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# Existentialist Advising

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*Abstract:* This paper explores the application of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy to academic advising. In Sartre's worldview, we are born into a meaningless universe, forcing us to create our identity, craft our values, choose our future, and accept the full weight of responsibility for everything we do. This philosophy resonates with many college students for whom their time in college marks a period of transition into adulthood and independence. Students are confronted with important choices about class selection, major choice, career interests, values, goals, identity, and overall life trajectory. Existentialist advising places the freedom and responsibility of students center stage and creates an advising relationship where students are encouraged to make authentic choices. While existentialist advising shares similar themes with other advising approaches, it offers unique and important insights for advising practice, making it an essential tool in the advising toolbelt.

*Keywords:* existentialism, identity foreclosure, self-authorship, Socratic advising, Marxism, communitarianism, nontraditional students

For many students, the college experience brings with it freedom, responsibility, anguish, and confrontations with life-altering choices. These experiences and concepts are systematically addressed by existentialist philosophy, so it is worth considering what existentialism might teach us about the college experience and the role of the academic adviser. Existentialism is a broad philosophical movement that includes figures such as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, Ralph Ellison, and Simone de Beauvoir (Marino, 2007). In this article, I focus solely on the work of Sartre, who more than any other thinker claimed and defined the philosophy of existentialism.

I start by summarizing the basic tenets of existentialism, focusing on the following four interrelated themes: "abandonment," "existence precedes essence," "condemned to be free," and "authenticity." I reflect on how these themes can be applied to academic advising, drawing lessons from Sartre's anecdote about a time

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when he advised one of his students. The goal of advising should be to encourage the student to make authentic choices, which requires that the student acknowledges the wide scope of their freedom and accepts full responsibility for their choices. I then compare existentialist advising to Socratic advising and advising informed by self-authorship theory. While these approaches are similar, I show that existentialist advising offers unique and important insights for advising practice. To further illustrate how existentialist advising can be put into practice, I apply the existentialist advising approach to the case of identity foreclosure. I then review and respond to possible critiques of existentialist advising: Does the focus on personal agency ignore the effects of social injustice? Is existentialism too individualistic, not capturing the experiences and needs of students from cultural backgrounds that are more family-oriented and communitarian? Given its atheistic assumptions, does existentialism have anything to say to students of religious faith? While existentialism seems to speak directly to the experience of many traditional college students, is it attuned to the unique experiences and needs of nontraditional students? I defend existentialist advising from each of these critiques. I conclude by reflecting on how existentialist philosophy might be incorporated into the adviser's professional identity and practice. The overall goal throughout this paper is to make the case that the existentialist advising approach should have a prominent place in the advising toolbelt.

## **PART 1: EXISTENTIALIST PHILOSOPHY: ABANDONMENT, FREEDOM, AND RESPONSIBILITY**

Sartre's most famous statement and defense of his existentialist philosophy is found in his essay "Existentialism is a Humanism." According to Sartre (1956b), we find ourselves born into a universe that is utterly indifferent to our existence. We exist without reason, without a "why." We feel a sense of "abandonment" when we realize that our existence is without cosmic or divine purpose. Humanity has always been eager to construct religious worldviews that imbue human life with ultimate purpose, but Sartre sees such views as untenable in the modern world. This lack of pre-determined purpose for our lives leads to Sartre's (1956b) claim that in the case of humans "existence precedes essence" (p. 290). What does this phrase mean? It is the view that there is no meaning, purpose, or value to human life (no inherent essence) except that which each individual chooses for themselves (through active existence). Lacking pre-determined purpose means that we are forced to give ourselves purpose through our actions.

To illustrate the meaning of "existence precedes essence," Sartre (1956b) contrasts the human condition with that of a knife that is conceived and produced by an artisan. Unlike in the case of humans, for the knife, "essence precedes existence." The knife is created with a pre-determined purpose (to cut into things) that exists in the mind of the knife's creator. For the knife, its purpose (essence) precedes its creation (existence). It exists for the sake of a pre-determined purpose and cannot be understood apart from that purpose. But humans are categorically

different from the knife. For humans, “existence precedes essence.” We first exist, devoid of purpose, and only through choices and actions do we impart purpose to our lives. Sartre (1956b) posits, “Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards” (p. 290).<sup>1</sup> When it comes to meaning and purpose, we begin our lives empty, as blank slates. We cannot look outside ourselves for the meaning of our lives. Meaning must be made, not found. This existentialist worldview sounds like a rejection of the religious worldview, and it is. Sartre states that his existentialist philosophy is simply atheism taken to its logical conclusion. If there were a God, then God could have created humanity with a pre-determined purpose, analogous to the artisan who created the knife. In a non-theistic worldview, however, there is no cosmic creator to imbue human lives with an essence.<sup>2</sup>

This lack of pre-determined essence connects with another key pillar of existentialism: “Man is condemned to be free” (Sartre, 1956b, p. 295). Born without meaning or purpose, I am forced to give my life meaning and purpose myself, through my every choice and action. No matter what I choose to do, such choices determine the meaning of my life. There is no escape. There is no way to unburden myself from this responsibility. Even inaction is a choice: “I must know that if I do not choose, that is still a choice” (Sartre, 1956b, p. 305). Everything I do defines me. Who I am, who I become, how my character develops, and how my life takes shape are my responsibilities. As Sartre (1956b) puts it, man “did not create himself, yet ... from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does” (p. 295). My fate is in my hands.

Some of these statements may sound commonplace, but they go against the grain of much modern thought. It is quite fashionable these days to reject free will altogether. Many philosophers and scientists assume that all human behavior can be explained by a combination of nature (genetics, neurochemistry) and nurture (upbringing, social forces), leaving no room for personal agency. For Sartre, this line of argument commits a category error. Humans are not reducible to mere matter that is pushed and pulled around by physical forces. I am first and foremost a self-conscious being that can envision different futures and make free choices about my actions. Humans are oriented in the world and in time differently than objects are.

