

HOW TO BE AN AGNOSTIC

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In a famous trial in Dublin in 1937, Samuel Beckett took the stand in a libel case, not directed at him but rather at a local author, Oliver St. John Gogarty, for an antisemitic caricature he had recently made of Beckett's Jewish relations. Gogarty's barrister put the following question to Beckett: "Do you call yourself a Christian, Jew, or Atheist?" From the dock, Beckett replied: "None of the three."¹ To this extent, Beckett may be grouped with the ever-increasing number of today's 'nones', those who regard themselves as 'non-religious', who are not affiliated with any religious tradition or community. It is primarily these nones to whom Schellenberg addresses his book. But what he seems to overlook is the distinctive, albeit unusual, way in which Beckett and many like him identify as religious 'nones'.

Beckett's perspective on religion is notoriously difficult to categorise. And he is not unique in this respect: the world's great writers tend to resist pigeonholes, especially with regard to religious belief. To ask, for example, whether Kafka was a theist is almost as illogical as many of the scenes depicted in his novels and short stories. Consider also Camus' reaction to the frequent attempts made to label him an atheist: "I hear people speak of my atheism. Yet the words say nothing to me: for me they have no meaning. I do not believe in God *and* I am not an atheist."² Even those who profess a fixed religious identity are often betrayed by their own writings. A good, albeit contested, example of this is Dostoevsky, whose affiliation with a quite conservative form of Christianity is well known, but who, at the same time, arguably undermined this very affiliation by putting forward some of the most powerful criticisms ever made against belief in God (for example, in the rebellious character of Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*).³

Malleable and fragmented subjectivities are of course a common feature in Dostoevsky. In his own, postmodern, fashion, Jacques Derrida also invoked the plural and decentred self when seeking to explain his religious sensibilities, to the consternation of some of his readers. In "Circumfession" (1991), modelled in part on Augustine's *Confessions*, Derrida talks about "my religion about which nobody understands anything," with the result that he has been "read less and less well over almost twenty years"; yet, he concedes that "I quite rightly pass for an atheist."⁴ When asked in an interview in 2000 why he didn't simply 'come out' as an atheist, instead of slyly saying that he 'rightly passes' for one, he replied:

I am being ironic. Firstly, I prefer to refer to what *they* say... So I feel free because *I* am not saying this... It is, however, not that simple. For I am more than one: I am the atheist they think I am, which is why I say that I "rightly" pass for an atheist, but I would also approve of those people who say exactly the opposite. Who is right? I don't know. I don't know whether I am or not.⁵

1 As reported in *The Irish Times* November 23, 1937.

2 Albert Camus, *Notebooks: 1951–1959* (Ivan R. Dee, 2008), emphasis in the original.

3 As Alexander Boyce Gibson has said, in *The Religion of Dostoevsky* (SCM Press, 1973), 2–3: "The public Dostoevsky was a Christian, and in his later years a Christian propagandist: qualified critics have seen his public professions as a mask for his inward misgivings. At the very least, the artist gives the atheist so much rope that he confronts the believer on equal terms; and who is to say that Dostoevsky's outward decision for orthodoxy is to override the evidence of his artistic intimations?"

4 In Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 154–55.

5 Mark Dooley, "The Becoming Possible of the Impossible: An Interview with Jacques Derrida", in *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*, ed. Mark Dooley (State Univ. of New York Press, 2003), 32, emphasis in original.

John Caputo, one of Derrida's most lucid interpreters, explains that Derrida qualifies as an atheist — by the usual confessional standards, “by the standards, say, of the local pastor, of the Pope or Jerry Falwell.”⁶ But given his commitment to deconstruction, and therefore to the subversion of fixed binaries such as the theist/atheist opposition, Derrida could not place himself squarely within the atheist (or theist) camp. It's not that Derrida is confused about what he thinks; the point, rather, concerns long-standing philosophical prejudices about which Derrida is deeply skeptical, prejudices like the unity of the self (which the credal assertion “I believe” presupposes) and the ‘decidability’ between theism and atheism (which presupposes that the meaning of these labels rises above historical contingency to represent two mutually exclusive options which can be rationally adjudicated).⁷ It is not, therefore, a matter of being confused about what one believes, but of refusing the very parameters within which the question (Do you believe?) is set. Kierkegaard, as Caputo has noted, similarly declined to claim he was a Christian, but was instead preoccupied with the problem of how to become one within the prevailing ‘Christendom’ of his time.

