

Make It New: Renewing Commitment
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INTRODUCTION: The Dancing Philosopher

Perhaps you haven't ever wondered who the best dancer was among the post-World War II French existentialist philosophers.

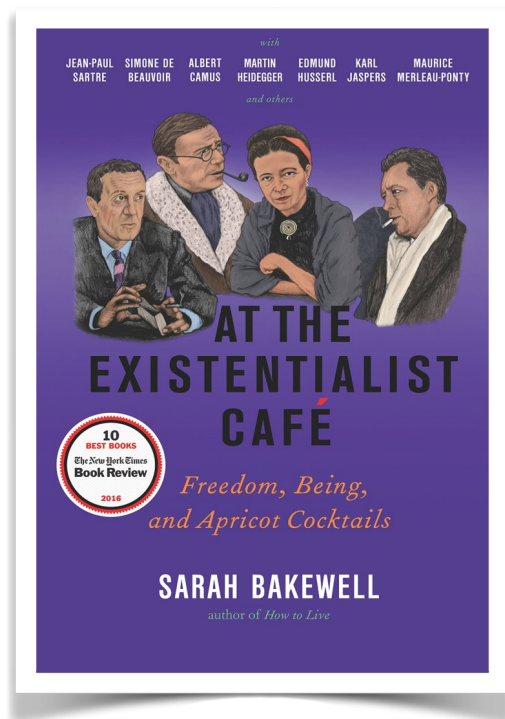
It's a simple oversight to make. We tend to see philosophers as thinking heads. Maybe smoking a cigarette as they gaze into the unknown. But never cutting the rug.

We know the answer concerning who the best dancer was among the post-World War II French existentialist philosophers thanks to an excellent book by the freelance historian Sarah Bakewell titled *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails*.

The answer is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who was known in his time as "the dancing philosopher." Maurice Merleau-Ponty is a name not much known by Americans, which is a shame.

Sarah Bakewell is a brilliant researcher, and she has a thorough knowledge of the existentialist milieu in Paris after the war. Also, she is able to articulate the philosophy very concisely and clearly. Take for example this on Sartre's most famous concept, "existence proceeds essence." She writes:

You might think you have defined me by some label, but you are wrong, for I am always a work in progress. I create myself constantly through action, and this is so fundamental to my human condition that, for Sartre, it is the



human condition, from the moment of first consciousness to the moment when death wipes it out. I am my own freedom: no more, no less.

And this,

Merleau-Ponty . . . saw quite calmly that we exist only through compromise with the world—and that this is fine. The point is not to fight that fact, or to inflate it into too great a significance, but to observe and understand exactly how that compromise works.

“We exist only through compromise with the world—and this is fine.”

Merleau-Ponty also wrote one of my favorite quotable quotes:

We can never move definitively from ignorance to certainty, for the thread of the inquiry will constantly lead us back to ignorance again.

Why was Merleau-Ponty the best dancer? For one reason, his entire philosophy had to do with being *in a body*. How we inhabit our bodies and how we negotiate with the space that surrounds us.

Merleau-Ponty stated the obvious very succinctly: “I am conscious of the world by means of my body.”

It’s obvious. But we tend to forget that. A lot.

ONE: Body Experience

#Nowadays, we hear the phrase “lived experience” everywhere. We use it to express the idea that every person’s subjective experience is valid and important. We use it to point out what at first appears obvious, but upon examination is not so obvious: Your “lived experience” and my “lived experience” are not the same, and that’s OK. That’s the nature of reality.

The term “lived experience” has come into vogue in popular usage because it is a useful concept. It explains, for example, how one person can see history as a march toward freedom and another can see history as an endless story of subjugation and warfare. Yet, as so often happens when a philosophical idea somehow gets loose

from the academic world and enters the popular imagination, in common usage, it is not fully expressed or nuanced.

But #that's one of the things we Humanists attempt to do: think things through. See some nuance.

The first confusion comes if you think about it for a moment: "lived experience?" Don't we have to be alive before we have an experience? So isn't "lived" and "experience" kind of redundant?

Yes, when the idea is taken out of context.

The idea of "lived experience" comes from a European philosophical tradition called phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty was a phenomenologist. The whole point of phenomenology is about how to live in our bodies. Hence the term "lived experience." Lived experience is your subjective narrative based on how you have existed in your body in the world.

I, for example, grew up very poor and experienced malnutrition as a child. So, my bones did not develop correctly. I have bent legs and a swayed back. The older I get, the more that matters in terms of how I navigate the world: every step I take is a reflection of my lived experience of malnutrition. It's part of who I am, even though that experience was five decades ago.

I'm not saying "poor me." That's a silly use of my time and your time. Rather, I am saying that #for all of us, our bodies and what those bodies have experienced is of the utmost importance in our own understanding of ourselves in the world.

"Lived experience," however, as a concept can stay abstract and all in the head, because the idea ignores another part of phenomenology, a term called "lived body."

"Lived experience" comes about because of our experience in a "lived body." Merleau-Ponty wrote,

True reflection presents me to myself not as idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical with my presence in the world and to others, as I am now realizing it: I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and through them, all the rest. (Phenomenology of Perception)

"Identical with my presence in the world and to others." #Being present. That's just a couple of words. But it's one of the most difficult things any of us can ever imagine doing. We just don't learn to do it in mainline US culture.

Merleau-Ponty used a simple exercise to explain the importance of "lived body." Whatever you are doing right now—sitting, standing, walking, lying down—whatever you are doing, stop and mentally examine how your body feels. What does "sitting in a chair" *feel* like? What is it doing to your knees? Your ankles? Your muscles? Try to express what your body feels like to yourself in words.