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<sup>1</sup> Sartre’s essay features male pronouns (he, him, his) and terms (man, mankind), but these should not be read as excluding non-males. Although in other writings Sartre does implicitly or explicitly advance sexist assumptions and arguments, in this essay it seems clear that he is using these gendered terms as universal signifiers per outdated convention. For my part, I have chosen to use mainly gender-neutral pronouns throughout the article to signify people in general.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that existentialism need not be atheistic. For example, Kierkegaard (1843/1985) developed a Christian existentialism that shares many themes with Sartre’s existentialism (see also Franke, 2009). While it would be interesting to discuss how Kierkegaard’s existentialism could inform existentialist advising, that is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, I maintain that Sartre’s existentialism is still relevant to those with a religious worldview, which I discuss in Part 5.

Human choices are influenced by nature and nurture but not determined by them. The ultimate cause of human action is human freedom.

Existential freedom, then, is not the same as economic or political freedom. One's existential freedom is not diminished when living under dictatorship or enhanced when living under democracy. Even people in the direst of circumstances retain agency because existential freedom is a fundamental feature of the human condition. Creating and recreating one's essence continues to take place even within prison walls.<sup>3</sup> Existential freedom cannot be lost to an outside force or forfeited in any way, which is why Sartre says that we are "condemned" to our existential freedom. Existential freedom refers to the inescapable obligation of each person to choose their essence, their meaning and purpose in life. It is part of the human condition to be born with this burden, and every person retains this burden until death.

The existentialist worldview can seem bleak. It can be terrifying to realize that the universe is indifferent to humanity and lacks any inherent meaning. This experience of abandonment can cause discomfort and even anguish. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1943/1956a) makes a distinction between fear, which is based on a worry about how the world will impinge upon me, and anguish, which is based on a worry about how I will use my freedom to act in the world (pp. 29–30). What should I do with my freedom? What do I really want to accomplish in this one short life that I have? Am I doing what I really want to be doing, or am I living out social roles that I did not choose? The experience of abandonment and the burden of existential freedom can cause existential anguish. To experience existential anguish is to approach a crossroads. Anguish can be a catalyst for embracing freedom, accepting responsibility, and living a life of authenticity. Others, however, refuse to work through their anguish and instead choose to flee into inauthenticity.

The inauthentic person lives in a state of denial about their freedom. They pretend that their essence is pre-determined, decided by some outside force, and thus out of their hands. The inauthentic person will search for excuses in order to evade responsibility, saying things like: "This is just the way I am." "This is what my parents want me to do." "I need to do this because it is what my religion dictates." "I'm just wired this way." "I can't help it, I'm a Gemini." There is something comforting in the thought that my identity and purpose are pre-determined and fixed, requiring no hard choices on my part. A person is in a state of inauthenticity when they choose to think of themselves like the knife whose essence has already been determined before its existence by an outside force. Existentialist freedom cannot be lost, but it can be masked through inauthenticity.

Inauthenticity is such a strong temptation because not knowing who I am or what I am supposed to do with my life can be deeply upsetting. Lacking a set identity, I can feel lost, aimless, drifting, alone. I may cling to a pre-packaged

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<sup>3</sup> While existential freedom is not diminished by living under political dictatorship, Sartre argues that existentialism does lend itself to a radical politics of liberation. Under conditions of political freedom, each individual will have greater scope and power to actualize their choices about their essence. See Sartre, 1957/1968, 1960/2004, 1985/2006.

identity so that I do not have to fashion one myself. Falling into a state of inauthenticity is to live a lie. It is to choose comfort and conformity over freedom and responsibility. It is to embody the phrase “ignorance is bliss.” And to be fair, the inauthentic life can be a happy one. Ignorance can be blissful. But is happiness worth having if it is bought with self-deception? For some people maybe it is. Not everyone is interested in authenticity. Not everyone has the courage to see life for what it is. But the existentialist asks us to aim higher than mindless happiness. The existentialist calls on us to live authentic lives in which we embrace our radical freedom and accept our responsibility for defining ourselves and creating our own meaning. Although sometimes terrifying, living authentically lets us see through the pre-written social scripts we are given and lets us decide what kind of life we really want to lead. There is a deep satisfaction to be derived from living the authentic life.

To live an authentic life is to choose the meaning and purpose of my life day after day. Authenticity is about exercising freedom and taking responsibility in all things. It means knowing that I always have a range of choices before me. Therefore, things could be otherwise, and I could be otherwise, depending on what I choose. Inauthentic people do what they do because others expect them to do it. Authenticity requires that my actions be always my own, chosen for my own reasons. It means taking advice into consideration, but never relinquishing my freedom of choice to others. Authenticity is never achieved once and for all. It is a mode of living, an ideal to always strive for.

Much more can be said about Sartre’s existentialist philosophy, but this summary is sufficient for the purposes of this article. While existentialism eloquently captures many elements of the human condition, I argue that existentialism provides especially powerful insights into the college experience. For many traditional college students, college is their first time living away from home, outside of the view and authority of parents and family. This newfound freedom can be overwhelming, exhilarating, and frightening. It can feel as if the ground has been pulled out from under them. Whereas meaning, purpose, and identity perhaps used to feel stable and secure, these can now feel uncertain and in need of evaluation. The college years feature a barrage of life-altering choices about major, career, relationships, and more. At first students may feel the residual pull of their old authorities. However, there comes a point in the college experience when most students come to accept that while parents can give input, the student must decide. Their life is their own for the first time. From this realization, students begin their journey toward authenticity. Academic advisers watch their students going through these experiences and students often turn to their advisers for guidance. How, then, might existentialism inform our advising practice?

