially in its halcyon days, the word “existentialism” was misused even by those who were counted as supremely literate and enviably well-informed. The dimensions of this misunderstanding help to account for the equanimity with which supportive scholars observe the apparent passing of existentialism from popular discourse. And like the difficulty of arriving at a definition, the responsibility for widespread misconceptions, if it makes sense to assign responsibility, must be shared by those interested only in convenient labels and by the impenetrability (or richness, depending on one’s inclination) of existentialism itself.

I was introduced to the topic by an English teacher in high school and then a political theorist in college, both of whom treated existentialism as synonymous with the thought of Camus. I currently own two dictionaries, one of which defines the term as “a body of ethical thought…” and the other of which calls it “a literary-philosophic cult of nihilism and pessimism.” These grotesquely mistaken characterizations suggest the range of error one finds, but I should like to focus here on six specific misconceptions: existentialism as, respectively, atheistic, pessimistic, abstract, here-and-now oriented, irrational, and individualistic.

The first two adjectives are regularly and vigorously attached to existentialism. Each, by telling only part of the story, is egregiously misleading. Both are quite clearly the result of associating the entire movement with Sartre, a confusion he encouraged by essentially appropriating the term. (It is this appropriation that led Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, and Camus to back off from the appellation “existentialist”; they actually were only distancing themselves from Sartre’s thought.) With respect to the question of God, of the ten philosophers most frequently discussed in the context of existentialism, only three (Sartre, Camus, and Nietzsche) were unquestionably atheists. Five (Kierkegaard, Marcel, Berdyaev, Tillich, and Buber) were passionately religious, and the remaining two (Heidegger and Jaspers) prove rather difficult to classify. At least as significant for anyone seeking to understand the movement is the fact that the overwhelming majority of (sympathetic) secondary sources on existentialism have been written by theologians — or, at the very least, theists. Most of the philosophical articles about existentialism still appear in religious journals like Encounter, Thought, and Cross Currents. Christians, and particularly Catholics, have resonated to the existential canon far more than atheists. It should be noted, though, that the problems of human existence cannot be neatly resolved for a theistic existentialist; this is what distinguishes him from many other theists. For Kierkegaard or Marcel or Buber (to choose one representative from each of the major Western faiths), there is no untroubled salvation for the faithful. Truly, even a life with God — or searching for God — is a life struggling to conquer absurdity.

The “pessimist” epithet is even less appropriate. Those who use it usually have Sartre in mind, so its validity is at best very limited. But even Sartre pronounced his philosophy optimistic on balance, although the claim is surely debatable. He, along with Nietzsche and Camus, explicitly repudiated nihilism and sought to construct alternatives to it. Even if Rollo May is right that “the terms ‘optimism’ and ‘pessimism’ refer to the state of one’s digestion, and have nothing whatever to do with truth,”[5] it is instructive to realize why existentialism is perceived as pessimistic by so many Americans.

Even to talk about subjects like death — never mind what one has to say — is viewed in this country as morbid and unseemly. Existentialism is a philosophy of balance: To exist is literally marvelous and not to be taken for granted, but that existence is shot through with finitude; our freedom to define ourselves is exhilarating but also a terrible burden; that God is dead — an historical statement, not a theological one — allows us to “belong to a higher history than any history hitherto,”[6] but suggests utter abandonment, a loneliness of dreadful proportions. On the other hand, when Sartre writes that “life begins on the far side of despair,” he is not only pointing to the
self-deception involved in denying the dark underside of existence but also emphasizing that life can begin.

Such balance does not play well to the “Have-a-nice-day” audience on this side of the Atlantic. In my experience, adolescents as well as adults are puzzled by the suggestion that awareness or authenticity or any other ideal may be intrinsically valuable rather than dependent for its worth on the extent to which it enhances our happiness. For them, for many of us, the only sensible justification for a value is its potential to pleasure us. If a fuller, more truthful appreciation of absurdity isn’t any fun, why bother with it? (Psychotherapy, similarly, having lost all connection to Freud’s ideal of self-knowledge, is now seen as nothing other than a means to feeling better.) Existentialism is perceived as pessimistic, then, not because of the context in which it raises the issues of mortality and meaninglessness, but for having the bad taste to raise them at all. As Barrett correctly notes, existentialism did not create the wrenching problems it addresses, “but simply sought to give them philosophic expression, rather than evading them by pretending they were not there.”[7]

The assumption that existentialism is a philosophy of abstraction could not be further from the truth. Abstraction is precisely what this movement finds intolerable. From Kierkegaard’s furious and lifelong assault on Hegel’s sub specie aeterni view of human history to Sartre’s famous declaration that existence precedes essence, existentialism has argued for the primacy of the real, experiencing human. That “existential” is loosely used to mean “abstract” can only suggest a failure to distinguish between intangibility (a characteristic of any idea) and abstraction.