As this indicates, there are challenging questions about borders and identities, about what is allowed in and what is driven out, that have to be addressed before we can begin listening to, let alone heeding, Schellenberg's call to rethink religion, to give it another chance (which means, for him, a lot more time) to fulfill its potential and grow into maturity.

If, for example, we are to rethink *religion*, what exactly is it that we are being called to explore and reflect upon, if not participate in and devote our lives to? Schellenberg, much like Socrates when accosting his fellow Athenians with various ‘what-is’ questions, makes the assumption that the object of investigation has certain identifying characteristics, perhaps even essential qualities, which illumine the nature or even ground the identity of that object, marking it off as distinct from other objects. And the quality claimed by Schellenberg to ground the identity of religion is *transcendence*. Or, to be more precise, ‘triple transcendence’, so that religion involves (really or seemingly) making contact with a transcendent reality, a reality which has transcendent meaning (“a shudderingly deep inherent significance”) and affords transcendent benefits (“a dramatically enhanced life for human beings”).⁸

Schellenberg doesn't provide much of a defence of this definition, or way of characterising religion, nor does he enter the fray of scholarly debate concerning the nature of religion. Should we adopt a ‘substantive’ approach, one that characterises religion in terms of its ‘substance’, that is to say, its belief-content or the reality the beliefs are purportedly about? Philosophers of religion, with their emphasis on the cognitive aspects of religion, tend to approach religion in this way. Sociologists, by contrast, like to view religion in functionalist terms, considering the functions it performs, the practical effects it has in the lives of people and society, where this might be social cohesion, meaning-making, moral clarity, etc. Or we might combine these two approaches, as Schellenberg's account of religion seems to do. But why assume that the category of ‘religion’ marks out any clearly identifiable phenomenon? A Wittgensteinian, making use of the ‘family resemblances’ idea, might argue that there is no specific essence or set of qualities that all religions share; instead, in light of our greater awareness of religious pluralism, we might be led to develop a list or ‘cluster’ of ‘religion-making’ characteristics, leaving it open and vague as to how many of these a phenomenon must have in order to count as ‘religious.’⁹

6 John D. Caputo, “A Game of Jacks: A Response to Derrida”, in *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*, ed. Mark Dooley (State Univ. of New York Press, 2003), 43.

7 See John D. Caputo, “Atheism, A/theology, and the Postmodern Condition”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael A. Martin (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), 275–76.

8 J. L. Schellenberg, *Religion after Science: The Cultural Consequences of Religious Immaturity* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019), 7–8.

9 On p.9 of his book, Schellenberg admits that “the issue of the definition of religion is actually rather controversial,” but the only considerations he goes on to offer in support of his ‘triple transcendence’ definition is that it is “quite widely accepted” and that the aspects of religiousness picked out by his definition “include the aspects of it [religiousness] that have been most influential.” One could contest these claims, and one could also contest the criteria employed to judge the adequacy of a definition of a phenomenon as multivalent as religion. As an indication of the problematic nature of Schellenberg's definition, note the centrality accorded to ‘transcendence’. A transcendent reality, according to Schellenberg, refers to “something *more* existing beyond the familiar world of fires and spears and wheels and everything else belonging to our ordinary shared experience.” (p.7,

Even more radically, one might question the category of ‘religion’ itself as a Western invention, a concept at home in Western modernity but not applicable to premodern or non-Western societies. Raymond Geuss, in his recent work *Changing the Subject*, points to the great gulf separating the contemporary Western understanding of ‘religion’ (inflected as it is by centuries of monotheistic belief and practice) and the conceptual and mythological universe of the ancient Greeks:

[T]he Greeks had no single simple substantive to designate what we call ‘religion’ that is at all parallel to our concept. The closest expression they had was τὰ τῶν θεῶν, ‘the things/matters/affairs of the gods’, which is not the same thing at all. In some dimensions ‘matters concerning the gods’ is much more indeterminate and open-ended than ‘religion’, including all sorts of things which a post-Judeo-Christian society would not really consider to be part of ‘religion’ in the strict sense, such as questions about the ownership and upkeep of temples, common stories people told about the gods, and details about the clothing of statues. In another dimension, to be sure, τὰ τῶν θεῶν is more limited than most contemporary Western conceptions of religion, if only because no Greek god, nor indeed the totality of them, ever made claim to the relentless universal surveillance of and control over *every*, even the smallest, aspect of human life, which makes monotheists in general such a potentially nasty group of people.¹⁰