## **PART 2: EXISTENTIALIST ADVISING: AIMING FOR AUTHENTICITY**

What does academic advising look like within an existentialist framework? We can get some idea by looking at one of Sartre's (1956b) anecdotes in his essay. He describes being approached by one of his students during World War II. The student is trying to decide if he should join the anti-fascist resistance in France or stay home to tend to his sick mother. The student realizes the historical and moral importance of opposing fascism but knows that his personal actions in the resistance may amount to nothing. And if he leaves home, his mother will likely die. What should he do? What is more important: serving one's family or serving a larger political cause? The choice is clouded with epistemic uncertainty and moral ambiguity. Instead of telling the student which choice he thinks is best, Sartre makes it clear that he can do no such thing because *there is no best choice*. Sartre explains to his student that consulting the major ethical theories and religious traditions provides no real guidance. Kantian ethics, for example, dictates that we treat all persons as infinitely valuable ends in themselves. This view, unfortunately, is too vague to be of any help in this situation. His mother is a person of infinite moral value, but so are those who may be victims of fascism. Christian ethics dictates that we treat others as we want them to treat us. But how does this ethical imperative apply in the student's case? Which others take priority—the other members of the French resistance, or his mother? Consulting moral theories and religious traditions does not seem to provide any clear answers.

The student suggests that he might consult his feelings and go with his heart. But Sartre (1956b) rejoins that “feeling is formed by the deeds that one does; therefore, I cannot consult it as a guide to action” (p. 297). In other words, how we feel changes depending on how we act. Since feelings change throughout the process of acting, they are not good guides for determining which course of action to take in the first place. And in any case, feelings must always be judged and evaluated by some other criteria outside themselves. Since our feelings can mislead us or cause us to act badly, we must choose whether our feelings should be followed in each instance. When provoked to anger, for example, it is often wise to take a breath and evaluate whether that anger is justified, or whether it is an overreaction, before acting on it. As with moral theories and religious traditions, our feelings cannot reliably and clearly dictate right action.

The student is exasperated and just wants Sartre to tell him what to do. But Sartre points out that seeking the advice of others can never absolve one of responsibility. Even if Sartre were to recommend one choice over the other, the student would still be the one to ultimately decide whether to take Sartre's advice. Even further, if the student were to bind himself beforehand to follow whatever Sartre's advice might be, this too would ultimately be his own choice. Sartre (1956b) explains:

But if you seek counsel—from a priest, for example—you have selected that priest; and at bottom you already knew, more or less, what he would advise. In other words, to choose an adviser is nevertheless to commit oneself by that choice. (p. 97)

So taking the advice of others can never absolve one of freedom and responsibility. Responsibility cannot be outsourced. The responsibility remains firmly on the shoulders of the student.

In the Abrahamic religious traditions, God is the ultimate moral authority. Might we find a solution to the student's problem in personal religious experience? What if, for example, one claims to hear the voice of God or an angel giving a command, like when Abraham heard God commanding him to sacrifice Isaac? Even here, Sartre (1956b) insists that the individual retains freedom and responsibility:

If a voice speaks to me, it is still I myself who must decide whether the voice is or is not that of an angel. If I regard a certain course of action as good, it is only I who chose to say that it is good and not bad. There is nothing to show that I am Abraham. (p. 293)

In other words, if the student were to hear an otherworldly voice telling him which choice to make, the student would first need to decide if it was the voice of God, the voice of the devil, or just a dream or hallucination. Can the voice be trusted? How does the student know that the action commanded is in fact morally best? He finds himself enmeshed in epistemic and theological confusions. Ultimately, the student would need to decide for himself what to do with the information he heard. No ethical theories, religious doctrines, trusted counselors, or even a booming voice from above can give him an authoritative answer. Nothing can remove the weight of responsibility from his shoulders. Sartre (1956b) concludes, "You are free, therefore choose—that is to say, invent. No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do: no signs are vouchsafed in this world" (pp. 297–298). The student is condemned to be free.

What lessons can academic advisers learn from Sartre's anecdote? On the surface of it, Sartre's advising role appears very minimal, almost negative in form, something like, "I'm sorry, I can't tell you what to do, only you can choose." This view of advising would make the adviser virtually irrelevant, indeed almost a hindrance to the student, nothing more than an obstacle in their path. Maybe the academic adviser could stick around to explain some information about academic policies, but then they would be required to step aside and let the student decide everything else for themselves. However, this interpretation misses what is most valuable about Sartre's approach: he warns against the temptations of inauthenticity and puts the student on the road to an authentic choice. First and foremost, then, existentialist advising is about reminding students of their inescapable freedom and responsibility. It is about helping students think through questions of meaning and purpose and then supporting them in their path to authenticity. In what follows I will illustrate some of these affirmative features of the existentialist advising approach.

Existentialist advising recognizes that many advising-related questions are downstream from the more profound question of “Who do I want to become?” Of course, prescriptive advising will always have a place. Sometimes a student just needs to know the next class in the sequence or how to access their degree audit or which form to fill out. In these cases, a simple answer to the question may be most appropriate. But whenever possible, advisers should refocus the conversation around deeper existential questions of meaning and purpose. When students think about career goals, for example, their thinking is often shallow and poorly informed. They might think vaguely about their academic interests and how much money they will make. These considerations are not unimportant, but there are more pressing questions such as “What kind of person will this job allow me to be?” Questions of meaning, purpose, identity, values, work–life balance, family, religion, and quality of life need to be part of these conversations.

When having such conversations, existentialist advising keeps the student’s freedom and responsibility in the forefront. Consider how the existentialist adviser might use major and career assessment tools. Students who are confused about major and career are often given online assessments that provide them with, for example, a list of majors or careers that may best suit them. These assessments are typically rooted in certain popular theories in personality psychology (e.g., Meyers-Briggs) which classify students into distinct personality types and then match these with major and career options. While existentialism does not deny the concept of personality types, it does deny that these types are fixed or hardwired. “Existence precedes essence” implies that personality is partially a product of choices, not merely the cause of them. These assessment tools of course have their place, but their place is at the beginning of the conversation, not at the endpoint of the student’s deliberation. They are meant to spark thought, not foreclose it. No assessment test will tell a student what they should do for career, major, or anything else. Assessments, advisers, teachers, parents, and mentors can give *input* and *advice*, but they cannot give *answers*. This basic insight is something that we advisers need to remind ourselves as much as we remind our students.

