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## Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy

Pierre-Jean Renaudie (University of Lyon)

For a long time, it seemed natural to consider that the methodological requirements and conceptual expectations that characterize analytic philosophy put it at odds with continental philosophy in general, and even more so with existentialist approaches in particular. Even though analytic philosophy and of phenomenology, arising from the respective works of Frege and Husserl, both originated from a similar attempt to propose a non-psychological analysis of the concepts and proposition constitutive of thought, they soon ended up following opposite pathways, allowing Michael Dummett to compare them with the Danube and the Rhine: two rivers rising in the same geographical area and which initial courses keep close to one another for a while, before taking two completely opposite directions and finally flowing into two different seas (Dummett 1994, 26). After Carnap's decisive dismissal of the meaningless metaphysical statements that one could find in Heidegger – one of the first and probably the most significant and obvious milestone in the history of their separation – it was understood that the overcoming of metaphysics through the logical analysis of language implied a straightforward rejection of the existentialist way of philosophizing. From then on, and despite the numerous forms of analytic metaphysics that developed later within the analytic tradition (e.g. Strawson's descriptive metaphysics, Quine's ontology, Kripke's analysis of metaphysical necessity, Putnam's defense of realism...), the idea that an unbridgeable divide keeps analytic philosophers separated from the various manifestations of existentialism that have emerged in continental philosophy has been widely accepted amongst the community of philosophers.

Looking at it more closely and with more distance, however, it seems that the situation is not as clear-cut as it may appear and that the reconstruction of this divide requires a more subtle analysis. The historical elements that constitute the scenario of their division actually look more like the plot of a high-budget family melodrama in which two children of the same parents who were separated at birth and raised in two different families come to realize, long after they started developing completely different personalities, that they share significant traits of character and have more in common than they would have thought. In spite of the institutional and philosophical oppositions that, for long, kept them apart from one another, some of the main themes and concerns that played a central part in the development of existentialist thought eventually came to reemerge under various forms in analytic philosophy. This existential subterranean line of thought brought a certain number of philosophers belonging to the analytic tradition either to reformulate in their own terms some of the ideas that constituted the core of the existentialist views, or even more directly, to go back to the analyses of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger or Sartre to discuss some of their theses and draw on their main philosophical insights. It is not rare to see nowadays what

would have seemed deeply antithetical and almost impossible half a century ago: an original blending of analytic perspectives on philosophical matters with some important aspects of the existentialist views, betraying more or less explicitly the influence of some of the authors abovementioned.

This variety of intersections and crossed-influences between analytic philosophy and existentialism opens a very wide field of analyses, which cannot be exhaustively covered in this chapter and fall well beyond its scope and limits. It is nevertheless worth exploring, even in an inevitably superficial fashion, the modalities of these potential forms of convergence between analytic reasoning and existentialist views, in order to measure and discuss the philosophical legitimacy of this unexpected combination. For this reason, I will only try here to sketch a history of the relationship between these two traditions of thought that may slightly diverge from the official line of presentation, and which might shed some light on the reasons that eventually brought them to intersect somehow, in spite of everything that was expected to keep them firmly apart. The chapter will start with some historical considerations designed to recontextualize and nuance the significance of the opposition between analytic philosophy and existentialism. I will then isolate and consider two main lines of questioning – namely the meaning of skepticism and the status of practical knowledge – which strongly contributed in the reemergence of existential themes within the analytic tradition, and laid a possible ground for analytic forms or uses of existentialism.

### *Two different kinds of meaninglessness*

As I have already mentioned, the history of the division between analytic and existential philosophy can be traced back to Carnap's seminal critique of metaphysics in a famous article published right at the beginning of the Vienna Circle and only a few years after the publication of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Carnap's programmatic and paradigmatic study aims at setting up a philosophical method designed to identify meaningless statements so as to eliminate them from philosophical discourse and to overcome ("überwinden") metaphysical systems. Carnap explicitly focuses upon a few statements directly borrowed from the inaugural lecture Heidegger delivered at the University of Freiburg in 1929 (published under the title *Was ist Metaphysik?*), which Carnap explicitly identifies as an exemplary source of the problematic statements that metaphysical systems are grounded upon and generate. Carnap himself stresses at the end of his article that the originality of his antimetaphysical thesis consists in declaring metaphysics *meaningless* rather than false. Whereas the falsehood of any statement can legitimately be discussed, their nonsensicality leaves no room for further argumentation. It is then crucial for Carnap's argument to point out the source of the meaninglessness that metaphysical statements are concerned with. To this end, Carnap analyzes more specifically Heidegger's claim that "the nothing nothings" (*Das Nichts selbst nichtet*; Carnap 1931: 230; Carnap 1959: 70), in which he sees a typical form of metaphysical nonsense: although this sentence seems to have the same grammatical structure as meaningful sentences of ordinary language such as "the rain rains", it fails to comply with

the logical rules of language and mistakenly ascribes some kind of existence to nothingness, even though “the existence of this entity would be denied in its very definition” (Carnap 1959: 71). For ‘nothing’ is not a proper noun, but an indefinite pronoun, the logical function of which is to account for the non-existence of a certain class of objects: Walt Whitman’s famous verse, “nothing is ever really lost”, for instance, is to be understood as stating that a certain class of objects – in this case the totality of all the things that are really lost – is empty, i.e. that such objects do not exist whatsoever. The application of this logical analysis of language to Heidegger’s lecture on metaphysics thus reveals, according to Carnap, that his philosophical account of nothingness results from a fundamental misuse of language that constantly violates its underlying logical syntax.

