



INTRODUCTION

# Existentialism and International Relations: In it up to our necks

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## Abstract

What, this essay asks, is the relation between contemporary IR scholarship and the existentialist intellectual and cultural tradition? How is our discipline informed and animated by existentialist thinking? Is existentialism a heritage to be recovered, claimed, and embraced by IR scholars, or a shadow to be escaped? And what resources does it furnish us for thinking through the kind of issues that IR scholars are called upon to grapple with today? These questions are not purely theoretical. There are practical and political reasons, not only for considering them, but for considering them now. Living through what has been termed an unfolding 'Age of Anxiety', we find ourselves confronted by existential questions and existentialist ideas at almost every turn. It is, however, unclear how substantive or meaningful this apparently existentialist moment truly is. Does existentialism have something to say to contemporary IR, or does it flatter to deceive? We think the time is ripe to take stock of existentialism as it relates to IR and global politics. This is the purpose of this article and of the collection of essays it introduces.

**Keywords:** crisis; disciplinary history; existentialism; IR theory

## Introduction

I most enjoy the great texts, the classicist Jane Ellen Harrison once wrote, 'when behind their bright splendour I see moving darker and older shapes.'<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this Special Issue is to examine the relation between the bright splendour of contemporary International Relations (IR) theorising and the darker, older shapes of existentialism that lurk, largely unnoticed, in its shadows and back-ground. What, it asks, is the relation between contemporary IR scholarship and the existentialist intellectual and cultural tradition? How is our discipline informed and animated by existentialist thinking? Is existentialism a heritage to be recovered, claimed, and embraced by IR scholars, or a shadow to be escaped? And what resources does it furnish us for thinking through the kind of issues that IR scholars are called upon to grapple with today?

These questions are not purely theoretical. There are practical and political reasons, not only for considering them, but for considering them *now*. Living through what has been termed an unfolding 'Age of Anxiety', we find ourselves confronted by existential situations and questions and existentialist ideas at almost every turn.<sup>2</sup> 'Existentialism is back in vogue', as Rens van Munster

<sup>1</sup>Jane Ellen Harrison, 'Reminiscences of a student's life', *Arion: A Journal of the Humanities and Classics*, 4:2 (1965), (pp. 312–346).

<sup>2</sup>Bahar Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety: Existentialism and the current state of International Relations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24 (2021), pp. 1020–36. For example, Nasir Abbas Nayyar, 'War and existentialism', *The News on Sunday* (9 October 2016), available at: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/561876-war-existentialism>;

puts it. 'Today, intellectuals and commentators again turn to the writings of Hannah Arendt, Albert Camus, and Jean Paul Sartre to make sense of human life in the twenty-first century, a period characterised by multiple and entangled planetary crises, including the ongoing threat of nuclear war, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic.'<sup>3</sup> IR is no exception. There has been an upsurge of writings in the field on existentialist themes and concerns. So much so, in fact, that Jelena Subotic and Filip Ejdus have recently identified an emergent 'existentialist turn in IR'.<sup>4</sup>

While its timeliness is plain for all to see, it is unclear how substantive or meaningful this apparently existentialist moment truly is. Does existentialism have something to say to contemporary IR, or does it flatter to deceive? Is there something to it, or is it merely a trendy, jargonised rhetoric that is hollow at the centre? In either case, what should we make of IR's latest dalliance with it? And what sense are we to make of the fact that, when confronted by multiple crises and contingencies, our response has been to declare that we are living through an especially existential moment? Moved by these considerations, we think the time is ripe to take stock of existentialism as it relates to IR and global politics. This is the purpose of this article and of the collection of essays it introduces.

The contributing authors to this Special Issue come from very different corners of the discipline, as well as very different parts of the globe, and hew to different theoretical and methodological approaches. Further, when it comes to existentialism, they do not all sing with one voice, or even from the same hymn sheet. Some are favourably disposed towards it, others less so. Yet all concur that there is benefit to be gleaned by engaging with existentialism; and more specifically, by excavating and problematising the part it has played in the origins and ongoing development of IR. Consider this Special Issue, then, an invitation to reflect anew on how we approach IR in light of fundamental concerns about freedom, agency, responsibility, finitude, subjectivity, and survival. No doubt these are themes in which, to paraphrase Albert Camus, we in IR are already up to our necks. Yet, if anything, the rising tides, rolling pandemics, and ratcheting body counts characterising the second decade of the new century render it all the more vital that we consider our global existential condition as well as the existentialist resources by which IR might help grapple with this.<sup>5</sup>