These deep conversations about meaning and purpose can cause feelings of existential anguish. Anguish is an awakening to existential freedom. Existentialist advising views the experience of anguish as productive, as a catalyst for personal development. It is okay to feel overwhelmed and confused. We should normalize these feelings in our students. Anguish is where the work of authenticity begins. And yet sometimes I find myself in my role of adviser not appreciating the positive dimensions of students’ anguish. I sense anguish in an advisee, and I immediately start a conversation around “How can we put an end to this negative emotional state as quickly as possible to return you to a state of happy equanimity?” We rightly want our students to be happy, so we may be tempted to redirect the conversation away from these troubling issues. But doing so may be a missed opportunity for a more profound conversation. Anguish is not to be avoided. It is to be worked through. However, a word of caution here: existential anguish can manifest in ways similar to anxiety disorders that are common among college students (Beiter et al.,



2015; Brownson et al., 2016; Bunner & Lloyd, 2020; Huenergarde, 2018). Since academic advisers are not trained to diagnose or treat mental health problems, we should always err on the side of caution when dealing with students in distress. In all such cases, we should talk through the negative feelings, examine how they might be an opportunity for personal growth, and then refer the student to the appropriate campus counseling resources.

One last consideration. In order to have these deep conversations about meaning, purpose, identity, freedom, responsibility, and anguish, the existentialist adviser must develop a relationship of trust and mutual respect with their advisees. Sartre's student came to Sartre with such an agonizing issue because he valued and trusted Sartre. In turn, it can be inferred that Sartre felt comfortable presenting his somewhat unwelcomed response to his student because Sartre knew that his student was capable of hearing and appreciating his advice. The importance of building relationships of trust between adviser and advisee connects existentialist advising with NACADA's (2017) "Core Values," specifically respect, caring, and empowerment. Students will only be willing to disclose personal matters to their adviser if a foundation of trust has already been established. Building this kind of relationship takes time. It will likely not happen in one meeting, or over email. These kinds of relationships more often develop across multiple face-to-face contacts. It is important that advisers (and the advising profession more generally) make sure that our work is structured such that we have the time and space for the kind of relationship-building with students that is the precondition for such important conversations.

### **PART 3: COMPARISON TO OTHER ADVISING APPROACHES: SOCRATIC ADVISING AND SELF-AUTHORSHIP**

Existentialist advising offers fresh insights on advising practice, but it also has clear similarities to other advising approaches. I will briefly explore the relationship between existentialist advising and two other advising approaches: Socratic advising and advising informed by self-authorship theory.

#### **Socratic Advising**

Socratic advising is rooted in the practice of Socratic questioning, which is exemplified in Plato's (ca. 375 BCE/1997) dialogues. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates asks his interlocutors to explain their views on some topic (e.g., justice). After they provide a definition, Socrates asks further questions about that definition, noting inconsistencies and ambiguities. The interlocutors try to respond and clarify their view. Socrates asks a new round of questions seeking further clarification. Before long, Socrates' interlocutors realize that they do not really know what they are talking about. They thought they had knowledge about the topic at hand but upon the further reflection provoked by Socrates' questioning they realize that they do not. Socratic questioning does not necessarily convey knowledge, instead it helps

people realize how little they actually know. The hope is that once people let go of their previously held unjustified beliefs, they can move forward with more openness, self-awareness, and critical thinking.

The Socratic adviser, then, eschews prescriptive advising and instead asks their advisees questions that help them critically think through their assumptions. In this way, students come to realize that they may have been operating on faulty assumptions or uncritically accepted views (Spence & Scobie, 2013, p. 197). This Socratic approach is an especially effective practice for advisers of undergraduate college students because these students often hold the views and values of their parents or friends, and they may not have spent much time thinking through those views and values themselves. Advisers often hear students saying things like, “I want to be a lawyer because I want to make a lot of money.” There are two false underlying assumptions here: (1) all lawyers make a lot of money, and (2) only lawyers make a lot of money. A further assumption that could be interrogated here is that “a lot of money” is a worthwhile tradeoff for a highly demanding and sometimes unpleasant career. Once these assumptions are pointed out and questioned, the student can begin thinking seriously (perhaps for the first time) about what they really care about. Many people go through life acting on beliefs that they never critically examine. Living in this thoughtless way can end in disaster when those beliefs lead people into careers (or relationships, etc.) that turn out to be a bad fit. The unexamined life often leads to the midlife crisis. This is why it is important for students to develop the practice of critical self-examination early in their college experience to help them successfully navigate the many difficult decisions they will be forced to make.

There are definite similarities between Socratic advising and existentialist advising. Both aim at weaning students off views and values that are not truly their own. Only by going through the process of critical self-examination can someone feel confident in and take ownership over their beliefs and actions. Socratic advising provides valuable tools for helping students make authentic choices. As Spence and Scobie (2013) put it, “The Socratic process helps students become more autonomous, independent, and resilient” (p. 198). Given these commonalities between Socratic advising and existentialist advising, I view these advising approaches as allies. Nonetheless, I will briefly point out two areas of disagreement.