Although Heidegger never claimed for himself the title of existentialist philosopher – he even resolutely refused such a label in his *Letter on Humanism* -, the predominant role that the notion of existence plays in the development of his philosophical thought is sufficient to identify Carnap’s critique as a significant historical milestone that may have contributed a great deal in laying the ground for the ideological division between analytic and existential philosophies. Carnap’s direct attack against Heidegger unquestionably sets the terms of this opposition by placing philosophical concepts authoritatively under the exclusive control and jurisdiction of logic. ‘Nothing’, as Carnap has it, is nothing but a “logical particle that serves for the formulation of a negative existential statement” (Carnap 1959: 71). The legitimacy of the existential concept of nothingness that Heidegger seeks to derive from the experience of anxiety must be reassessed on a strictly logical basis, according to Carnap, and explained solely in terms of existential quantification and negation. If the logical function of the concept of nothing is to account for the negation of an existential quantification, it is clear that it can neither function as an individual constant nor as a predicate in a proposition, which means that it can neither be turned into a substantive nor a verb. The main question underlying this philosophical opposition, as Carnap clearly sees by quoting Heidegger on that particular point, is that of the “sovereignty of logic” – a sovereignty that Carnap champions when Heidegger seems to be abandoning it. It is also the point that Heidegger puts forward when responding to Carnap’s attack a few years later, in a draft of his 1935 lecture course (*Introduction to Metaphysics*), in which he firmly refuses to base the philosophical understanding of Being on an analysis of the logical function of the copula in the proposition (Heidegger 1983: 228; Friedman 2000: 21-22). For Heidegger, our experience of nothingness is prior to logic, and must be considered the source of the logical concept of negation: nothingness is to be analyzed as intrinsically connected to our understanding of the existence of beings, and experienced through anxiety.

Notwithstanding, as strong and determinate as this frontal opposition between Carnap and Heidegger may seem, it is important to keep in mind that this initial collision and conflict about their ways of understanding the role of philosophical thinking was somewhat unexpected. As Michael Friedman has stressed, this discussion between Carnap and Heidegger must be brought back to the context of the most significant debate that occurred only a few years before at Davos, in the course of spring 1929. It is there that, for the first time, the different philosophical trends that were developing in the German-speaking

intellectual world started to split, under the influence of Heidegger's critique of Neo-Kantianism and attacks on its most eminent representative at the time, Ernst Cassirer. This philosophical event, in which Heidegger found a wonderful opportunity to appear as the champion of the revolt against the obsolete "rationalism" of the old generations of European thinkers – including 'old-school' phenomenologists such as Husserl as well as the different schools in the Neo-Kantian tradition – gained him considerable fame, attraction and influence on the younger generations of philosophers, as all the witness of this event concur<sup>1</sup>. Amongst them was Carnap, who showed at this time an unexpected interest in Heidegger's philosophical position and met him personally on this occasion. In his diary, Carnap records the strong impression that Heidegger's argumentative skills made on him, and he interestingly reports the themes of the conversation that he had with Heidegger on this occasion, which would later occupy a great place in their debate: the question of existence, and the fight against idealism. This wider historical perspective on the context of the debate between Carnap and Heidegger allows us to look at it from a slightly different angle. In the light of the philosophical dispute that opposed Heidegger and Cassirer at Davos, it seems perfectly clear that the rise and success of the original analysis of existence developed in *Being and Time* (1927), were grounded in Heidegger's ability to offer both a powerful critique and an innovative alternative to the great speculative systems of metaphysics. It seems rather uncontroversial to suggest that the surprisingly strong interest in Heidegger's philosophical thought demonstrated by Carnap as he engaged in a thorough study and discussion of *Being and Time* within the months immediately following the Davos encounter (Vrahimis 2013: 47) may originate in the common philosophical goal he and Heidegger shared: Heidegger's existential analytics and its aftermath were indeed part of a philosophical program that was attempting to provide a philosophically compelling critique of the old metaphysical systems.

Interestingly enough, this is a point that Heidegger himself stressed later on, as he added an introduction to the original manuscript of his 1929 lecture for the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of *Was ist Metaphysik?* (in 1949): in the very first pages of this text, Heidegger precisely insists that his own attempt to think the truth of Being must be understood as accomplishing the overcoming of metaphysics: "Die Metaphysik ist im Denken an die Wahrheit des Seins überwunden" (Heidegger 1955: 9)<sup>2</sup>. Heidegger's emphasis on this fundamental dimension of his philosophical gesture, and the terminology chosen as he explicitly identifies his own project as the "Überwindung der Metaphysik" (the quotation marks are Heidegger's), make it hard not to see in his claim a direct and obvious response to Carnap's harsh critique of 1931: from the existential analytics of *Being and Time* to his critical analysis of the onto-theological structure of metaphysics, Heidegger understood as much as Carnap his ultimate philosophical goal as the overcoming of metaphysics.

This common philosophical orientation may explain why Carnap felt initially close to Heidegger at Davos, even if the critique of metaphysics he would later develop would go in a

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed description of the event, see Friedman's account of the Davos encounter in the first chapter of (Friedman 2000).

<sup>2</sup> These additions to the original texts have not yet been published in the English translation of *What is metaphysics?*

symmetrically opposed direction. But the choice of Heidegger as an exemplary representative of the metaphysicians in the 1931 article remains somewhat puzzling, given Carnap's interest and informed knowledge of Heidegger's own attempt to overcome metaphysics, and can by no means be uniquely explained by their supposedly antithetical views: Carnap could just as well have found an ally in Heidegger, since their opposition to the speculative systems that metaphysics drew on oriented them both in a common direction. As Stanley Cavell notes, analytic philosophy and existentialism, in spite of all that would later contribute in making them antithetical, share a common philosophical impulse and result from a similar motivation: they were both coined in an attempt to get rid of philosophers' tendency to issue in speculative systems, which they too hastily end up satisfying themselves with (Cavell 1964: 948)<sup>3</sup>.