So, in calling us to drive the project of ‘religion’ forward, is Schellenberg ‘changing the subject’?¹¹ And even if he isn’t guilty of this, whose to say—given his own ‘deep time’ frame of reference, where we come to see that the project of religion has immense swathes of time available to it for further development—that the concept of ‘religion’ (not to be confused with the lexical unit or word) will eventually fall out of use as our conceptual scheme undergoes a multitude of ‘paradigm shifts’? In 10,000 years, we (assuming there remains a ‘we’ corresponding to the human species) might well arrive at a way of carving up reality that is far more removed from current science than, say, Thales’ theories are removed from those of Einstein. The divergence may indeed be so great that in 10,000 years’ time we might not be able to comprehend Einstein’s formulas, any common ground or possibility of intertranslatability having disappeared in ‘the abyss of time’. But it’s not necessary to travel so far into the future to appreciate this point. Consider only the history of philosophy from the presocratics to the present: it quickly becomes apparent that philosophy (its nature, methods, and aims, and not merely the meaning of the word ‘philosophy’) has dramatically changed over time, so much so that what many of the ancients were doing would not be regarded nowadays as part of philosophy, but as part of natural science or even religion. Whose to say, then, that the ways in which we now conventionally distinguish academic disciplines (e.g. ‘this is biology, not philosophy’) and areas of human endeavour (‘this is religion, not science’) will apply or make any sense in 10,000 years?

emphasis in original) Later, he speaks of the transcendent as “something beyond the wonderful world of nature that is even more wonderful.” (p.110) If the transcendent, thus understood, is incompatible with metaphysical naturalism, then Schellenberg’s definition would rule out naturalistic forms of religion, including Theravada Buddhism (or versions thereof), panpsychist and pantheist religious outlooks, and the nature spiritualities practiced by contemporary pagans, animists and wiccans. But perhaps Schellenberg means to leave room for naturalism in religion, as is suggested by his proposal (on p.10) that the notion of ‘the *transmundane*’ could be employed as an alternative to ‘the transcendent’. However, this will not suffice to distinguish religion from other spheres such as literature, music, even sport, which often take us beyond the mundane or ordinary without involving any religious commitment.

¹⁰ Raymond Geuss, *Changing the Subject: Philosophy from Socrates to Adorno* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2017), 77–78, emphasis in original.

¹¹ It might be countered that, even if the ancients did not have any word or linguistic expression that corresponds precisely with our use of the word ‘religion’, surely they had the *concept* of religion. But this is to buy into a dubious Platonist conception of concepts, where concepts have the kind of eternal and immutable nature enjoyed by Platonic Forms. But even if the ancients did have the concept of religion, why assume that, in their eyes, this concept has anything to do with the beliefs and practices they regard as ‘holy’ and ‘sacred’? What if a community were to find ‘transcendence’ (in Schellenberg’s sense) in militarism, but ‘religion’ (in their understanding of the term) in sport? The realm of religion is, for them, an arena of playful and pointless competitiveness. War, however, provides them with meaning and orientation in life, perhaps because terrestrial conflicts are seen as a way of participating in a higher, spiritual reality, one involving a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. This is indeed what one finds in the Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*, where the human conflict between two related clans (the Pandavas and the Kauravas) is viewed as a transposition to earth of the unending cosmic conflict between gods and demons.

A certain degree of suspicion and resistance is therefore fitting when it comes to the predilection of philosophers for ‘clear and distinct’ ideas, names or systems of classification. As Michel Foucault, a keen proponent of resistance strategies, once said:

Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.¹²

The issue here is not merely the fluidity and contingency of our classificatory schemes, which can easily be disrupted and overturned. More deeply, it is a matter of methodology, how to go about the intellectual and creative life, whether in philosophy, the ‘project of religion’ (in Schellenberg’s sense), or in other areas of culture, such as literature and the arts. Looked at this way, the central weakness in Schellenberg’s ‘agnostic religion’ is that it’s not skeptical enough.