First, in Plato’s dialogues, Socrates often insists that he and his interlocutor are conversing as equals, both working together to discover the truth of the matter. However, Socrates’ apparent humility often seems insincere as the dialogue goes on. Socrates claims that he is merely asking questions when, in fact, he is often subtly leading the interlocutor down a particular path that Socrates had in mind beforehand. As Kuhtmann (2005) points out in her critique of Socratic advising, this leading-by-questioning can make the Socratic method a subtle tool of domination and oppression (p. 44). Insofar as this approach can creep into Socratic advising, it is inconsistent with existentialist advising (and, indeed, inconsistent with the *ideal* of Socratic advising). I sometimes catch myself engaging in this problematic form of questioning in my advising practice. I start out by just trying

to get the student to think critically, but I end up subtly trying to get the student's critical thinking process to terminate in *the right answer as I see it*. We need to be on guard against falling into this trap. The existentialist adviser must be careful not to sneak in a personal agenda under the guise of nudging the student toward authenticity. The student can only make an authentic choice if, after being presented with the necessary information and being reminded of their freedom and responsibility, they make up their own mind, uncoerced by their adviser or anyone else.

Additionally, in Plato's dialogues Socrates often seems to assume that critical thinking leads to objective and timeless truths. In *Republic*, for example, the discussion of justice culminates in a recognition of the ultimate unchanging truth behind all appearances (the Form of the Good, famously analogized to the sun in the allegory of the cave in Book VII; Plato, ca. 375 B.C.E./1997). In her discussion of the Socratic method, Nussbaum (1997) affirms that the Socratic method is committed to the principles of reason, objectivity, and truth. In their discussion of the Socratic method, Spence and Scobie (2013) assert, "Through the process of uncovering faulty thinking, the best possible solution emerges" (p. 199). However, this assumption that truth and right action lie at the end of Socratic questioning is rejected by existentialism. With existentialism, we are forced to choose, but we are deprived of the hope that there is a best or right choice to be found by reason. Instead of right vs. wrong or truth vs. falsity, within the existentialist framework, there is only authenticity vs. inauthenticity. Authenticity requires that I make a choice, commit fully to it, and take full responsibility for that choice. Truth or rightness has no place in the existentialist worldview. There are no absolute moral principles to discover and follow. There is no ultimate meaning to human life to be uncovered. We must make choices without a roadmap to guide us, with no assurance or hope that our choices are the right ones.

Returning to Sartre's student deciding between staying with his mother and going off to war, the student desperately wants one of the choices to be most correct, true, moral, or rational because, if this is so, then the difficulty and anguish of the choice falls away. He hopes that Sartre might be able to help him see which choice is the correct one, thus resolving his painful internal conflict. As Sartre tells him, the student must simply choose and commit. This basic idea has an important role to play in academic advising. Students often come to us with deep confusions about major, career, personal issues, etc. They hope to leave our office with both an answer and an assurance that the answer given is right. Students might be used to getting such pronouncements from authority figures in their lives. Wanting to make students happy and satisfied, advisers may be tempted to play into this assumption. But many questions with which advisees grapple do not have such answers. They, like Sartre's student, should be helped to understand the stark nature of the choice facing them. Critical thinking is valuable in such conversations, but there is no reason to believe that critical thinking will terminate in a right answer. It can, however, assist in coming to an authentic choice.

## Self-Authorship Advising

Existentialist advising is closely aligned with advising informed by self-authorship theory. Consider the following summary of self-authorship:

A self-authored student will not blindly follow parental expectations or expect advisers to tell her or him the major that would be best, nor will a self-authored student single-mindedly follow a gut feeling or passion. Instead, a self-authored student will be open to and actively consider the advice and input of family members, advisers, and other important authority figures (e.g., professors, coaches, older siblings), but the student will not exclusively consider externally imposed expectations. Rather, the self-authored student will consider both external expectations and internally defined goals and values. Self-authored students know that the best choice is made after consideration of multiple perspectives, in light of their own short- and long-term goals and values, and the constraints of the situations (e.g., university requirements, individual abilities, personal finances). Self-authored students will be reflective about how their decision impacts their own future and interpersonal relationships, and they will be able to see their individual decisions within a context of goals and situations that is larger than the one in which they find themselves at the moment. (Pizzolato, 2006, pp. 32–33)

There are some clear similarities between the principles of self-authorship and existentialist advising. Both approaches aspire to cultivate autonomous students who accept responsibility for making their own life choices. Furthermore, self-authorship explicitly affirms that in order to begin the process of developing into a self-authored person, “students need to experience discomfort or provocation” (Pizzolato, 2006, p. 38; see also Schulenberg, 2013, p. 126). The importance of discomfort in catalyzing personal growth is similar to the way in which existentialism affirms the positive and productive role of anguish. Nonetheless, there are a few important differences between these approaches.

In her article “Three Elements of Self-Authorship,” Baxter Margolda (2008) identifies one of the elements of self-authorship as “trusting the internal voice” (p. 269). According to this approach, at some point in early adulthood individuals experience a conflict between external influences and their own internal voice. At this crossroads, the path to self-authorship can begin, and it ideally culminates with the individual more fully developing and trusting their internal voice. External influences are not ignored, but they are no longer blindly followed. Although this approach sounds much like existentialism, there is a subtle difference which comes with the metaphysical ambiguity of one’s “internal voice.” Was the student’s internal voice there all along, trying to make itself heard, but drowned out by outside voices? For self-authorship advising, the answer seems to be “yes.” Baxter Margolda (2008) uses language like “self-discovery” and “listening to” the internal

voice, as well as being able to “lose sight” of the internal voice, all suggesting that the internal voice is an internal source of authority that must be discovered through self-exploration (p. 274).

For existentialism, on the other hand, there is no “internal voice” waiting to be discovered, after which one’s true self might be unveiled. There exists no supreme authority outside of me (God) or inside of me (internal voice). Wherever we turn for answers, we will be met with silence. There is no source of meaning outside of one’s own actions and commitments. As Sartre (1956b) tells his student, “no signs are vouchsafed in this world” (p. 298), which includes external *and internal* signs. Even one’s own deeply felt emotions and intuitions stand in need of evaluation and interpretation. While self-authorship advocates self-exploration, existentialism advocates self-creation. There is no internal voice to hear. Meaning and purpose are forged through action. Meaning is made, not found. The distinction is subtle but significant.