It is consequently a little difficult to grant unquestionable credit to the idea according to which the source of the unbridgeable philosophical divide that kept the existential and analytic approaches to philosophy separated from each other over more than half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century can be found in the opposition between Carnap and Heidegger<sup>4</sup>. This initial disagreement may not have been as decisive as it became, were it not strengthened by a subsequent event that played an essential, though most often disregarded, role in the "parting of the ways" – an event that contributed in turning this philosophical dissent into a *polemical* one, and which ended up splitting the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy in two irreconcilable traditions. Between 1932 and 1933, following the recommendation of Gilbert Ryle, British philosopher A. J. Ayer was sent from Oxford to Vienna so as to get a better sense of the philosophical ideas that were being discussed at the Vienna Circle's meetings (Vrahimis 2013: 89). On the basis of what he learnt during this stay in Austria, Ayer published in 1936 a widely read and highly influential book, *Language, Truth and Logic*, which introduced for the very first time logical positivism to a British audience, and proposed on this occasion his own restatement of Carnap's anti-metaphysical theses. However, being foreign – not to say impervious – to the German philosophical and historical background of the discussions that framed the context of Carnap's opposition to Heidegger, Ayer's less nuanced and well-informed version of his critique develops into a more polemical argument and caricature of this debate. Overlooking the common roots of Heidegger and Carnap's effort to overcome the grand speculative metaphysical systems they were both rejecting, Ayer describes Heidegger as the champion of a metaphysics "based on the assumption that "Nothing" is a name which is used to denote something peculiarly mysterious", and grounded on the "superstition [...] that, to every word or phrase that can be the grammatical subject of a sentence, there must somewhere be a real entity corresponding" (Ayer 1970: 43-44).

The historical importance of Ayer's book, which set the ground for the British reception of logical positivism and its absorption by the growing generation of analytic philosophers, is

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<sup>3</sup> For further analyses of the close relations between the respective positions of Carnap and Heidegger, see (Stone 2006), (Gabriel 2009), (Vrahimis 2013).

<sup>4</sup> In the wake of Friedman's seminal work, many have argued that the cultural, sociological and political components of the divide were at least as significant and influential as its strictly philosophical terms. See (Simons 2001), (Glendinning 2006), (Preston 2007).

obviously considerable. What remains less known is its impact on the fate of existentialism amongst English-speaking philosophers. Ayer, indeed, was not only involved in philosophical espionage for the sake of his advisor Gilbert Ryle at Oxford University. A few years after the publication of his book, as the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war was ending, he was sent over for military purposes to the intelligence section of the British Embassy in Paris, where he befriended several unexpected prominent figures of the Parisian intellectual landscape, such as Albert Camus, Georges Bataille, or Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In the following years, between 1945 and 1950, Ayer became well-acquainted with the new existentialist trends in philosophy and published no less than five articles on the topic, three of them being specifically dedicated to Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy<sup>5</sup>. In spite of Ayer's acquaintance with French existentialism, these articles, utterly negative and critical towards existentialism, maintain the strongly polemical – sometimes even aggressive – tone Ayer had already adopted in his book on logical positivism. In spite of the surprisingly great amount of effort Ayer put in his repeated attempts to discuss the existentialist views, going as far as to admit some kind of proximity between Sartre's esthetical and ethical claims and his owns<sup>6</sup>, it is clear that his opinion had already been shaped well before he got to read Sartre and Camus (Vrahimis 2013: 89), when he first granted his full support to Carnap as he first discovered the theses of the Vienna Circle. Existentialism is dismissed as deeply irrational and obscure, grounded on gross logical fallacies that Ayer rejects using the exact same set of arguments he found in Carnap's critique of Heidegger (Ayer, 1945: 18–19).

This extension of Carnap's seminal critique of metaphysics to existentialism in general was bound to have a significant and long-lasting impact on analytic philosophers. As a matter of fact, the years in which Ayer wrote this series of articles on existentialism are precisely those that marked the beginning of a major transformation in British Philosophy departments, which David West describes as the 'active process of forgetting and exclusion' of continental philosophy (West 2017: 37). It was especially the case at Oxford – the most powerful faculty of philosophy in England and Ayer's philosophical homeland – where the immediate after-war coincides with the institutional turn thanks to which analytic philosophers gained firm institutional control over the Philosophy Faculty (Akehurst 2013: 243-244). Thus, even if it is possible to imagine that the original opposition between Carnap and Heidegger may have been more or less smoothly integrated in the flow of the passionate debates that regularly shook European philosophy and were constitutive of its intellectual vitality, the definitive and irrevocable sentence pronounced by Ayer's critical reports on existentialism as analytic philosophy was gaining indisputable supremacy over the English-speaking philosophical world had the final word, and lastingly established the separation between these two traditions. It may be worth mentioning, as a symptomatic example of the influence that Ayer's analyses exerted over analytic philosophers, the categorical and highly dismissive judgment formulated by Alasdair MacIntyre – though he could hardly be counted as one of the strongest opponents of continental philosophy – in the needless to say unavoidably influential

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<sup>5</sup> See Ayer (1945, 1946a, 1946b, 1948, 1950); Ayer kept writing on Sartre and existentialism in the following years, publishing four more articles on the topic in the sixties.