In Ch. 7 Schellenberg portrays the ‘old agnostic’ as one who “thinks atheism goes too far, is unsure about a personal God, thinking there might be one and also might not be.”¹³ In place of such traditional, Huxley-type, agnosticism, Schellenberg proposes a ‘new agnosticism’ which he regards as supported, if not mandated, by his view of the religion project as developmentally immature: “the immaturity view presses us away from a sweeping and totalizing denial or disbelief (or irreligious belief) to the very thing that we might otherwise have impatiently rejected [as do the ‘new atheists’] as unduly timid: agnosticism.”¹⁴ This new variety of agnosticism is marked by three levels of doubt. At the first level we can reasonably doubt, within the context of the immaturity view, that (1) religion will never be successful in making contact with a real transcendent reality. But if we should be in doubt about this, then we should also be in doubt as to whether (2) all religious claims are false. And if we should be in doubt about (2), we should further be in doubt about the claim that (3) there is no triply transcendent reality.¹⁵

These doubts form the basis of what Schellenberg calls, in Ch. 9, an ‘agnostic religion’. In an age of immaturity, religious progress can be made only by surmounting ‘believerism’ — i.e. the tendency in religion, as we have known it thus far, to be “full of detailed conviction and passionate belief”¹⁶ — and by adopting in its stead the ‘new agnosticism’. Schellenberg adds to this the possibility of exposing the new religion to a *double* dose of agnosticism, where an adherent doubts not only the existence but also the nature of any divine, transcendent reality, in which case they would find themselves “not having a belief as to what a triply transcendent reality would be like.”¹⁷ But what is lost by the suspension of belief is more than made up for by the power of imagination, so that the doubt of the new agnostic enables a kind of ‘imaginative faith’ while also nourishing typically religious practices and attitudes, including wonder and awe. It is an agnostic religion of this sort that is offered as “an alternative for the Nones,” as well as “a viable ‘next step’ for religious progressives.”¹⁸

To see how limited the skepticism of this religion actually is, notice that the goal (or at least one of the primary goals) set for its followers is to *overcome religious skepticism*. This simply follows from the way in which Schellenberg has set up the overarching goal of the religion project as consisting in the completion of an inquiry into a range of topics (listed on p.2 of the Prologue) associated with the existence and nature of transcendent reality. It is because religious inquiry remains in a dismally undeveloped state with respect to the achievement of these goals that Schellenberg advocates a skeptical stance in religion. But by recognising the immaturity of religion and then working hard to correct this, the skeptical starting point is slowly abandoned, at least if our investigations over time provide us with increasingly more information about transcendent reality and thus bring us nearer to meeting the goals set for the religion

12 Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Routledge classics (London: Routledge, 2002), 19.

13 Schellenberg, *Religion after Science*, 81.

14 *Ibid.*, 83.

15 *Ibid.*, 83–86.

16 *Ibid.*, 102.

17 *Ibid.*, 103.

18 *Ibid.*, 113–14.

project. It's possible, to be sure, that all investigations prove fruitless and we remain in the dark. The *aim*, nonetheless, is to dispel the dark, to achieve enlightenment.¹⁹

But what if we were, instead, to follow Camus, who in response to Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith', wrote: "The important thing, as Abbé Galiani said to Mme d'Épinay, is not to be cured, but to live with one's ailment. Kierkegaard wants to be cured."²⁰ What Camus is suggesting, in the manner of Beckett, Derrida and other like-minded Nones, is something far more radical and skeptical than what is envisioned in Schellenberg's new agnosticism. While Schellenberg looks for a 'cure' for ignorance, these Nones recommend we persevere in the darkness, taking our goal to be the journey itself, a journey of restless and perhaps even endless exploration, without knowing or caring where such wondering and meandering will lead (and so not predetermining or prejudicing the outcome in advance). The capacity to remain with difficult doubts without seeking to quash them is what John Keats called 'negative capability':

It struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason — ...²¹

Heidegger, in a similar vein, spoke of the necessity of retrieving the practice of 'thinking', especially in philosophy, and this due to the naive presumption that "philosophers are *the thinkers par excellence*."²² Unlike what often passes for 'thinking' in academic work, genuine thinking for Heidegger is not teleological or productive: it will not assist the progress of science or philosophy, nor will it provide us with moral directives or answers to religious questions. To describe this way of thinking, Heidegger appropriates from medieval German mysticism the term *Gelassenheit* ('releasement', 'letting-be'), to refer to a non-willful, patient, receptive and attentive comportment to the world that does not impose itself on 'what is given' for the sake of its own needs or goals, but allows things to just be (or to be themselves).