Secondly, existentialist advising recognizes that the self-authorship of one’s values, goals, meaning, and purpose is always shot through with irrationality. As Sartre makes clear concerning his student’s conundrum, there is no right choice. Neither choice is more correct, true, moral, or rational than the other. There is only an authentic choice and an inauthentic choice. This shift in perspective is what makes freedom and choice so dizzying and difficult in the existentialist framework. Choice is rationally groundless and cannot be guided by or measured against any higher criterion. In other words, while we can give reasons for our choices, if we continue digging into those reasons, at some point our reason fails us: “Why do you want to do A?” “Because I care about B.” “Why do you care about B?” “Because I am committed to C.” “Why are you committed to C?” “Well... I am not sure. I just am.” At this point, when reason runs out, we must simply say “Here I stand, I can do no other.” Even in the absence of ultimate rational justification, we must choose and act and take responsibility. It is not clear how the self-authorship approach understands this issue. Self-authorship advising does not seem to make a judgment about the epistemic status of the student’s choices. So this is not so much a disagreement between the two approaches but rather a novel contribution of the existentialist approach.

#### **PART 4: APPLICATION OF EXISTENTIALIST ADVISING: THE FORECLOSED STUDENT**

It will help further illuminate the practice of existentialist advising by discussing its application to a specific and common problem that academic advisers face: the foreclosed student. Foreclosure (or “identity foreclosure”) is defined as “premature commitments to plans and goals despite minimal or no effort to explore options or to understand oneself” (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2017, p. 165). There are many causes of foreclosure, often rooted in a student wanting to conform to the pressure or expectations or values of others, including family, friends, mentors, or society. These pressures may be more intense for certain student demographics,

such as international students, first-generation students, or certain ethnic groups. For example, Asian-American students may come from a cultural background that prioritizes family-oriented collectivism over individualism. Their families may view education more as a family investment than a process of personal development. On the positive side, this may result in strong family support for such students. On the downside, this worldview may lead Asian-American students into majors that they are neither passionate about nor interested in. Out of deference to their parents, these students may be initially closed off to re-evaluating their choices and exploring other options (Kodama & Huynh, 2017).

One of the challenges of advising foreclosed students is the anguish that such students may experience upon entering a state of open exploration. Being unsure about one's major and career can be very demotivating and depressing because of how our culture values these identity markers. The first question asked upon meeting an adult is often "What do you do?" And the first question asked upon meeting a college student is often "What is your major?" We live in a culture where one's occupation is central to one's identity. *And not knowing who you are can be terrifying.* This underlying anguish is often at the root of foreclosure. As Shaffer and Zalewski (2017) explain:

This process of exploration, however, brings a level of apprehension that can become burdensome. Students may attempt to minimize their anxiety by making and announcing an identity choice that they believe will garner approval by important persons in their lives, including parents. (pp. 167–168)

Fear of the unknown can cause us to flee into the perceived safety of other people's expectations. However, foreclosure regarding major choice can lead students into majors that are not a good fit, which in turn can lead to academic disengagement and poor performance. Importantly, "The available evidence suggests that [foreclosed students] show lower levels of academic success and persistence" compared to students who have developed their identity through a careful process of exploration (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011, p. 69). Thus, academic advisers need to develop the tools to guide students out of foreclosure and into the process of exploration. How might existentialist advising facilitate this process?

In most advising literature, the goal in the case of identity foreclosure is to help the student move from "identity crisis" to "identity achievement" (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2017, p. 167). Identity achievement is reached when a student has moved through the exploratory phase, reflected critically about their values and abilities and goals, and settled on a new stable identity. For existentialism, on the other hand, the authentic life is lived *in between* the poles of "identity crisis" and "identity achievement," in between total chaos and total fixity. This view is implied in the joint existentialist ideas of "existence before essence" and "condemned to be free." In the existentialist worldview, identity is never complete, stable, or achieved; it is always in the making. "Existence precedes essence" means that nothing about my

identity is pre-determined. Since I am condemned to be free, I am forced to choose again at every moment what I will do and therefore who I am becoming. This process of self-definition and self-creation is renewed at each moment. I can forge a new path at any time I choose to do so. Identity foreclosure and identity achievement are both problematic within the framework of existentialism. If I deceive myself into thinking that my identity is pre-determined (by God, society, parents, etc.), then I am operating in a state of inauthenticity and identity foreclosure. On the other hand, I should also never feel content that my identity has been achieved in any kind of stable or permanent way, even when that identity is the product of careful and critical reflection. Resting contently on an achieved identity can lead to its own form of inauthenticity if it hides the truth that I could always choose otherwise, I could always *be* otherwise than I currently am.

The goal with existentialist advising, then, is to help the foreclosed student confront their anguish and learn to be comfortable within an identity that is always in the making, always open and revisable, never finalized or finished. The important contribution of existentialism is its emphasis on the necessary incompleteness of identity and the need to constantly choose and re-choose one's path. We should help students make choices they feel good about but also remind them that such choices are always provisional. This idea is not just an abstract theoretical point—it has profound practical implications for the student, and thus it is important to incorporate into the advising conversation.

## **PART 5: CRITIQUES OF EXISTENTIALISM: MARXISM, COMMUNITARIANISM, RELIGION, AND NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS**

There are many potential concerns and critiques of the existentialist advising approach. By examining some of these critiques, I reflect on and address some possible shortcomings of existentialist advising. In defending existentialist advising from these critiques, I further clarify the theory and practice of this approach.

