

## **Resilience in Times of Need**

Jytte Holmqvist  
University of Central Lancashire  
United Kingdom

### Abstract

In these transformative times of interrupted lives, humanity has had to take a step back and subject its frantic, rushed existence to a profound analytical glance. The COVID pandemic has caused millions to suffer and the elderly are more vulnerable than ever; moreover, many families are left to mourn alone, not always able to gather around their departed loved ones at the time of grief. This has led many to believe that humanity has lost control of its environment and its destiny. Yet, if recent predictions by sociologists come true, the current, seemingly never-ending pandemic might have some positive results. The anguish it causes may be, in fact, teaching us to appreciate the value of the natural world that we are depleting, to understand “the other”, and to recognise the planet-saving significance of the phrase “less is more”. And while the world’s populations slowly realise that their social environment has changed permanently, the pandemic’s beneficial upshot might be that people will be mindful of things beyond their immediate concerns and will begin to see the “bigger picture”. In view of the speculative disarray inherent to our present condition, this paper proposes existentialism as a system of thought with the intrinsic power to guide individual and social awareness; it thus analyses our present in an interpretive and pragmatic light while it draws on the existentialist theories of Søren Kierkegaard and Simone de Beauvoir. Both philosophers are querying and inquisitive and both timelessly relevant, sensible and direct about what they see is at the core of human existence.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, existentialism, interrupted realities, Simone de Beauvoir, Søren Kierkegaard

Existentialist thought is galvanised by a fundamentally ontological concern: that of making being and reality more intelligible. This comprehensive perspective makes existentialism a malleable system of thought whose relevance to diverse social environments is clear. As such, the present paper proposes existentialism as a system of thought that needs to be considered from a broader perspective, an -ism which, to be fully understood, must issue forth from academia, step out of the page and be directly and methodologically applied to the way in which non-academicians from all walks of life view diverse social and cultural contexts. Understood in a pragmatic manner, existentialism becomes a formula for how to live and understand life and the different roles people play. It provides a lens through which we familiarise ourselves with our world and with the societal pressures that shape our human condition. It is a philosophy that can metamorphose into a set of practical guidelines that, if adhered to, could allow individuals to become liberated from the weight of collective thought and be free to act as mindful beings.

In line with certain distinctive attributes of existentialist thought, the individual, without necessarily ignoring the deity's backstage presence, must not fear the fear that comes with being human. Rather, it is in the pain and discomfort inherent to that condition that the human being is able to delve deeper and reach higher all at once, living and experiencing the whole range of human emotions intensely. Kierkegaard explains his religious attitude in *Fear and Trembling* (1843):

... anyone who loves God needs no tears, no admiration; he forgets the suffering in love. Indeed, so completely has he forgotten it that there would not be the slightest trace of his suffering left if God himself did not remember it, for he sees in secret and recognizes distress and counts the tears and forgets nothing. (Kierkegaard, qtd. in Strawser, 2006, p. 60)<sup>1</sup>

Kierkegaard here seems to suggest that, while we would be wise in adopting a critical stance to Christianity on an institutional level – and that “[b]elieving in Christianity means accepting fundamentally absurd doctrines, especially those that define its founder” (Robinson and Zárate, 2013, p. 89) – our hearts should be faithful to a redeemer who remains by our side through hard times. (Adam Kirsh [2020] notes that “a Christian, for Kierkegaard, isn’t something you are born; it is something you have to become through terrific inner effort”). So, it is evident that difficulties integral to the human condition are not there to be resolved by a higher force or spirit, waiting for that which makes us become passive, uninvolved, and complacent. Rather, we are in charge of our own destiny and are individuals in a world where we must act as free agents and consciously deal with issues both on a personal and a societal level.

The more liberal faction of existentialist scholars (Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus) disengaged from the limiting conditions and structure of the Christian Church as an institution. They gave added agency to the individual as compared to more conservative existentialists who adhered to a more conventional behaviour influenced by societal norms. Thinker-philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard and Simone de Beauvoir, more specifically, broke away from conformity by questioning largely undisputed “truths”, or norms, relating to institutional structures on both societal and personal levels (in terms of, e.g., conventional lifestyles versus a striving towards

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard likewise expands on his idea of existential suffering in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) and *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849).

greater individual independence, authenticity, the withdrawal from strict worship procedures and renunciation of standard family setups, including marriage as an institution).<sup>2</sup>

They recommended, without being prescriptive, a path forward where individuals should strive to find their own footing while still being functional within the parameters of civil society. Kierkegaard and de Beauvoir proposed that the individual strive for personal freedom and an existence which, even if it may be solitary and anxiety-ridden at times, opens up alternatives and allows for a lifestyle where a true self may be found, discovering thus the meaning of existence. In existentialist thought, the personal blueprint is the fundamental feature of cognition. That is to say, it offers a context where human suffering is not internalised inertly following normative, religious or social prescriptions, but is an important reactant for personal growth. On the whole, it is more of a ‘free-flowing philosophy’ than a doctrine, and it has often been misunderstood as “philosophy of complete nihilism and utter despair” (Olson, 1962, p. 13). Disregarding this misconceived idea, we argue that existentialism should be construed as a way of being and relating to this world, one that is flexible and allows for interpretations, or as the Encyclopaedia Britannica puts it, for existentialists “existence is always particular and individual” and “is opposed to any doctrine that views human beings as the manifestation of an absolute or an infinite substance”. Existentialism, in a word, “... does not require adherence to any normative moral principle” (Aho, 2020, xiii).