<sup>6</sup> Ayer 1950, 634 ; Ayer is consequently described by Iris Murdoch as no less an existentialist than Sartre, as far as ethical questions are involved (Murdoch 2014, 34; see Vrahimis 2013, 93-95).

entry he wrote, some twenty years later, for the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, declaring existentialist thinkers fundamentally “insensitive to the syntactic and semantic properties of the language they employ” (MacIntyre 1967: 153). Here again, in an article designed to introduce the existentialist tradition to English-speaking students in philosophy, MacIntyre follows precisely the path opened by Ayer, who “has accused Sartre of a systematic misuse, in his ontology, of the verb “to be.””. The “distrust of rationalism” that existentialism embodies according to MacIntyre is then less understood as a result of its critique of metaphysics than as the expression of its deep incompatibility with logical reasoning. By that time, after the ultimate attempt to build a dialogue between continental and analytic philosophy admittedly failed at the infamous Royaumont Colloquium in 1958 (*La philosophie analytique* 1962; Taylor 1964: 132-133), analytic and existential philosophies were, according to Stanley Cavell’s words, not only mutually incomprehensible but so deeply distrustful that it cannot but seem vain to entertain the hope to comprehend them both (Cavell 1964: 947).

And yet, their common philosophical distrust of speculative systems makes them strikingly similar in their attempt to identify and overcome the archetypal forms of meaninglessness that philosophy conveys. Only, they disagree on the interpretation that must be given of what philosophical meaninglessness results from. As Cavell puts it, “the discovery of analytical philosophy is that such [speculative] systems make *statements* which are meaningless or useless; the discovery of existentialism is that such systems make *life* meaningless” (Cavell 1964: 947). Both existential and analytic philosophies are motivated by a fundamental suspicion towards the forms of meaninglessness that philosophical systems generate. But whereas meaninglessness is interpreted by the analytic tradition as the consequence of the misuse of language and disregard of logic, existentialism understands this failure in relation to the individual lives that such philosophical systems fail to clarify: not only do speculative systems fall short of accounting for the meaning of our lives, they also - and perhaps more importantly - fall short of accounting for the meaninglessness and contradictions that human forms of existence usually involve and deal with. The absence of meaning is less understood as a semantic consequence of ill-formed linguistic statements than as a proper dimension of human lived-experience, the description of which constitutes a fundamental aspect of the existentialist tradition. Existentialism often resulted in an attempt to make sense of the contradictions that our lives are made of and to describe certain forms of absurdity as inherent to human existence. Sartre’s famous claim that the for-itself “is what it is not and is not what it is”, for instance, perfectly exemplifies the existentialist impulse/urge to describe human existence as inherently grounded on an insuperable contradiction, which threatens, but also decides on the meaning of human behavior. The violation of logic that Sartre’s phrase entails is obviously at odds (just as much as Heidegger’s abovementioned remark on logic) with the logical expectations of the members of the Vienna Circle. Nevertheless, the acknowledgement of the philosophical significance that such contradictions may carry expresses at a more basic level a skeptical concern about meaninglessness that the existentialists share, in spite of their divergences, with the analytic tradition.



### *From skepticism to the absurd*

This nuanced recontextualization can help us highlight some significant points of intersection between the analytic and existential traditions and interrogate the reemergence of existential motifs in the development of analytic philosophy. One of these themes, inherited from the suspicion that both traditions entertained towards speculative systems, is that of skepticism, which played an important role in analytic epistemology since its very beginnings<sup>7</sup>, and which soon became interpreted in terms that gave it some existential depth. The skeptic attitude, indeed, does not solely consist in an epistemic stance that stresses the limits of human knowledge, it may also give rise to an interrogation of the place that such limited knowledge grants us, pointing to our condition as finite beings and to our existential situation in the world. This connection between the epistemological worry about the justification of our knowledge that the skeptical attitude encapsulates and the existential concern about the justification of our existence contributed to building a bridge between the existential and analytic traditions. As different as their understanding of meaninglessness may be, their common concern about meaningless forms of philosophical discourse brought them to raise the problem of the absurd in somewhat similar ways.

The conceptual linkage between epistemological skepticism and the question of the meaning of life was the object of a seminal article on the absurd published by Thomas Nagel in 1971 (Nagel 1971; reprinted in Nagel 2009). Nagel proposes in this text an analytic treatment of the question as to whether or not life can be considered meaningful, which strikingly recalls the terms of Sartre's famous analyses of the irreducible contingency of our existence and the unbearable impossibility of finding any justification for it. Nagel starts by analyzing four standard reasons for which life is usually thought to be devoid of meaning. These common reasons to claim that life is absurd, he argues, can easily be proved unconvincing and unsatisfactory by paying closer attention to the weaknesses of the argumentation they draw on, and should be rejected. However, Nagel says, in spite of our capacity to demonstrate the invalidity of such arguments, their elimination does not manage to clear all grounds for supposing that the reality of our lives is incompatible with our general expectations and aspirations. From this inevitable discrepancy results, according to Nagel, an insuppressible feeling of absurdity attached to our existence. Trying to understand the source of this discrepancy, Nagel has it that it stems from the "collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt" (Nagel 1971: 718). The absurdity of our lives, in other words, is not the result of a mere lack of meaning, as if meaning was simply absent from our mode of existing. It is experienced as a lived contradiction between two inescapable tendencies of our existence: the skeptical tendency to issue doubts regarding chains of reasoning that lack necessity, and the need to make choices and take decisions that apply to our lives as if they were rationalizable and devoid of contingency. Nagel claims that it is the inevitable clash between these two incompatible perspectives that produces the absurdity of our lives. The way we live our lives implies a kind of commitment and involvement in the

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<sup>7</sup> See for instance Moore's refutation of idealism and Russell's constant use of skeptical arguments.

actions we take, the decisions we make, etc., which is incompatible with our knowledge of their contingency and arbitrary character. What makes life absurd, then, is our purposeful and voluntary ignorance of doubts we cannot completely overlook nor discard – a behavior in which one might easily recognize the existential disposition which Sartre described as “bad faith”. The absurdity arises less from the pure absence of meaning than from our desperate efforts to keep living our lives with nearly undiminished seriousness in spite of all the doubts we cannot help raising in that respect: no matter how much care, energy and attention we invest in our lives, “we have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness [with which we take our lives] appears gratuitous” (Nagel 1971: 719).