### **Marxist Critique**

Marxist philosophers have criticized existentialism as a bourgeois ideology that reflects the experiences of the wealthy but ignores the experiences of the poor and working class (Desan, 1965; Lessing, 1967; Novack, 2002). One of the reasons for this critique is that the existentialists' focus on radical freedom seems to assume class (and race, gender, etc.) privilege: sure, you have the opportunity to radically make and remake yourself if you have the privilege that comes with a lot of money and time. But it is pure ideological mystification to place the burden of personal responsibility on the single parent working a low-paying job. To expect them to transcend the harsh confines of their situation through the sheer power of free will is to endorse a toxic pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps worldview. Having money opens up choices in life. Without money, circumstances brutally dictate how life

goes. This critique is serious and must be addressed. It is especially relevant to academic advising because our students come from a wide variety of backgrounds with widely varying levels of privilege and resources (Archambault, 2017). How might the existentialist respond?

Sartre was not blind to the Marxist critique. A politically active Marxist himself, Sartre understood that unjust social structures can stifle human flourishing, and he fought for social justice throughout his lifetime. Nonetheless, Sartre maintains that, although we cannot always change our circumstances, we can always choose how we respond to our circumstances. Indeed, in response to this Marxist critique of existentialism, one might recall Marx's well-known line, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx, 1852/2006). So existentialism does not assume that choice operates independently of circumstances. Instead, we have the freedom to choose how we respond to and operate within our circumstances, no matter how constraining and unjust those circumstances might be.<sup>4</sup>

This critique nonetheless has implications for existentialist advising. Existentialist advisers should not assume that students are responsible for all their academic difficulties. If a student is facing economic hardship that forces them to take on a job while in school, this burden will often impact academic performance. Another example of such constraints might be a learning disability. It is important that the existentialist adviser not get wrapped up in the abstract discourse of freedom and responsibility and ignore the constraints and challenges that their students face. Yes, we must remind our students that they always have freedom, that they are always making choices and that they need to accept responsibility for those choices. But we must never hold students responsible for circumstances that are out of their control. This insight brings us back to the importance of relationship building within the context of academic advising. Advisees will only share information about the circumstances under which they live and work if they first feel a personal connection with their adviser.

### Communitarian Critique

Communitarian philosophers criticize existentialism for being hyper-individualistic. Existentialism is accused of celebrating an atomized conception of the individual at the expense of community and relationality (Cross, 2001). For communitarian philosophers, no person is an island. The self is a social product, constituted by its network of relationships. Who am I if considered apart from my family, friends, and society (Sandel, 1982)? Existentialism is accused of neglecting the social nature of the self and rejecting the legitimate authority my community might have over some of my life choices. Are we really justified in demeaning the

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<sup>4</sup> In his later writings, Sartre sought to philosophically reconcile existentialism and Marxism. See Sartre 1957/1968, 1960/2004, and 1985/2006.



person who dutifully lives out their family-assigned role as falling prey to inauthenticity? Is authenticity just another way of describing anti-social, anti-conformist rebellion? Is that really the best way for everyone to live?

This critique directly bears on existentialist advising. Not all students want to make up their own minds in the way advocated by existentialism. Some students are happy to pursue the career and lifestyle that are prescribed by their family and community. It is important to be sensitive about this issue with students who may come from backgrounds with a stronger emphasis on family and community and less emphasis on individual autonomy and choice. How should the existentialist adviser approach these cases? Let us consider a hypothetical student who wants to become a doctor primarily because their parents want them to do so. First and foremost, the existentialist adviser should remind this hypothetical student that the decision about their career actually *has not* been made for them. Such a decision *cannot* be made for them. The student is condemned to be free. The student is the one ultimately choosing to pursue the career of a doctor. The student is the one ultimately choosing to follow the wishes of their parents. They could choose otherwise. They have made a choice even if they think that they have not. This subtle reframing of the situation can be important for how the student pursues this path. By taking ownership of this more fundamental choice, the student will be more likely to take ownership for each step along the way. They will see each of those decisions as truly their own, and thus as ultimately their own (and not their parents') responsibility. As we can see, the student's choice can be authentic even though it ultimately aligns with their parents' wishes. In other words, authenticity is not the same as anti-social rebellion. One can authentically choose the values of one's family and community.

## Religious Critique

Sartre asserts that existentialism is simply atheism taken to its logical conclusion. While there are Christian existentialists, Sartre's particular brand of existentialism is fairly hostile to religious belief. Does Sartre's existentialism, then, have nothing to offer those with a religious worldview? Since advisers work with students from religious backgrounds, we must use advising frameworks that accommodate these various religious beliefs. If indeed existentialism only speaks to atheists and is truly incompatible with religious belief, then it is not appropriate as an advising approach. Is there a way to defend existentialism from this important objection? Is existentialism for everyone, or just atheists?

Although Sartre is clear about his own atheism, and asserts a logical connection between atheism and existentialism, he also gestures at how religious belief might operate within his existentialist philosophy. Sartre (1956b) states, "Even if God existed that would make no difference from [the existentialist] point of view" (p. 311). He elaborates:

Not that we believe God does exist, but we think that the real problem is not that of His existence; what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God. (Sartre, 1956b, p. 311)

This statement is rather cryptic. What does Sartre mean by “nothing can save him from himself,” including God? Let us return to Sartre’s conversation with his student who is contemplating whether he should join the anti-fascist resistance or stay home to take care of his ailing mother. Sartre (1956b) reflects,

What could help him to choose? Could the Christian doctrine? No. Christian doctrine says: Act with charity, love your neighbor, deny yourself for others, choose the way which is hardest, and so forth. But which is the harder road? To whom does one owe the more brotherly love, the patriot or the mother? Which is the more useful aim, the general one of fighting in and for the whole community, or the precise aim of helping one particular person to live? Who can give an answer to that *a priori*? No one. (p. 296)

Even when the meaning of a religious text seems clear, it is not always clear how to apply the meaning of the text to a particular situation. What does the Christian ethic of universal love have to say about the student’s conundrum? Texts do not apply themselves. Translating from text to action requires human discretion and choice. The student cannot push off his moral responsibility onto a religious text or tradition. He must choose how to apply the religious values to his life and take responsibility for those choices. Even the devoutly religious person is condemned to be free.