The description of existentialism as concerned exclusively with “here-and-now” reality offers a truncated and thus misinformed perception of the movement. The human as he or she experiences the world is central, but this is not at all an experience locked in the present moment. Kierkegaard brilliantly described such temporal isolation in his discussion of the “aesthetic mode,” but he did not mean to endorse this any more than Camus’s stranger reflected the latter’s idea of authenticity.[8] Human life is a tension between history and possibility, which is to say, between past and future. Thus, the present can be understood as the intersection of previous choices (now congealed into a self) and the process of projecting ourselves forward at each moment — anticipating, dreading, planning. Existentialists, like Eliot, understand that “If all time is eternally present/All time is unredeemable.” Existentially oriented psychologists have even used the idea of temporal imbalance as a conceptual tool for understanding personality disturbance.[9] Misunderstanding of existentialism’s view of the present probably issues from the dramatic depictions in its literature of being caught in the present and also from the disproportionate emphasis on here-and-now experience in some quarters of humanistic psychology.

Its rebellion against reason’s proud reign since the Enlightenment has led some to see existentialism as championing the irrational. (William Barrett’s superb introduction to the movement carries the unfortunate title Irrational Man, which undoubtedly has multiplied the confusion.) Luther branded reason “a whore,” infinitely inferior to faith; the Romantics (and the neo-Romanticism of the American human potential movement) dismissed matters of the mind as sterile and unrewarding in contradistinction to those of the heart. But existentialism has challenged the insufficiency of reason and the hubris of positivism and scientism in their refusal to grant the legitimacy of other domains of the human. It is the exclusive emphasis on rationality, the imperial arrogance of its partisans, to which the existentialists have objected. The critique rests on three foundations: the value of wholeness (and the need to affirm the whole person rather than just a disembodied mind), the urgency of action (as opposed to mere reflection), and the personal relationship to what is known (which Kierkegaard called “subjective knowledge” and counterposed to the rationalist ideal of disinterested objectivity). Once again, the point is balance rather than a swing to irrationality — or,
more precisely, an attempt to illuminate the existing human who embodies both reason and unreason.

Finally there is the matter of individualism. This view of existentialism is at once the most common and the most plausible. Kierkegaard’s denigration of “the crowd,” Nietzsche’s of “the herd,” and Heidegger’s of “das Man” (the “they”) surely are suggestive, and John Macquarrie must be taken seriously when he writes that “all the leading existentialists. . . are [primarily] concerned with the individual whose quest for authentic selfhood focuses on the meaning of personal being” despite paying “lip-service to the truth that man exists as a person only in a community of persons.”[10] Still, the truth proves much less susceptible to the easy label of individualism. Buber, Marcel, and the mature Camus were centrally concerned with the interhuman, tireless in their criticism of rampant individualism. Buber in particular noted that the individual/collective dichotomy was a false one: “The wholeness of man. . . [involves] the sphere of ‘between’. . . . This is where the genuine third alternative must begin.”[11] To this extent, to stress the limits of das Man is not necessarily to fall into uncritical worship of the individual. (High school English teachers are apt to link existentialism with the American transcendentalist theme of self-reliance, an equation that is myopic and difficult to defend.)

The assumption that Sartre is purely individualistic is similarly hasty. Two hundred and fifty pages on “Being-with-Others” in Being and Nothingness should convince us that he is not unaware of the issue,[12] while his caution against viewing No Exit as a statement of his view of human relationship needs to be considered, as well. Add to this the grounding of his ethics — “When we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men”[13] — and the moral impulse underlying his later Marxism. Generalizations about existentialism’s individualistic coloration are, in short, only partly justified, and the focus on “the individual self” may be read as emphasizing the “self” more than the “individual.”

The Current Status of Existentialism

For someone with an active interest in existentialist issues, the silence in contemporary discourse can be deafening. Existentialism, as noted above, is widely perceived as passé, and this is not only true in popular culture: The Journal of Existentialism(formerly the Journal of Existential Psychology) ceased publication in 1967 and the International Forum for Existential Psychiatry) folded three years later. Only the Review of Existential Psychiatry and Psychology limps along, publishing irregularly, its parent association gone.