For most of us, that is very difficult.

Merleau-Ponty insisted: #right there is our first human problem. We don't even know what it *feels* like to be in our bodies. Sure, we are aware of extraordinary things—stubbing our toes or running up several flights of steps. We do not, however, grasp what it feels like from moment to moment to live in our bodies.

This is the point at which another existentialist, Simone de Beauvoir, went to town. Since we understand so little about how we feel within our own bodies, we can be misled. Beauvoir says that women are sold a narrative about their bodies that is mired in patriarchal assumptions that create a self-imposed, subjugated reality: "I'm too this, I'm too that, I'm too this other thing."

"Self-imposed subjugation" because we don't know how it feels to live in our bodies. Those experiences then, and other personal experiences, add up to "lived experience."

Nowadays we call it names such as "negative self talk."

TWO: Spirit Good

#Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir are there to tell us that the way Christian Europe—and all its many colonies and outposts—the way Christianity has taught us to deal with the very natural human feelings of passion and angst and unease is to ignore the body. #The equation taught is: spirit, good; flesh, evil: Ignore the body and improve your soul. Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir are there to say this is exactly the wrong way to go.

#To be in any way whole and present, we must embrace both our own lived experience and our own lived body.

This line of thought reminds me of a poem by Ezra Pound, the twentieth century American poet who made the term "Make it New" synonymous with Modernism. The poem is very short. It goes like this:

And the days are not full enough
And the nights are not full enough
And life slips by like a field mouse
Not shaking the grass

"And life slips by like a field mouse / Not shaking the grass." Ezra Pound is describing a life lived out of the body, ignoring the body: the feeling of being alive is utterly etherial and never enough: ". . . life slips by like a field mouse / Not shaking the grass."

What is being described there is *not* a life well-lived in a body.

Our theme for the month of March is Renewing Commitment. #The first commitment all of us has is to ourselves. To live that well-searched life of meaning, purpose, and justice-making.

Yes, philosophy and theology can seem abstract. But existentialism is the opposite of abstract. I'm reminded of the lives of the existentialist as I've watched the war in Ukraine unfold these past days. The existentialists were all young adults during the Second World War. Merleau-Ponty was a French soldier fighting the Nazis on the front line and was wounded in battle as the French army collapsed.

After the Nazis had captured Paris, Merleau-Ponty founded an underground resistance group with Jean-Paul Sartre called "Under the Boot."

Sartre had also fought on the front lines and was captured by the Nazis and spent time in a prison camp.

Beauvoir taught school in Paris through the war.

Paris was not severely bombed. The Nazi leadership thought of Paris as one of the centers European civilization, and treated the city—if not its citizens—with respect. The

cafés, the theaters, the museums, the schools and universities all stayed open during the occupation.

The occupation years were a very surreal experience for the French—going to the usual cafés and shops during the day, hunting and being hunted by Nazis at night.

When the Allies invaded Europe, they first chose to avoid Paris. There wasn't a meaningful Nazi presence there, and they didn't want to waste troops on a rear-guard action. At that point, the French Resistance, including Merleau-Ponty, openly fought the Nazis in the streets until finally the Allies took notice and realized the symbolic value of liberating Paris.

The existentialists had lives. Very dangerous and often controversial lives. Beauvoir was raised in a strict Catholic household. She attended convent schools. She was very pious, until she began asking questions. She became an atheist, saying "Faith allows an evasion of those difficulties which the atheist confronts honestly."

And that fairly well sums up the existential project: "Faith allows an evasion of those difficulties which the atheist confronts honestly."

Beauvoir insisted that her body was hers. She and Sartre had an open relationship all their adult lives. Beauvoir was openly bisexual. She joined with other French women in signing a petition declaring that they had had abortions, even though abortion was illegal in France at that time.

And Beauvoir scandalized Americans by having an open affair with the American writer Nelson Algren, who wrote *The Man with the Golden Arm*. Sometime you're in Chicago with some time, go to the Wicker Park neighborhood and hang out in the coffee shops and bars where Beauvoir and Algren hung out when Beauvoir was in the US. Wicker Park is still a very artsy neighborhood.

#The existentialists are here to tell us that our existence is an existence only. But the essence of our lives—in the face of suppression, oppression, imprisonment, war, torture, murder—the essence of our lives is the choices we make in the face of the terrors of being alive.

And that's all about commitment. A commitment to realizing , every day, where we are and making life new everyday

CONCLUSION: It's Not How We Think We Think

To summarize. I talked a lot about information a couple of weeks ago. The folk understanding of human consciousness is called "information consciousness." Many if not most people think that our consciousness is the product of our brains processing information. Even though this *feels* true, this does not appear to be how consciousness works, though what consciousness *is* still eludes us for the most part.

#Merleau-Ponty had a theory, based in the concept of "lived body." He called it "intercorporeality." Inter-corporo-reality. By which he meant that we are what we are and think what we think based on our interactions with other bodies. Not only partners. Not only relatives. Every person we encounter. Every living being we encounter. #If we experience other bodies as mere objects, we are, Merleau-Ponty said, walking among corpses—we are choosing to walk through our lives experiencing corpses. That's one way to live. It is not a fulfilling one.

#Merleau-Ponty said that we must take our own "lived experience" and "lived body" out into a world of other *living* bodies—realizing that our very thoughts and very being are created by "intercorporeality." A living body among other living bodies—plants, animals, the planet, and each other.

I invite us all to live in that place. A place of compassion. We can get there by recommitting to making it new everyday.

It may or may not make you a better dancer, but it can make us all better people.

SOURCES and Further Reading

Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails*.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945.

Dan Nixon, "The body as mediator: The phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty." Aeon.

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