Interestingly, the existential conflict that results from this conspicuous discrepancy between two incompatible perspectives on one’s life is described by Nagel as distinctively human and inherent to human existence. It is not so much a matter of falling short of justifications while trying to account for our choices or decisions, as if the absurdity of our existence simply arose from our incapacity to produce a full chain of reasons explaining why we do what we do or live the way we live. For if it were the case, we would only be facing the epistemic issue of infinite regress, which might remain existentially acceptable, though epistemologically unsatisfying. Why would we bother entertaining doubts and concerns about the possible absence of meaning of our existence if they were only a matter of theoretical knowledge, disconnected from the practical aspects of our everyday life? But Nagel’s analysis stresses that the discrepancy in which the question of the meaning of life originates expresses at a more basic and fundamental level our particular situation in the world. The problem, indeed, is that we can always step out of the chains of justifications to find out, as Nagel puts it, that the whole system of justification which supports our claims to rationality and upon which the most important decisions of our lives rely, is itself fundamentally unjustified, resting “on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity, and to which we shall continue to adhere even after they are called into question” ” (Nagel 1971: 720). In terms strikingly similar to those of Sartre, Nagel depicts our ‘being-in-the-world’ as that of beings who are constantly torn between the practical perspective that commits them to their own lives and the disengaged external standpoint that ruins all possibility of finding ultimate justifications of their choices. “We see ourselves from outside, and all the contingency and specificity of our aims and pursuits become clear. Yet when we take this view and recognize what we do as arbitrary, it does not disengage us from life, and there lies our absurdity: not in the fact that such an external view can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves can take it, without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded” (Nagel 1971: 720). In Nagel’s view, just as much as in Sartre’s, our particular way of being situated in the world consists in this fundamental ambivalence between the contingent limitations of our lives and our capacity to see these limitations from an external standpoint.

A quite remarkable consequence of this analysis is that it reverses the relationship between our epistemological reasons to be skeptics and our existential experience of the absurdity of our lives. Nagel understands philosophical skepticism as resulting from the

adoption of a disengaged standpoint, which we can only arrive at in contrast with the certainties that support our practical life. The skeptical attitude, whether epistemological or existential, derives from this unbridgeable gap between our “limitedness” and our “capacity to transcend these limitations in thought”, thanks to which we see them as inescapable limitations ” (Nagel 1971: 722-723). In other words, as Duncan Pritchard notes, “radical scepticism [is nothing but] the epistemological counterpart of absurdism” (Pritchard 2010: 6). This relationship between epistemological skepticism and the adoption of a disengaged standpoint that urges us to acknowledge the inescapable absurdity of our lives establishes a substantial and intimate connection between analytic philosophy and existentialism, which appear, in Nagel’s view, much more closely related to each other than one may have thought.

Not only does Nagel see his own analysis as an original development of the existentialist approach to the question of the meaning of life; he goes as far as to claim that his view offers an improvement and refinement of existentialism. For Albert Camus, indeed, the absurdity of our lives arises because the world fails to meet our demands for meaning<sup>8</sup>. This claim, however, presupposes the logical possibility of a different world, which might satisfy those demands. Nagel’s description of the conflictual situation that is inherent to human existence demonstrates that this cannot be the case. The absurd, in Camus’ analysis (as interpreted by Nagel), is less the consequence of our ability to transcend the conditions of our existence, than the result of a certain state of the world. For Nagel, on the contrary, “the absurdity of our situation derives not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves” (Nagel 1971: 722). There is no conceivable world which would be such that it would necessarily prevent us from raising “unsettling doubts” about the meaning of our existence.

For this very reason, Nagel’s conclusions in his article diverge significantly from Camus’ “romantic and slightly self-pitying” response to absurdism (Nagel 1971: 726). The acknowledgment and acceptance of the absurdity of our lives does not require, according to him, the kind of distress and defiance that constitutes the ground of Camus’ analysis. Instead, once we admit that absurdity is deeply human and manifests “our most advanced and interesting characteristics”, we can simply deal with it in a much more casual way, and “approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair” (Nagel 1971: 727). This final plea for irony brings back to the table one of the main themes of existentialism, since Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the Socratic use of irony. The terms of Nagel’s analyses and the conclusions that he draws from these original insights might of course be discussed, and have been critically reassessed within the analytic tradition. According to Duncan Pritchard, for instance, however compelling Nagel’s arguments may be, his approach to the question of the meaning of life tends to substitute an epistemological thesis to a metaphysical question. The acknowledgment of a disengaged perspective from which we may rationally doubt the final value of our fundamental goals does only entail that we might not be able to *know* whether or not they have final value, but not that they do not or cannot have any whatsoever (Pritchard 2010: 11). Pritchard consequently proposes a revision of Nagel’s argument that defends a

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<sup>8</sup> Nagel refers in particular to Camus’ *Myth of Sisyphus* (Nagel 1971: 721-722; Camus 1955).

strictly epistemological version, claiming that “the meaning of one's life is necessarily opaque to one, in that one will not have a subjective guarantee that one's life is not absurd” (Pritchard 2010: 13). However, as Pritchard notes, this epistemological uncertainty necessarily generates some existential consequences, starting with the angst that always accompanies our inability to determine whether or not our lives are meaningful, and that constitutes in consequence “an incontrovertible feature of the human condition” (Pritchard 2010: 15). Far from rejecting the terms of Nagel’s discussion of the absurd, such criticisms accordingly contribute to restating the legitimacy of this original intersection of analytic epistemology and existentialism.