This and other evidence notwithstanding, though, existentialism has not gone the way of the phlogiston theory. It continues to offer a minority report in philosophy proper, to color the Zeitgeist more generally, and to contribute most impressively to psychology and psychotherapy. This assessment was confirmed by a series of recent conversations I had with philosophers, including William Barrett (retired from New York University), Hazel Barnes (Univ. of Colorado), and Maurice Friedman (San Diego State Univ.); such psychologists as Rollo May (now in private practice), Suzanne Kobasa (City Univ. of New York), and Steen Halling (Seattle Univ.); and literary critics like William Spanos (State Univ. of New York), Frederick Karl (New York Univ.), and Leo Hamalian (City Univ. of New York).

Existentialism may be viewed as analogous to psychoanalysis - its heyday past, its number of rising practitioners falling, its representation in psychology departments approaching zero, and even its critics failing to become exercised anymore. Yet the impact of psychoanalysis both in and out of the academy is beyond dispute; its concepts and dialect are so much a part of us that even recognizing the extent of its contribution proves difficult. Something similar, though clearly on a smaller scale,
has happened with existentialism. Neither movement is au courant in the 1980s, but that signals a diminution of its faddishness rather than of its significance. No one sympathetic to existentialist ideas is dismayed at their having passed from the realm of hem lengths and Top 40 music. To note that popularization involves dilution and misrepresentation is not to consign the movement to the ivory tower in a fit of elitism. It is merely to insist that just because other topics have replaced it in cocktail party conversation (a predictable occurrence given our appetite for novelty; as Sartre put it, we require the smell of fresh paint) we need not begin the last rites for existentialism.

A thorough survey of existentialism’s influence across the disciplines would require an intimate familiarity with the currents of each discipline that I do not pretend to have. I know, for example, that existentialism — and, more saliently, phenomenology — has shaped a recognizable school in sociology and political science,[14] but I don’t know much more than this. I am also aware that existentialist thought has been brought to bear on a surprisingly wide variety of other topics and fields,[15] but my understanding of each is limited. The following discussion, then, will necessarily be of limited scope, confined to literature, philosophy, and, in somewhat greater depth, psychology.

In literature, one would be hard put to argue that existential themes have receded over the last quarter century. However, more than in any other arena, determining which writers merit the “existentialist” label in the first place is virtually impossible. There are some on whom most critics will agree: Kafka, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Rilke, and the drama of Brecht, Pirandello, and the Theatre of the Absurd. After that, anything is fair game — to the point that the tag is almost meaningless.[16] Given the unmistakable presence of existentialist themes in Aeschylus and the Book of Job, one can scarcely suggest we are addressing a phenomenon exclusively of the modern age. On the other hand, with the likes of Walker Percy and Joan Didion still publishing, it would be difficult to argue that literature has left such themes behind.

Literary criticism is quite another matter. Frederick Karl and Leo Hamalian edited an anthology entitled The Existential Imagination 20 years ago, and another, The Existential Mind, ten years ago.[17] Today, Hamalian pronounces existentialism “dated,” noting that he hasn’t seen the word used in a long time in connection with criticism. Similarly, Karl comments: “As an active movement or something that would influence present-day literary criticism, it’s almost died out.” Criticism has turned toward deconstruction and other styles emphasizing a reading of the text such that it appears to exist in a vacuum — or so it seems to the existentialist. “There is no ‘real life’ anymore,” according to Karl. “What remains is the internal dynamics of the text itself.” Yet paradoxically, according to William Spanos, himself the editor of an existentialism anthology, deconstructionism presupposes existentialist thought in a way that partisans of the former are loath to acknowledge. Calling himself both a deconstructionist and a Heideggerian, Spanos sees no discontinuity between post-structuralist criticism and Sartrean and Heideggerian philosophy.

If the problems of “lived life” contrast with the isolated text in criticism, they contrast even more sharply with the philosophy of language. Breathtakingly trivial issues form the mainstay of analytic philosophy, whose practitioners justify this orientation by citing the rigor made possible thanks to a microscopic dissection of formal propositions. Shaped by the positivism of the Vienna Circle, this approach to philosophy is perhaps best captured in J. L. Austin’s dictum that truth is important, but importance is not.