While not a philosophical doctrine as such, existentialism does provide a relatively specific and identifiable set of guidelines, like the need for authenticity, the necessity of acquiring the freedom to choose our own path in life, the acceptance of the inherent anguish that comes with having the choice to decide a personal future, and the need to take responsibility for personal mistakes. In this regard, Jennifer McWeeny provides a relevant contemporary Beauvoirian observation, writing in her Council for European Studies article “A New Existentialism for Infectious Times” that

The French existentialists who formed their ideas in the belly of World War II knew what it was to be afraid of mortality and an unknown future. Theirs is a philosophy born out of the desire to give meaning to their lives within the trembling softness and vulnerability of the human condition that come to light in times of global crisis. ... Much like de Beauvoir and her famous entourage, we, too, are contending with an unexpected and catastrophic visitor. The coronavirus pandemic therefore allows us to enter the historical experience of these French thinkers more deeply than we have before. More importantly, it shows how existentialism can empower us at the very moment when we feel most helpless and passive, when we are waiting uneasily for an outcome that we cannot know in advance. (McWeeny, 2020)

Relevantly, according to de Beauvoir the individual “is seeking with anguish to find his place in a world upside down” (de Beauvoir, 2004, p. 4). Kierkegaard offers that “empowerment” necessary in times of trouble that is mentioned by McWeeny. As an existentialist that has not disengaged with his faith, Kierkegaard introduces the symbolic concept of the “Knight of Faith”, one who embraces life fully and courageously. He compares him to the “Knight of Resignation”:

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, often considered the first modern couple, are here a perfect example of how a union that lasted for life was able to thrive and prosper as a result of the free conditions under which the couple operated – committed to an open marriage and relationship which saw them able to focus almost undividedly on a shared philosophy and liberal ideas that were developed further and lead to the publication of important works such as “The Second Sex” first published in Sartre’s *Les Temps Modernes* (1949).

When around one everything has become silent, solemn as a clear, starlit night, when the soul comes to be alone in the whole world, then before one there appears, not an extraordinary human being, but the eternal power itself, then the heavens open, and the I chooses itself or, more correctly, receives itself. Then the personality receives the accolade of knighthood that ennobles it for an eternity (Kierkegaard as quoted in Hong, 1978, p. 76).

And further,

The knight of faith is the only happy man, the heir to the finite while the knight of resignation is a stranger and an alien. (Kierkegaard, qtd. in Westphal, 2014, p. 420)

Kierkegaard's personal environment accounts for many of his existentialist's characteristics and parallels the suffering and anguish that the present pandemic is causing around the world. Brought up in a strict protestant environment, his father was a stern clergyman and his mother a "plain" woman in the eyes of society. The family suffering would leave a lasting impact on both father and son: 5 of the 7 children of Michael Kierkegaard died before age 34, and the only ones eventually left standing were the father Michael (his wife died early as well), Søren and one of his older brothers. Shame, guilt and suffering became lingering sentiments that would weigh on Michael Kierkegaard's conscience, who, it is speculated, may have interpreted the tragedy as a punishment for his own premarital sins. But the sense of impending doom would also haunt Søren Kierkegaard throughout his life. Pain, suffering and dread, as well as ingrained feelings of insecurity were prevalent, even when he was celebrated as a public persona. Dread and anxiety accompanied him as a dark shadow and shaped his entire outlook on life, famously leading him to break off an engagement and choose a solitary existence rather than marital "bliss".<sup>3</sup> Initially determined to follow in his father's footsteps, and connected to the former through a complex mix of repulsion/attraction,<sup>4</sup> an increasingly affluent Kierkegaard living off his family inheritance ultimately never stepped into the role of Lutheran pastor and would always lead "a poet's existence" (Kierkegaard, 2004, p. 53). Gradually oriented towards philosophy, he was drawn to Hegelian dialectics, to the image of an "ideal" society where "the will of each individual and society's laws must coincide, because, ultimately, human beings are defined by their relation to others" (Robinson and Zárte, 2013, p. 30).

In a statement that becomes increasingly relevant in a pandemic world, Kierkegaard declares that a true Christian must

... grasp the secret of suffering as the form of the highest life, higher than all good fortune ... For this is the severity of the religious, that it begins by making everything more severe. ("Concluding unscientific postscript", qtd. in Carlisle, 2019, p. xv)

With much in common with Kierkegaard and with an equally questioning mindset, de Beauvoir sees existentialism as something organic that moves with the times. As such, it can be embraced today as a means of methodically organising the data of experience as we enter ever more

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<sup>3</sup> Clare Carlisle writes of Kierkegaard that "in many of his books, he focused on the themes of romantic love and fidelity and engagement and marriage, and he kept returning to these questions through his philosophical writing" (Warburton, 2021, n.p.).