If what we're striving for is not knowledge and enlightenment, solutions and explanations, but something along the lines of negative capability borne from a meditative, free-spirited and open-ended form of thinking where the questions matter more than the answers, then I wonder whether religion — even religion of the very liberal sort advocated by Schellenberg — is best placed to accommodate and cultivate such a skeptical orientation. If the agnostic hankers after knowledge, then they have good reason to get involved in Schellenberg's project of religion, where this may include taking an interest in and perhaps contributing to the debates of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. But if the agnostic's skepticism runs deeper, in an intellectual as well as existential sense, becoming a source of personal anguish and destabilisation as they relentlessly grapple with the big questions of life and death without the security of final answers, even in the distant horizon, then a more creative (or artistic) and less formal (or academic) approach would be called for.²³

The reference to the existential dimension leads naturally to the existentialists of the last century and their literary model of philosophy. Schellenberg, I should say, does stress the importance of imagination in undergirding the faith of the 'new agnostic'. The role of the imagination is, however, unusually re-

19 This is not to equate 'religion' with the 'project of religion' (on the difference between these two, see Schellenberg, *Religion after Science*, 15–16). I am, rather, drawing attention to a significant area of overlap: religion, and agnostic religion above all (given its suspension of belief), shares with the project of religion the goal of *discovering truth*, of investigating and testing truth-claims in religion, particularly about the existence and nature of divine reality. This is why Schellenberg regards as one of the benefits of agnostic faith its (presumed) propensity to "aid religious investigation of the sort we should all want to see succeed." (p.112)

20 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, (Penguin Books, 2000), 40–41.

21 John Keats, *Selected Letters of John Keats* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), 193.

22 Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* (HarperCollins, 1976), 4–5, emphasis in the original.

23 To clarify, the objection is not that Schellenberg excludes the creative or artistic dimension from the religion project (which he doesn't: Schellenberg, *Religion after Science*, 11–17), but that this dimension is regarded (in characteristic Enlightenment fashion, I might add) in *developmental* terms, ideally impelling the community of inquiry over time to find solutions to the problems set out in its research program. As the very title of his book suggests ('*Religion After Science*', see 5–6), Schellenberg, like many analytic philosophers of religion, remains beholden to a quasi-scientific model of philosophy of the sort that existentialism sought to contest.

stricted, limited to such things as forming pictures and contemplating what it would be like for a proposition to be true.²⁴ These acts of the imagination, we are told, should not be reduced to wishful thinking, pretence or make-believe: “imaginative but agnostic faith isn’t some kind of fictionalism — it’s not just a matter of losing yourself in a mental world as you do when engrossed in a good novel.”²⁵ The emphasis on imagination, and creativity more generally, is salutary. But apart from the foregoing remark about the novel and the temptation to use it merely as a means of escape, Schellenberg does not delve into the multifarious forms (styles, traditions, aims, etc.) of literature and other artistic genres, and how these might connect with philosophical notions of truth and understanding. Will a novel by Dostoevsky or a film by Bergman help practitioners of agnostic faith, or anyone for that matter, find an answer to the problem of evil? *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Seventh Seal* are masterpieces in part because of their penetrating insights into God and evil, faith and doubt. But how do these insights relate to, or progress, the goals of agnostic religion and the religion project? How, in other words, are the narrative and visual languages of artists connected with the language of faith (including ‘agnostic faith’) and the academic discourse of the philosopher of religion? Should we go looking in artistic works for answers to philosophical problems, or will this inevitably distort these works? These are, to be sure, difficult issues, but given the prominence Schellenberg wishes to accord the imagination, a more extensive and historically informed engagement with works of art is necessary. By contrast, the possibilities of the imagination were at the forefront of the existentialists’ thinking, as their influential literary works demonstrate.