### *The privileges of theoretical knowledge and the critique of self-knowledge*

Another important philosophical trend historically related to the birth of logical empiricism brought analytical philosophy of mind to intersect in an interesting way with the existential tradition. The skeptical attitude that analytical philosophy inherited from the empiricist tradition led to a critique of theoretical knowledge, which questioned its philosophical legitimacy and gave rise to a discussion of self-knowledge that echoes some of the existentialist claims. This critical approach to self-knowledge arose mainly from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s remarks on the philosophy of psychology, and their interpretation by his student, Elizabeth Anscombe, who stressed their philosophical importance. Wittgenstein’s singular philosophical style and mode of thinking exerted a great influence on the analytic tradition, from his conversations with Russell in Cambridge before the publication of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to his discussions with the Vienna Circle – with Moritz Schlick and Friedrich Waismann in particular. In the lectures he gave at Cambridge (which belong to what is often called his ‘second philosophy’) Wittgenstein emphasized in an original fashion the specificity of the claims that we commonly feel entitled to make about our beliefs, sensations or desires, and more generally about our knowledge of our own states of mind. In a remark from his *Lectures on philosophical psychology* from 1946-47, Wittgenstein stresses for instance that our knowledge of ourselves does not rely on the type of procedure thanks to which we are able to provide evidence in support of our usual epistemic claims:

"To know my own state is easy because I am myself" - because I am so near to it? But even so how can I predict my behaviour? Has experience taught me that when I see one thing in myself I am likely to do another thing? and nobody else could see the thing in myself? (Wittgenstein 1989: 97)

Wittgenstein’s remark is meant to prevent us from understanding self-knowledge in terms of *observational* knowledge, as if one needed to turn her gaze inward and perform some kind of inner monitoring in order to check whether she prefers Coke or Pepsi, believes that Mount Everest is covered with ice and snow, or has the intention to propose to her next-door neighbor<sup>9</sup>. The epistemic credit one enjoys when expressing a belief, a desire, or an intention,

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<sup>9</sup> See for instance the critique of the ‘detectivist’ view in (Finkelstein 2003).

does not rest, in this case, upon the proximity between the knowing subject and the object known, as if our ability to tell what we desire was ultimately grounded in our spatial location and justified by a geographical fact, putting us in a better position than others to observe ourselves. In his first philosophical essay of importance, *Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre develops a critical approach to self-knowledge that highlights a strikingly similar point, even though his line of argumentation significantly diverges from Wittgenstein's:

The me, as such, remains unknown to us. And that is easy to understand: it is given as an object. So the only method for getting to know it is observation, approximation, waiting, experience. But these procedures, which are perfectly suitable for the entire domain of the non-intimate transcendent, are not suitable here, by virtue of the very intimacy of the me. It is too present for one to look at it from a really external point of view. If we move away from it to gain the vantage of distance, it accompanies us in this withdrawal. It is infinitely close and I cannot circle round it. (Sartre 2004: 22)

Sartre's analysis seems to head in the exact opposite direction from Wittgenstein's, as he claims that our *knowledge* of ourselves cannot be *but* observational; what we call self-knowledge is nothing but a particular kind of theoretical and objective knowledge that takes the 'me' as its object. If this is true, however, then the 'intimacy of the me' constitutes an irreducible obstacle to our knowledge of ourselves, as it suppresses the distance between the subject and the object so as to make direct observation impossible: "it would be futile to ask the me directly and try to take advantage of its intimacy to get to know it. Quite the contrary: it is this intimacy that bars our route" (Sartre 2004: 22). As a consequence, Sartre's conclusion arrives at the very same point that Wittgenstein's remark highlighted: the particular proximity or intimacy that one might feel entitled to claim as an epistemic justification for her statements about herself is of no use for self-knowledge.

Both Sartre and Wittgenstein's remarks draw our attention to the limits of our theoretical expectations about self-knowledge. The knowledge we acquire on the basis of observation and experiential acquaintance with objects can never satisfyingly account for the specific authority that is usually granted to whomever makes a claim about her beliefs, desires, intentions, emotions, or other mental states... According to Sartre, we must conclude from this analysis that "to know oneself well' is inevitably to look at oneself from the point of view of someone else" (Sartre 2004: 22), which means that one's claim to immediate introspective self-knowledge is always fallacious. Sartre develops this view in *Being and Nothingness*, where he describes the self-identification of one's own motives or reasons to act in such or such way as a manifestation of bad faith, which consists in the *a posteriori* reconstruction and rationalization, for the sake of self-justification, of the choices that may explain one's behaviour, but fail to reveal the fundamental project in relation to which this behaviour takes place. Likewise, Wittgenstein's remark clearly shows the fallacy attached to the inferential identification of one's own desires, intentions or choices: the knowledge of our own mental states does not manifest itself as something on the basis of which we acquire the ability to predict our behaviour, and which becomes accessible to us through inferential judgments based on the observation of our own behaviour.

By refusing to ground the authority of first-personal statements about one's mental states on the epistemic specificity of direct self-observation, Wittgenstein and Sartre both contributed in different ways to highlighting the particularity of practical knowledge and its irreducibility to theoretical knowledge. This particular aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophical contribution was especially developed by his student at Cambridge Elizabeth Anscombe, whose famous work on intentions had a wide and significant impact in analytical philosophy, from philosophy of action to moral psychology (Anscombe 2000; originally published in 1957). Stressing the non-observational character of the knowledge on the basis of which we feel justified to describe our actions as intentional, Anscombe refuses to identify this knowledge with theoretical knowledge. She insists, however, that my non-observational awareness of the intentional character of my action is not just a kind of access to my intention that I have while the others do not – as in the case of my awareness of the position of my limbs. In her account, my conception of my intentional action does not bear only an epistemic or descriptive relation to the action, but also plays a fundamental role in *constituting* it as the action it is (Moran 2004a: 67-68). The knowledge that expresses my non-observational awareness of my own intention is somehow also, according to Anscombe, “the cause of what it understands”, i.e. a particular kind of knowledge, which was systematically overlooked by modern philosophy's “incurably contemplative conception of knowledge”, and which medieval philosophers such as Aquinas used to call practical knowledge (Anscombe 2000: 57).