<sup>4</sup> Carlisle identifies as "distinctive features of Kierkegaard's character ... his attitude of ambivalence. He was ambivalent towards his father; he was ambivalent towards Christianity; he was very ambivalent towards being an author" (Warburton, 2021 n.p.).

deeply into the COVID world, questioning the possibility of a post-pandemic future. In her 1947 core text *Qu'est-ce que l'existentialisme?* (translated into English as *What is Existentialism?*) she writes that this concept or philosophy:

... claims to be a practical and living attitude toward the problems posed by the world today. It is a philosophy yet does not want to stay enclosed in books and schools; it intends to revive the great tradition of ancient wisdom that also involved difficult physics and logic, yet proposed a concrete human attitude to all men. (de Beauvoir, 2004, p. 3)

Its relevance to the present situation is further defined by Aho, who declares that existentialism applies to the concrete actions and choices of the *existing* individual and to the human situation as it is *lived*:

Although existentialism cannot be reduced to a unified doctrine or school of thought and its major representatives differ widely in their views, the common thread that ties these thinkers together is their concern for the human situation as it is lived. This is a situation that cannot be reasoned about or captured in an abstract system; it can only be felt and made meaningful by concrete choices and actions of the existing individual. (Aho, 2020, xi)

In drawing from Kierkegaard and de Beauvoir's texts and visualising how their insights, attitudes and worldviews directly relate to society today, informing the way extraordinary transformations are understood, we may better grasp the idea that we are no longer in control of the future. The very pillars of our beliefs in humanity, its consistent journey of progress and improvement, the stability of its hegemony over the planet, its persistence and perpetuation, are being ground to a pulp by a microscopic enemy. The statement by a 32-year-old Kierkegaard resounds today with heartrending immediacy: "life has become a bitter drink to me, and yet it must be taken in drops, counted one by one" (Kierkegaard, 2004, p. 47).

Modern-day populations feel more vulnerable – both physically and mentally – than ever before. Clinical psychologist Sarb Johal notes this same sense of disarticulation in moments of crisis:

[f]or existentialists, an existential crisis is considered to be a journey, a necessary experience and a complex phenomenon. It comes from an awareness of your own freedoms and how life will end for you one day. That journey may reveal to us that where there was structure and familiarity, now there is mystery, unfamiliarity, a sense of discomfort, and a feeling like somehow, things don't fit so well anymore. (Johal, 2021)

Things do not fit so well anymore, there is a mystery and an unfamiliarity in reality today because the enemy is unseen and yet deadly and unrelenting. As Francesco Tava notes, "[w]e live in a time of anxiety – where anxiety is fear without an object, fear without a clear source of that fear" (Assiter and Tava, 2020). A new and frantic defence of personal safety and security today has priority over human connections; our only escape route appears to be away from the world and into detached confinement.

From an existentialist frame of reference, these times of reflection and isolation may render us more authentic, as suggested by Johal, who writes that "an existential crisis might move you

towards greater authenticity, which may also bring anxiety as you struggle for meaning”. He also argues that “Covid is an existential crisis that comes with an awareness of your own freedoms” (Johal, 2021).

It seems like the world came to a halt when COVID-19 struck, making the headlines and sending shock waves around the globe. Everything would soon be “turned upside down”, as in Kierkegaard’s phrase. Absurdist images proliferated of overcrowded hospitals, severely tested health professionals, quarantined people in southern Europe providing verbal support and encouragement to each other from balconies as police patrolled the streets below, ambulances rapidly crisscrossing urban arteries, and hastily excavated dumping sites turned mass graves to store the bodies of the deceased. With them came the parallel coverage of silent mourners, unable to be with their loved ones at the sudden unexpected end of their life journeys, and the resulting grief and despair – as well as stories of extreme emptiness. Incredulous, the world watched. Reality became unrecognisable, and we no longer recognised ourselves, slowly losing touch with who we were before and discovering a new version of ourselves.

Johal notes that we are now experiencing a new kind of anxiety; one that feels “different, deeper, and beyond perhaps your usual fear or anxiety about day-to-day troubles. This feels more existential.” (Johal, 2021, n.p.). De Beauvoir had already summed it up perfectly in her timeless *Wartime Diary*, when haunted by the traumas of WWI, she gave voice to her exasperation:

I felt myself caught in a trap, tossed about in space and time, without a future, without hope.... A great cataclysm had passed through, not one that devastates the earth and leaves everything to be rebuilt, but on the contrary, one that leaves the world intact but destroys humanity. (de Beauvoir, qtd. in McWeeny, 2020, n.p.)

In the end, we may find a new sense of wisdom: Fear must not be feared. Rather, it is a feeling that must be embraced as a way to move to the next level of a rather existentialist new way of life. To undergo the transition from a world ostensibly under control to one of profound uncertainty no doubt requires a conversion to a new consciousness, to an inner self that prioritises its existentialist dimension. An important stage in the process involves overcoming our fears, and where there is nothing to fear, individuals will be alert, more discerning and more acutely aware of what it means to “be”.

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**Corresponding Author:** Jytte Holmqvist

**Email:** kastanjett@gmail.com