Yet this school, from all accounts, does not hold the discipline in thrall today the way it did not so long ago. Whether this shift is due more to the inherent limitations of the approach or to the insistent criticism from Continental philosophy (notably existentialism and phenomenology) is difficult to ascertain. In any case, two of this country’s most respected students of existentialism argue that they are by no means alone. “The contributions existentialism has made have become, in certain respects, part of modern philosophy,” contends William Barrett. “They’ve infiltrated
gradually, and analytic philosophers have become more aware of these problems.” He points especially to the range of topics being tackled by ethical theorists and to the acceptance of Heidegger by philosophers of religion. Hazel Barnes, Sartre’s major English translator, notes that a paper on existentialism is almost always given at any philosophy conference now, while courses on the subject are still being taught all over the country. “In other words, it’s become part of the basic philosophical framework. It would be inconceivable for someone who spoke even three minutes on philosophy today not to include [existentialism and phenomenology] as a very profound part of it.” Barnes finds that students’ interest is undiminished, as well: “It used to be that people regarded Sartre, Camus, and so forth as the latest thing; obviously they don’t now. But you know the old Quaker expression ‘it speaks to my condition’? Well, the students still feel that, and I find that both when I speak around the country and in my own classroom.”

It is in psychology, however, where existentialism’s contribution is still most pronounced. The departments at certain universities — notably Duquesne, Seattle, and the University of Dallas — are dominated by the existential and phenomenological perspective, offering such courses as “Phenomenology of the Face” and “Seminar on Desperate Styles.” (Interestingly, all three of these schools are Catholic.)

The real power of existentialism, however, owes not to the minority that conspicuously identifies itself with it, but to the extent to which its themes have been assimilated into other schools. During a lengthy and wide-ranging conversation last summer, Rollo May stressed this point:

> The impact [of existentialism] is not that there are therapists who call themselves existential therapists, because existentialism is not a technique over against other techniques. It is not a system that you go to school to learn. It’s rather a concern with the basic presuppositions of what it means to be a human being. You can be a good Freudian or a good Jungian and still existential — and if you are good, you will be existential. Even some behavior therapists are very good existentialists. . . . Existentialism means keeping in mind the person who has the instincts or drives or behavior.

Irvin Yalom, whose publication of Existential Psychotherapy gave a boost to the movement several years ago, similarly emphasized that “the experienced clinician [of any school] often operates implicitly within an existential framework.”[18]

Historically, the influence of existentialism on psychology comes from two sources: Sartre and his “existential psychoanalysis” (as set out in Being and Nothingness) from which R.D. Laing took his cue, and the Swiss psychoanalysts Ludwig Binswanger and Medard Boss who attempted a synthesis of Freud and Heidegger. The latter version washed up on American shores with May’s Existence anthology. Its primary feature is a repudiation of the so-called “subject/object” dualism, which Binswanger once called “the cancer of all psychology,” in favor of the notion of “being-in-the-world.” This rather clumsy locution refers to the fact that we constitute what is outside us and are constituted by it, and that this reality is prior to the existence of the individual. It is inaccurate, in other words, to speak of an “I” over here and an “environment” over there and then say they interact. There is a sense in which the whole that includes them is more real than either by itself.

Other features of an existential approach to psychology include: a rejection of the dehumanizing elements of the natural science model, and particularly its emphasis on causality, reductionist explanatory theories, and quantification; an affirmation of the individual as changing through his or her choices, and the need to authentically take responsibility for those choices; a focus on the real encounter between two human beings that describes psychotherapy; and a rejection of theoretical approaches, including Freud’s, that portray the human as a collection of components. On traditional
disputes in psychology regarding the significance of behavior versus motivation, or the priority of thought versus feeling, the existentialist response — precisely as it is to such philosophical disputes as the mind/body problem — is to suggest the whole debate is misconceived. What matters is the self’s experience; anything else is a distraction at best and a violence against the human at worst. I am not an object for others to cathex, a collection of neurotransmitters and chromosomes, a repertoire of behaviors, or an information processing unit; I am an experiencer, an actor, a chooser — a whole and unique person in the world.

This approach hardly qualifies as the prevailing direction of American psychology or psychiatry, but its impact is felt. There are presentations at the national conventions, articles in mainstream journals (like the American Journal of Psychiatry), and textbooks that reflect an existential perspective. “Fifteen years ago,” says Seattle University’s Steen Halling, “if you looked at a traditional psychology journal and someone said that people responded to events as they perceive them and not events as they really are, that would have been a radical thing to say. It isn’t anymore.” Suzanne Kobasa has been conducting a longitudinal evaluation of the relationship between perceived stress and disease. An increasingly popular subject for research, Kobasa sees it as “taking some existential concepts that were vague and trying to turn them into empirical constructs. Behind the questions of stress resistance, I see a basic existential conception of life — such issues as the inevitability of change and struggle [and the idea] that what one is is what one makes.” The entire field of psychosomatic medicine, in fact, follows existentialism in rejecting the mind/body split that has plagued Western thought since Descartes.