Of the many existentialists I could choose to illustrate this point, I will only mention the great French writer and feminist, Simone de Beauvoir. She has, unfortunately, sometimes been regarded as a mere disciple of Sartre, as lacking his philosophical acumen and originality, and whose ideas she simply ‘applied’ to her own projects. And this, clearly sexist, conception of her work has been reinforced by her own, somewhat curious, refusal to identify herself as a ‘philosopher’: “Sartre was a philosopher, and me, I am not,” she said in a 1979 interview.²⁶ But as some commentators have observed, in such admissions may lie a veiled criticism of the kind of philosophy constructed by Sartre. In the same interview, Beauvoir proceeds to explain that, in her view, “a philosopher is someone like Spinoza, Hegel, or like Sartre: someone who builds a great system.”²⁷ In wishing to distance herself from philosophy, she is possibly then distancing herself only from a certain kind of (traditional, systematic, theoretical) philosophy, not philosophy *per se*.

In any case, her published output consisted mainly of *literary* writings, primarily novels and memoirs. The only strictly philosophical book she published was *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), though she also wrote a number of philosophical essays. Of these essays, it’s worth looking at her article, “Literature and Metaphysics,” based on a lecture given in 1945 and then revised for publication in the April 1946 edition of *Les Temps modernes*.²⁸

Having just written a play, *Les bouches inutiles* (‘The Useless Mouths’, 1945), which “was assailed by critics for sacrificing literature to philosophy”²⁹ (a pitfall common to philosophers who try their hand at literature), she now returns to a question that had preoccupied her since her days as an avid young reader: *Where is truth to be found: philosophy or literature?*³⁰

On the face of it, she notes, philosophy and literature are worlds apart, as is indicated by the irreducibility and uniqueness of a literary work (which “cannot be translated into abstract concepts”), its freedom

24 Schellenberg, *Religion after Science*, 107–8.

25 *Ibid.*, 109.

26 Margaret A. Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 9.

27 Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex*, 11.

28 Simone de Beauvoir, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Univ. of Illinois Press, 2004), 269–77.

29 *Ibid.*, 263.

30 Simone de Beauvoir, “Literature and Metaphysics”. In *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2004), 269.

of thought (it doesn't dictate ideas), and its faithfulness to "life's opacity, ambiguity, and impartiality."³¹ It seems, then, that a 'philosophical novel', no matter how well crafted, is impossible: the imposition of ideas and doctrines into a work of fiction "would immediately destroy the work's effect."³² The solution, according to Beauvoir, is to reconceptualise the role of the writer: the novelist must participate in the same search they have invited their readers on. And the search, if it is to be authentic, must be undertaken (by the novelist) with no ready-made answers, so that the novel functions as a process of discovery *for the author* as well as the reader. "The novel is endowed with value and dignity," she wrote, "only if it constitutes a living discovery for the author as for the reader."³³ It is this experimental methodology (likened by Beauvoir to the experimental method of science, and dubbed by her "an authentic adventure of the mind"³⁴) that guided Beauvoir's own literary work, as she remarked in a documentary film:

People often ask me: "Why have you not created women who are positive heroines?" Because I have a horror of that; I have a horror of positive heroes; and books with positive heroes don't interest me. A novel is a *problématique*. The story of my life is itself a *problématique*. I don't have any solutions to give to people and people don't have to await solutions from me. It is in this regard that, sometimes what you call my fame, people's expectations of me, bothers me. There is a certain unreasonable demand that I find a little stupid because it imprisons me, completely fixing me in a kind of feminist concrete block.³⁵

In the essay, Beauvoir goes on to explore the relation between *the novel* and *metaphysics*,³⁶ and points to two ways of grasping metaphysical reality: (i) *via abstraction*, as happens in the metaphysics of Aristotle, Spinoza, and Leibniz — but one could not imagine, Beauvoir says, their metaphysics being expressed in novelistic form (because no allowance is made for subjectivity and temporality), or (ii) *via existential categories*, which retain the subjective, singular, temporal and dramatic aspects of experience.

Existentialism is therefore advanced as an attempt to reconcile philosophy and literature, the abstract and the concrete, the objective and the subjective.³⁷ A purely abstract or third-person account of reality will always be deficient, will inevitably miss something essential in human experience, "the thickness, the ambiguous richness of the world."³⁸ As a result, literature is necessary, but it is not necessarily incompatible with philosophy. Only certain philosophies are incompatible with literature, such as those produced by "philosophers who, separating essence from existence, disdain appearance in favor of the hidden reality." "Fortunately," Beauvoir adds, "they are not tempted to write novels!"³⁹