What are the implications of this insight for how existentialist advising is practiced? Insofar as a student might be stubbornly and uncritically holding onto a view (about their major or career, for example) for reasons that might be vaguely tied up with religious belief and authority, the solution is clearly not to try to talk the student out of their religious belief. Instead, the existentialist adviser should help make the student aware of the vast range of choice and freedom that they have within their worldview, whatever it is. Additionally, oftentimes the effect of religious beliefs is to subtly reinforce and cement the values and views of one’s parents or social group—values and views that have no actual foundation in the religion itself. For many young people today, being a good religious person has been watered down to pleasing one’s parents and conforming to middle class bourgeois norms. This inauthentic version of religious belief is what existentialists rightly criticize: religion that functions to mold inauthentic conformists who shirk their freedom and responsibility. Authentic religious belief is possible and desirable. It is appropriate and good for advisers to encourage their religious

students to acknowledge and embrace their freedom and responsibility and to strive for authenticity.<sup>5</sup>

## Nontraditional Students

Some of my descriptions of the college experience in this article assume the stereotypical experience of the traditional college student, namely the student who is aged 18–24 and who leaves home to attend college shortly after graduating from high school. We know that nontraditional college students make up a near majority of college students in the United States. In fact, over 47% of incoming college students are over 25 years old, and 40% of those are over the age of 35 (Seale, 2019). We also know that these nontraditional students may come to college with different experiences and expectations from traditional college students (Auguste et al., 2018; Kasworm, 2010; Lin, 2016; Macdonald, 2018). For example, many traditional college students are unsure about their major and career, and these topics can generate a great deal of soul-searching and existentialist anguish. On the other hand, nontraditional college students may have already spent many years in the workforce and know exactly what major they want and how they plan to use it when they graduate. Nontraditional students may have already gone through the transition into adulthood and the awakening into their existential freedom. These differences in student experiences raise the question: is existentialist advising a useful approach for nontraditional students, or does it only speak to traditional students?

Existentialist philosophy speaks about the human condition generally, about the basic problems we all confront, and therefore it should be relevant to students from all backgrounds. Imagine a student going to college at the age of 45 after having children and working for 25 years in low-paying jobs. They may not be experiencing abandonment, freedom, and responsibility for the first time, but they still experience these features of being human and must grapple with them. College is a period of transition from one phase of life to another, an opening onto a new future with new possibilities for employment, identity, and meaning. This student may be looking to upgrade their skills and credentials to get a promotion or enter a new line of work. However, regardless of the student's expectations going into college, once classes start, they may struggle in classes in which they expected to excel or be bored in classes they expected to love or love classes they expected to find boring. Academic advisers hear these stories from students all the time. For

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<sup>5</sup> One reviewer incisively asked, “What if the student is a Calvinist (and believes in predestination)?” The doctrine of predestination denies human free will, which would seem to put it at odds with existentialism. My argument in this section still stands, at least in the ways that matter most. Even if the future is fully preordained from the perspective of an omniscient God, the future remains wide open from the perspective of humans. The thought “my life path was decided by God before I was born” changes nothing about my situation: my future is completely unknown *to me*, and I must still choose how to act under this shadow of ignorance.

the traditional and nontraditional student alike, college is a setting where personal meaning and purpose are worked out. All these experiences and challenges will factor into conversations with their academic adviser. Our essence is not fixed at any age. People redefine themselves in all phases of life. We remain burdened with the responsibility to choose our purpose and identity day after day, year after year, until our dying breath. So, while some of my language and framing in this paper assumes a certain traditional college experience, I intend existentialist advising to be relevant to all students.

## CONCLUSION: THE FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ADVISER

This article has focused on how the adviser should place the advisee's freedom and responsibility at the heart of the advising practice. However, these themes should also be incorporated into the adviser's own professional identity and practice. The adviser, too, should strive for authenticity. Sartre (1956b) writes, "I am thus responsible for myself and for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I fashion man" (p. 292). He continues, "Everything happens to every man as though the whole human race had its eyes fixed upon what he is doing and regulated its conduct accordingly" (Sartre, 1956b, p. 293). In other words, to encourage an authentic way of life in their advisees, the adviser should model an authentic way of life themselves. As a matter of consistency, the existentialist adviser should apply existentialist insights to their own personal and professional life. We must practice what we preach. What would this look like?

Authentic daily professional practice is a challenge for anyone who works under a powerful bureaucracy. Such institutions invite and sometimes reward inauthenticity: "The bureaucracy made me do it." "I'm just following the policy." "I'm just an adviser, there's nothing I can do about it." "Some other committee worries about that stuff." It is easy to pass the buck. But such attitudes cloak the true freedom and responsibility of the adviser. We should not forget that we operate in an institution that is shot through with social injustice. Academic advisers work in a situation of moral ambiguity. Our students are taking on crushing amounts of debt. The taxpayer is contributing to the cost of higher education. Our work has impacts throughout our institutions and communities. Although it is easy to ignore, we are responsible to many stakeholders and our actions have real-world consequences. We do not just passively enact policies handed down to us, but we also have the power to change policies. The authentic adviser will reject the temptation to be morally forgetful and instead will be ever aware of their professional freedom and responsibility, knowing that with every decision they make, they could have (and maybe should have) chosen otherwise. Strive to be a daily example of authenticity to your students and colleagues.

College is, as much as anything, an education in freedom. Advisers are responsible to oversee a process in which students mature into adulthood.

Existentialist advising is important because it takes this process seriously. Academic advising is not about simply helping students navigate campus policy and graduate on time. It is about helping students become aware of their profound freedom and responsibility. It is about helping students forge their own path and create their own identity. Existentialism speaks directly and powerfully to the college experience of many of our students. Unsurprisingly, then, existentialist philosophy offers valuable lessons for academic advising practice. The existentialist advising approach should have a prominent place in the advising toolbelt.

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