## Existentialism and International Relations

Before we go any further, it may be helpful to say a few words about what we mean by existentialism – a term that evades easy definition.<sup>6</sup> No two scholars seem to treat it the exact same way.<sup>7</sup> Coined by Gabriel Marcel in the 1940s to describe the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, the term 'existentialism' does not designate a bounded system of philosophical thought.<sup>8</sup> Rather, it stands for a kind of intellectual activity that, encapsulated by the aphorism 'existence precedes essence', is concerned with the human situation *as it is lived*. Closely associated with

Robert Zaretsky, 'Make America existentialist again', *Foreign Policy* (20 August 2019), available at: {<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/20/make-america-existentialist-again/>}; Carmen Lea Dege, '2020's Existentialist turn', *Boston Review* (24 August 2020), available at: {<https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/carmen-dege-existentialism-redux/>}; Jessica F. Green, 'The existential politics of climate change', *Boston Review* (21 January 2021), available at: {[https://www.bostonreview.net/forum\\_response/jessica-f-green-existential-politics-climate-change/](https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/jessica-f-green-existential-politics-climate-change/)}; Sarb Johal, 'Covid is an existential crisis that comes from an awareness of your own freedoms', *The Guardian* (30 January 2021), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/30/covid-is-an-existential-crisis-that-comes-from-an-awareness-of-your-own-freedoms>}.

<sup>3</sup>Rens van Munster, 'Nuclear weapons, existentialism, and international relations: Anders, Ballard, and the human condition in the age of extinction', *Review of International Studies*, forthcoming (2023), p. 1, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210522000638>}.

<sup>4</sup>Jelena Subotic and Filip Ejdus, 'Towards the existentialist turn in IR: Introduction to the symposium on anxiety', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24 (2021), pp. 1014–19.

<sup>5</sup>Albert Camus, *Between Hell and Reason* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan Press, 1991), p. 183.

<sup>6</sup>Mary Warnock, *Existentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup>The scholars who have contributed to this special issue define existentialism in different ways. One aim of this special issue is to put these different understandings of existentialism in IR in dialogue with one another.

<sup>8</sup>David E. Cooper, *Existentialism: A Reconstruction*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), p. 1.

mid-20th-century European political thought, it nevertheless reflects a wide range of references, encompassing everything from Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilism to a particular way of reading the works of W. E. B. Du Bois to contemporary 'neuroexistentialism'. Once considered the preserve of apricot-cocktail-sipping Left Bank intellectuals,<sup>9</sup> existentialism has today become a permanent fixture in popular consciousness and contemporary letters and provides continued inspiration for artists, musicians, filmmakers, writers, social revolutionaries, and ordinary people alike.<sup>10</sup> A broad church, existentialism coalesces around a commitment to asking the 'big questions about what it means to live an authentic, fully human life' in a world that refuses to make sense.<sup>11</sup>

The formative expression of existentialism is Sartre's essay 'Existentialism is a humanism'. Though controversial in its own way, and far from representative of all strands of existentialist thought, it offers a pithy recapitulation of many indicative themes. The claim that 'existence precedes essence' enjoys pride of place in Sartre's treatment. The effect of positing existence as prior to essence is to affirm that humans are responsible for who they are and how they live their lives – and that the two ideas are deeply intertwined. As Sartre puts it, 'Man is nothing but what he makes of himself'.<sup>12</sup> What this means is that humans should not be seen as having a fixed nature but rather should be understood as beings that create and recreate themselves through the projects they adopt. Who and what we are is defined, on this view, not by some pre-given essence or higher power, but by the very choices we make and actions we take.<sup>13</sup> 'The first effect of existentialism', Sartre explains, is therefore 'that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders'.<sup>14</sup> The universalising implications of this stance are profound. To choose one way of life or course of action over another, he writes, is to choose it not just for oneself, but for all. As such, 'when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but he is responsible for all men'.<sup>15</sup> Freedom and responsibility are thus yoked together: 'When a man commits himself to anything, fully realising that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind – in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility'.<sup>16</sup>

Framed in these terms, existentialism is reflective of a unique understanding of the human condition and of a particular mode of response to that condition. It takes as its point of departure the experience of realising 'that something's not right with us; that we are not "real" or "at home" in this world; that our existence is inescapably finite and absurd; and that there are no moral absolutes that can tell us how to live'.<sup>17</sup> In their stead, there is only ever constant striving, perpetual choice, radical freedom and responsibility, and inescapable angst. Instead, though, of accepting this sense of dislocation as a natural and inevitable element of social life, existentialism posits it as an opportunity for questioning the decisions we make and the way we lead our lives. It reminds us that the

<sup>9</sup>Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails* (London: Vintage, 2016).