For Beauvoir, then, philosophy and literature interpenetrate one another. But as Ashley King Scheu has noted, the traditional order of priority is reversed in Beauvoir's aesthetic theory of the novel, which holds that philosophy "is created with and through the creation of a believable literary universe; it emerges out of that world and remains dependent upon it, rather than serving as its hidden source."⁴⁰ Literature is not simply a source to be mined for illustrative examples or test-cases of abstract philosophical theories. This may be how literature is seen and used by many philosophers, but not by Beauvoir. Scheu points out that Beauvoir's more radical idea is that "philosophical viewpoints come out of or from the concrete, that they are made of the stuff of the concrete and are in some way inseparable from it, not that they are compared to or tried out upon the concrete."⁴¹ As a phenomenologist, Beauvoir takes lived experience as the ground and site of philosophy, and as an existentialist her philosophy flows from, is created out of, the

31 Ibid., 270.

32 Ibid., 271.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 272.

35 Quoted in Josée Dayan et al., *Simone de Beauvoir: un film de Josée Dayan et Malka Ribowska* (Gallimard, 1979), 75, translation mine..

36 Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics" in *Philosophical Writings*, 273–74. The original lecture given on December 11, 1945 was entitled "The Novel and Metaphysics".

37 Ibid., 274.

38 Ibid., 275.

39 Ibid.

40 Ashley K. Scheu, "The Viability of the Philosophical Novel: The Case of Simone de Beauvoir's *She Came to Stay*", *Hypatia* 27, no. 4 (2012): 795.

41 Scheu, "The Viability of the Philosophical Novel", 796.

fleshly forms of literature. This is especially evident in her own novels, such as *She Came to Stay* (1943) and *The Mandarins* (1954), where the fiction is not an aesthetic add-on to an abstract argument, but is integrally connected to the philosophical questions and ideas, which would lose their force and meaning outside of the literary context. This means, as Scheu puts it, that “life does not incarnate philosophy in Beauvoir’s novels, but instead life *is* philosophy; there is no separation between the two.”⁴²

Towards the end of her essay Beauvoir turns to that vintage existentialist value, freedom. The philosophical novel, Beauvoir says, constitutes an *appeal to freedom*, particularly the freedom of the reader, who is not pressured to adopt a particular position or told what to think, but rather is invited, despite any resistance at the outset, to take part in the literary experiment and find their own way:

Actually, the reader quite often refuses to participate sincerely in the experiment into which the author tries to lead him; he does not read as he demands that one write; he is afraid to take risks, to venture. Even before opening the book, he presupposes that it has a key, and instead of letting himself be taken in by the story, he tries ceaselessly to translate it. He ought to give life to this imaginary world, but instead he kills it and complains that he has been given a corpse.

...About Kafka, Mr. Blanchot says, very profoundly, that in reading him one always understands either too much or too little. This remark, I believe, can be applied to any metaphysical novel. But the reader must not try to elude this uncertainty and his share of the adventure. He should not forget that his collaboration is necessary, since the novel’s distinctive feature is, precisely, to appeal to his freedom.⁴³

Beauvoir concludes with a high estimation of the hybrid genre of the ‘metaphysical novel’, claiming that at its best it “provides a disclosure of existence in a way unequalled by any other mode of expression.”⁴⁴ A novel, play or poem — indeed any creative or artistic work — can therefore be something other than an entertaining distraction, by functioning as the site of ‘disclosure’ (of meaning, or its absence) and ‘encounter’ (with the real world, in all its ambiguity and complexity). The implication is that even the kinds of philosophical questions posed in Schellenberg’s religion project can only be treated adequately or ‘authentically’ by way of a medium and method that reflect the true depth of our doubts. As Robert Wicks put it, in reference to Heidegger’s philosophy: “Human beings are thrown into the world, in other words, with a dominating question mark inscribed into their being.”⁴⁵ We might initially join Schellenberg’s religious agnostics in their journey from belief to doubt, but sooner or later we will have to veer off course, each freely forging their own path, with no providential guidance or ultimate guarantees, with no hope of an exit or terminus. To quote Beckett again, “you’re on earth, there’s no cure for that!”⁴⁶

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⁴² Ibid., emphasis in original.

⁴³ Beauvoir, “Literature and Metaphysics” in *Philosophical Writings*, 276.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Robert Wicks, *Modern French philosophy: From existentialism to postmodernism* (Oneworld, 2003), 40.

⁴⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Endgame: A Play in One Act* (Faber and Faber, 2006), 33.

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