Anscombe's conception of practical knowledge is thus meant to account for that particular awareness of one's intentions that does not only *detect* our mental states but plays a *constitutive* role in the determination of our action as intentional. The capacity to ascribe to oneself such or such intention (and to claim one's action as intentional or non-intentional) is less a matter of *describing* one's inner states than a matter of *deciding*, on the basis of some kind of rational deliberation, what one's reasons to act in such way should be. Richard Moran makes this particular consequence of Anscombe's analysis explicit in his book *Authority and Estrangement*, in which he stresses the intrinsic relationship between one's ability to describe one's action as intentional and one's knowledge of the *reasons* one may have to act in such way:

The description under which an action is intentional gives the agent's primary reason in so acting, and the agent knows this description in knowing his primary reason. [...] The agent takes the question of what he is doing to be answered by his decision as to what is worth pursuing, and that question is not a predictive or explanatory one to be answered by observation of himself. (Moran 2001: 126)

Moran's influential book, which constituted an important milestone within the field of the philosophical studies on self-knowledge and was instrumental in renewing the analytic approaches to this question, can be understood as an attempt to determine to what extent Anscombe's conception of practical knowledge allows a novel and original interrogation of the epistemic status of self-knowledge. The constitutive dimension of practical knowledge that his interpretation of Anscombe emphasizes can shed light, according to Moran, on the immediacy of ordinary self-knowledge and on the authority with which first-person reports of

attitudes and states of mind are delivered and received. In belief as in intentional action, Moran claims, the stance from which a person speaks with any special authority is not a stance of causal explanation based on some special kind of observation, but the stance of rational agency. It is consequently by *reflecting* on our reasons to act like we do or hold whatever belief we might hold that we perform self-knowledge and get to know ourselves: our intentions or beliefs, in other words, are both described and constituted simultaneously.

In belief as in intentional action, the stance of the rational agent is the stance where reasons that justify are at issue [...] Anscombe's question "why" is asking not for what might best explain the movement that constitutes the agent's action, but instead is asking for the reasons he takes to justify his action, what he is aiming at. It is as an expression of the authority of reason here that he can and must answer the question of his belief or action by reflection on the reasons in favor of this belief or action." (Moran 2001: 127)

Ordinary self-knowledge, according to Moran, requires first and foremost our capacity to *reflect* on the reasons in favor of our belief or action, which secondarizes the role of observation and introspection. The immediacy of such forms of self-knowledge expresses fundamentally the way in which a person 'assumes responsibility' for her thought and action (Moran 2001: 131). This emphasis on the level of responsibility that reflection involves brings the discussion back to Sartre's concept of 'commitment' (*engagement*), and – as we will see a little later – to his distinction between pure and impure reflection. In an earlier passage of *Authority and Estrangement*, which lays the ground for his interpretation of Anscombe, Moran distinguishes between two different and irreducible ways of asking a question about oneself: theoretical and practical (or deliberative) questions. This distinction is meant to account for the fact that finding out what one's intention is does not amount to discovering an antecedently formed intention in one's mind. The question, Moran claims, is less theoretical than deliberative: its answer does not involve the discovery of a fact but requires the process of *making up our mind* about what we intend to do (Moran 2001: 56):

What we're calling a theoretical question about oneself, then, is one that is answered by discovery of the fact of which one was ignorant, whereas a practical or deliberative question is answered by a decision or commitment of some sort, and it is not a response to ignorance of some antecedent fact about oneself. (Moran 2001: 58)

According to Moran, the kind of commitment involved in the answers given to deliberative questions plays a constitutive role in self-knowledge (Moran 2001: 146), which echoes Sartre's identification between self-consciousness and freedom. In *Being and Nothingness*, indeed, Sartre describes self-consciousness "as the positing of one's freedom with respect to whatever psychic structures, drives, or traits of character are discovered in consciousness", which leads him to hold that self-consciousness expresses one's free choice of herself: "to be conscious of ourselves and to choose ourselves are one and the same"

(Sartre 1956: 595; Moran 2001: 140)<sup>10</sup>. Thus, Moran finds in Sartre the idea of the intimate connection between self-reflection and free choice that underlies what he himself calls, following Anscombe, practical reflection: for it is, in Sartre's view, a consequence of one's reflection on oneself that a situation of choice is somehow *forced* on us, such that whatever we may do with respect to this "psychic given" must now count as our *commitment* to it (even if we only acquiesce in it) (Moran 2001: 140). The reassessment of the authority of self-knowledge that Moran proposes is largely based on his original interpretation of Sartre's emphasis on commitment. In Moran's terms, the self-ascription of a belief, for instance, is to be understood less as a description of one's mental states or attitudes than as an *avowal*, thanks to which one explicitly *endorses* this belief, and which expresses one's "own present commitment to the truth of the proposition in question" (Moran 2001: 86). Rather than the discovery of a psychological fact, an avowal consists in an act of commitment, which, as such, cannot be contested, and which justifies, precisely for this reason, the specific authority granted to first-personal reports about oneself. Avowing one's desire, intention or belief, does not presuppose our prior knowledge of these states of mind, but constitutes the necessary condition for the possibility of such knowledge.