The so-called neo-Freudians have introduced a variety of existentialist concerns into their studies of character. In place of Freud’s creaky mechanistic model, firmly based in the natural sciences and decidedly individualistic, the revisionists have emphasized our capacity to grow and choose and make meaning, as well as our relations with others. It is relevant to ask not only how one approaches psychology, but just what one is studying. Whereas Freud investigated such reifications as the “id” and the “ego,” the neo-Freudians were more concerned with the whole existing person.

But even many of those psychoanalysts who recoil from taking such liberties with the master have begun to embrace a new movement that quietly introduces existentialist themes. The late Heinz Kohut developed a “self psychology” during the 1970s that is particularly concerned with narcissistic disorders. While this is not the place for a summary of Kohut’s thought — or an explication of narcissism — several features of this theory warrant brief attention.

To begin with, the very way Kohut and others describe narcissism recapitulates such existentialist issues as alienation and emptiness. Moreover, Kohut created this self psychology as a direct result of the inadequacy of traditional psychoanalytic treatment; it was a change grounded in his concrete experience, not in a desire for a more elegant theoretical construct. When he talks about “data,” his conception diverges from that of the natural sciences. In the words of one Kohutian, “By taking an empathic, introspective stand one may sample the full range of experience from within the self of the patient as well as one’s own array of inner responses.”[19] One addresses the total subjective experience of the self, that is, and sees this as more fundamental than biologically based drives; the person replaces Freud’s “mental apparatus.” Too, this person is principally understood as a meaning-maker: “Through self psychology, . . . we have learned to approach relations not merely as what goes on between people, but in terms of the significance and meanings that become attached to the ‘goings on.’”[20] The self is even described in holistic terms, as “a psychological whole that is superordinated to the psychological parts.”[21] In short, while Kohut comes no closer to identifying himself with the existentialist movement than an occasional quotation from Kafka, his work, extraordinarily influential today in psychoanalytic circles, bears its footprints.

Humanistic or “Third Force” psychology is so widely believed to embody an existentialist perspective
that most textbooks simply refer to “humanistic-existential approaches.” Indeed, Charlotte Buhler argued that “Existential considerations form the underlying philosophical basis of humanistic psychology,”[22] and Carl Rogers and Fritz Perls regard themselves as existentialists. It is probably accurate to say that the themes of existentialism are not absent in American psychology so long as the humanistic alternative endures. Yet there are substantial differences between the movement originating in Germany and France and the one that developed in California. The three most substantial distinctions are these:

(1) Existentialism, particularly but not exclusively in its atheistic variety, focuses on the human as a creator; he or she invents values, purposes, and, ultimately, a self. Humanistic psychology places its emphasis on discovery. The self is there already, waiting to be actualized; “all you’ve got to do is sit and be nice,” as May characterizes the position. Values present no real dilemma: “The best way for a person to discover what he ought to do is to find out who and what he is. . . . Many problems simply disappear; many others are easily solved by knowing what is in conformity with one’s nature.”[23] Somehow it is not surprising that the Journal of Humanistic Psychology is increasingly filled with words like “spiritual,” “meditation,” and “transpersonal,” or that the photograph on its cover does not feature a person but an ethereal blue sky.

(2) Implicit in the sufficiency of discovery is humanistic psychology’s profound optimism. Unlike the balance offered by existentialism, Maslow, Rogers, et al., prefer to leave questions of death and despair to the Europeans, serving up instead a sanitized vision of the human condition. Maslow has no time for what he flippantly refers to as “high I.Q. whimpering on a cosmic scale.”[24]

(3) Existentialism is rooted in both affirmation and rebellion, and Camus brilliantly described how the two interpenetrate. But humanistic psychology virtually excludes revolt. In a very fine essay, Richard E. Johnson has argued that existential choice must exist “in defiance of every obstacle — not, as the new humanism preaches, ‘in harmony, in alignment with everything else’. . . . There is no way to reconcile this strain and tension of the individual self and the creative will . . . with a calm surrender to passive faith in the wisdom of the organism and the probity of the situation.”[25] Humanistic psychology, in sum, was largely shaped by an existentialist sensibility, but it would be erroneous to see the two schools as coextensive.