The influence of Sartre's existentialist view of the relationship between self-consciousness and freedom on Moran's original approach to self-knowledge is highlighted by one of his critics, Charles Larmore, who discusses them both in a book originally written in French, and later translated into English under the title *Practices of the Self* (Larmore 2004; Larmore 2010). Following Moran's abovementioned distinction between theoretical and practical questions, Larmore distinguishes between two kinds of attitudes towards oneself, which he presents as modelled on Sartre's distinction between 'pure' and 'impure reflection'. From *Transcendence of the Ego* to *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre relentlessly draws his reader's attention to the deceptive character of self-reflection, which makes us adopt toward ourselves the point of view of someone else (Sartre 2004, 22), and can provide nothing but the knowledge of a reified and objectified version of ourselves. In Sartre's own words, impure reflection consists in this act thanks to which the for-itself apprehends itself as in-itself: it "apprehend[s] the reflected-on as in-itself in order to make itself be that in-itself which is apprehended" (Sartre 1956: 160). This cognitive and 'impure' form of reflection is consequently "in bad faith in so far as it constitutes itself as the revelation of the object which I make-to-be-me" (Sartre 1956: 161). Larmore stresses the similarity between impure reflection and what he himself describes as the cognitive/contemplative stance we are often tempted to take up with regard to ourselves. This is for instance what we do when we take pleasure in watching ourselves act "instead of devoting ourselves to the action itself that the situation requires", the better to hide from ourselves our own responsibility for our acts (Larmore 2010: XV).

Sartre, however, insists that this impure form of reflection implies the possibility of a pure form of reflection. He describes it as "the simple presence of the reflective for-itself to

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<sup>10</sup> See also (Sartre 1956: 462): "As our being is precisely our original choice, the consciousness (of) the choice is identical with the self-consciousness which we have. One must be conscious in order to choose, and one must choose in order to be conscious. Choice and consciousness are one and the same thing."



the for-itself reflected-on” which constitutes the original form of reflection but is never first given (Sartre 1956: 155). When performing pure reflection, Larmore comments, “I am not adopting a viewpoint toward my state of mind” (Larmore 2010: 114); I refuse to take up the contemplative stance through which I can obtain an inferential knowledge of my states of mind based on the scrutiny of my psychological traits or observation of my behaviour. As Sartre notes, pure reflection in this sense is to be understood in terms of recognition (*reconnaissance*) rather than knowledge (*connaissance*): it “delivers to us the reflected-on, not as a given but as the being which we have to be” (Sartre 1956: 155-156). This description of pure reflection encapsulates perfectly, according to Larmore, the main philosophical purpose of the concept of avowal that he borrows from Moran and shares with him: “An act of reflection in which we posit the being we have to be: this is a fine description of what seems to me the character of the avowals” (Larmore 2010: 114). Avowals, indeed, make manifest the irreducibly first-personal dimension of the sort of self-knowledge that results from practical reflection, and point to the alienation or bad faith that is inevitably attached to any other kind of first-person reports. As Moran puts it, “the attribution of attitudes to oneself cannot substitute for knowing one’s mind as the exercise of a deliberative, non-observational capacity” (Moran 2001: 68).

As it may already be clear to the attentive reader, however, both Moran and Larmore’s critical reassessment of self-knowledge diverge from Sartre’s view on a significant point, as the former both defend a *normative* and *rationalist* approach to first-person authority that is at odds with Sartre’s existentialist posture. In spite of their philosophical disagreements<sup>11</sup>, Moran and Larmore concur that a critical examination of self-knowledge must acknowledge the essentially normative dimension of the first-personal apprehension of oneself: our beliefs, intentions or desires are fundamentally constituted by our ability to issue practical reasonings and so to determine the content of our mental states by articulating them consistently within the normative space of reasons. The reason why we can be considered “wholly normative beings” is precisely, according to Larmore, that “we are only subjects in the space of reasons” (Larmore 2010: 95). This conclusion is evidently at odds with Sartre’s existentialist conception of freedom and choice, which claims on the contrary that one’s choice of oneself always come prior to the reasons and motives that might justify one’s action. For Sartre, rational deliberation always comes too late, so as to explain afterwards a choice which has already been made and which precedes all rationalization (Sartre 1956: 461-462). On the contrary, Larmore insists that “it is the normative order that constitutes the subject and not the other way around”(Larmore 2010: 95). Likewise, Moran identifies Sartre’s critique of rational deliberation as a potential threat that his conception of avowals is meant to avoid. It is the reason why Moran insists that a first-person report on one’s states of mind is an avowal *only if* it is the result of her practical deliberation on what is to be desired, believed, or intended (Moran 2004b: 424).

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<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of the differences between their approaches, see (Webb 2017) and (Webb 2022)

## **Conclusion**

Regardless of the disagreements they may raise, these discussions of Sartre's theory of self-consciousness and the critical reassessment of the existentialist views that they engaged are enough to document and evince the philosophical fruitfulness of such analytic readings of the existential tradition. In the preface of *Authority and Estrangement*, Moran stresses the complementarity between Sartre and Wittgenstein's investigations of the first-person apprehension of oneself, which constitutes, according to him, the underlying thread of his own arguments about self-knowledge (Moran 2001: XXXIV). Such intersections between the existential and analytic traditions create a rich and interesting domain of investigation, both for the renewal of the existentialist views, and for bringing more complexity some of the discussions raised by analytical philosophy of mind. On the one hand, original uses of the existential claims have emerged through the analytic tradition, which contributed to the disengagement of existentialism from the methodological constraints and doctrinal orthodoxy that its historical ties with phenomenology had imposed. On the other hand, the careful examination of some of the arguments or ideas that can be found in the existential literature have contributed to considerably enrich the analyses upon which mainstream analytical philosophy of mind was accustomed to draw. These fertile intersections between analytic philosophy and existentialism give rise to a tight, but philosophically interesting tension, which is manifest in Moran and Larmore's discussion of the irrationalism involved in Sartre's existential views: the question remains, indeed, whether the rational demands and expectations that analytical philosophy requires can fully and satisfyingly accommodate the existentialist endeavour to describe the irreducible complexity and contradictions of human lives.

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