In developmental psychology, finally, we have evidence of some incorporation of the spirit of existentialism. An exciting book by Robert Kegan, The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development[26] offers a new theory to account for how we look at the world differently as we grow. For Freud, one’s adult life is a recapitulation of early experiences, and affect (feeling) is far more significant than thought. For the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, by contrast, it is cognitive ability that matters. Kegan not only synthesizes these two perspectives — he transcends them. He proposes to explore the underlying issue that defines human life: the project of making meaning or making sense of ourselves and the world around us. From the epistemological concern with how we come to know (Piaget’s interest), he moves to the ontological issue of what and who we are. Our growth, he suggests, can be understood as a process of reconstruing our relationship to the world, specifically by distinguishing ourselves from what is outside us. This, in turn, permits us to interact with the world more fully. As Buber put it, “One cannot stand in relation to something that is not perceived as contrasted and existing for itself.”[27]

There is little explicit reference to existentialist ideas or thinkers, but Kegan’s theory is an extraordinary realization of existentialism. His model unself-consciously touches on the dreadful exhilaration of change and choice (“Every transition involves to some extent the killing off of the old self”), the idea of projecting ourselves into the future, and the repudiation of the subject/object dichotomy. Most important, Kegan offers an account of growth from the inside, a phenomenological portrait of change that goes far beyond Piaget’s “objective” description of which mental operations
can be performed at which age. Unlike most developmental or personality theorists, Kegan’s subject is really the (human) subject.

In a sense, the tacit use of existentialist themes by people like Kegan and Kohut is more significant than the self-styled existential psychology to be found elsewhere. Such thinkers — and, doubtless, others as well — continue to find these ideas seminal and useful, yet feel no need to call attention to their roots. This suggests that existentialism is present here and now in a form both more profound and more enduring than the days when Life ran a 19-page photo essay on what was effectively billed as a new philosophical craze. Existentialism today has a quiet relevance to the issues of everyday life as well as a special immediacy in times of crisis. "Wherever there’s any ground for urgency in modern life, you have the existential issues," Barrett says, and, indeed, my students read Sartre juxtaposed with Jonathan Schell’s The Fate of the Earth.

Beyond psychology, our consciousness has been subtly changed by the presence of existentialism; this is clear whenever we speak of “absurdity” and mean more than simple silliness, whenever we talk of “a leap of faith” or “bad faith,” whenever we refer to making someone into an object or having a “dialogue.” As Maurice Friedman observes, “It’s not always being named existentialism, but the thing that represents that spirit is very palpably there. It’s had a very permanent impact that’s growing, and people are growing through it.”

NOTES

1. For example: Harper’s, the Atlantic Monthly, Saturday Review, the New York Times, the New Yorker, the New Republic, Esquire, Commentary, or Psychology Today.


12. To the extent that his treatment of the problem in this book was not exactly Buberian, his later reflections describe a significant change: “In Being and Nothingness, my theory of others left the individual too independent,” he later told an interviewer (“The Last Words of Jean-Paul Sartre,” Dissent, Fall 1980, p. 405). This entire interview is filled with reflections on fraternity, obligation, and collaborative activity.


16. Existentialism anthologies have included excerpts from Shakespeare, Proust, Dickens, Crane, and Hemingway. In his Existentialism and Modern Literature (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel, 1962), Davis Dunbar McElroy singles out Ibsen, Miller, and Faulkner. John Macquarrie nominates Joyce; Rollo May would include O’Neill and Fitzgerald. Surely Melville and Woolf cannot be excluded. All of which suggests the possibility of a short literature course on non-existential writers.

17. Frederick Karl and Leo Hamalian, The Existential Imagination (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Premier, 1963) and The Existential Mind, (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Premier, 1974.)


20. Arnold Goldberg, Introduction, in ibid., p. 9. Kohut summarizes his “new viewpoint” as one that “allowed me to perceive meanings, or the significance of meanings, I had formerly not consciously perceived” (“The Two Analyses of Mr Z,” International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 60, 1979, p. 3).


Copyright © 1984 by Alfie Kohn. This article may be downloaded, reproduced, and distributed without permission as long as each copy includes this notice along with citation information (i.e., name of the periodical in which it originally appeared, date of publication, and author's name). Permission must be obtained in order to reprint this article in a published work or in order to offer it for sale in any form. Please write to the address indicated on the Contact Us page.

www.alfiekohn.org — © Alfie Kohn