<sup>10</sup>William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1961), p. 8.

<sup>11</sup>Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café*, p. 28. Stella Sandford describes it as 'that philosophical tradition and orientation concerned with the analysis of "existence", where "existence" is the term reserved for the being of the human: its nature, its meaning, its possibilities, and its afflictions. This does not mean that existentialism engages in an attempt to isolate a property unique to humanity, the possession of which would qualify one for the ascription "human"; rather, it undertakes to describe the fundamental characteristics of *existing* as a human in the midst of the world of humans and others.' Stella Sandford, *How to Read Beauvoir* (London: Granta, 2006), p. 4.

<sup>12</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism is a humanism', in Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Plume, 1975), pp. 345–368 (p. 349). The gendered language is Sartre's, as it is Morgenthau's in the next section.

<sup>13</sup>José Ortega y Gasset offers a useful alternative formulation: 'Man is the entity that makes itself', he writes. 'Man, in a word, has no nature; what he has is – history'; José Ortega y Gasset, 'Man has no nature', in Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Plume, 1975), pp. 155–7.

<sup>14</sup>Sartre, 'Existentialism is a humanism', p. 349–50.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 351.

<sup>17</sup>Kevin Aho, *Existentialism: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), p. ix.

choices we make and the actions we take are our own, and nobody else's, and that we have powerful agency but must also therefore assume responsibility, not only for what we do, but also for who we are. It thus encourages a confrontational attitude towards the givens that structure routinised everyday life and challenges us – the free subjects it addresses – to lead meaningful lives even in the face of finitude and absurdity. In other words, 'people everywhere are "condemned to be free", forced to confront the dilemma of existence, to seek infinitude in the face of limits.'<sup>18</sup> Parlayed in these terms, one might be tempted to associate existentialism with the writings of a cadre of core figures, including Beauvoir and Sartre, but also Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and Søren Kierkegaard. Our inclination, however, is not to approach existentialism as a canon of great thinkers. We prefer to engage it as a literary, cultural, and political movement which seeks to understand the human condition, not via detached abstract reasoning, but through a commitment to grappling with the lived experience – grounded and concrete, visceral and affective – of human existence. Accordingly, while this Special Issue engages directly with several of those just listed, it also ranges more freely across identifiably existential themes and arguments, as well as some existential thinkers that the canon overlooks.

It is one thing to introduce existentialism, another to consider its impact upon IR. It is to this latter task that we devote this Special Issue. We do so by posing the question: how does existentialism intersect with and inform IR? Our aim in this introductory essay, then, is simply to frame and historically situate this line of inquiry. This leads us to an analysis of the past, present, and future of the relationship between existentialism and IR.

## Past

The same grim exigencies that animated existentialism also, arguably, helped give rise to the emergence of International Relations (IR) theorising as a distinct field of academic inquiry. The rise of fascism, the devastating experience of two world wars, the depraved horror of Nazi death camps, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the advent of superpower rivalry, and the looming threat of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD): all played a formative part in the advent of existentialism. And though these happenings pertain to IR concerns on a number of registers, we find it conspicuous that mid-century IR theorists understood their work as an attempt to confront the 'crisis of meaning' that such developments engendered.<sup>19</sup> This makes sense when one considers that, just as several of the key originary IR texts were written by scholars who had been forced to flee for their lives from Nazi Germany, so many of the core writings of the existentialist canon were produced by men and women who had lived under, and indeed resisted, fascist occupation.<sup>20</sup> At the risk of overstating the point, then, it is possible to view IR and existentialism as fraternal twins. Both came into being as a way of getting a grip on, or at least coming to terms with, an increasingly dangerous world that no longer seemed susceptible to rational analysis.

Going further, spotty yet provocative evidence suggests that IR and existentialism developed in tandem or even in lockstep. E. H. Carr, the Woodrow Wilson Chair of International Politics at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, from 1936–47, drew heavily upon existentialist touchstones in his writing. His disdain for Enlightenment rationalism – and its IR offshoots – derived, it seems, from his interest in the writings of Fyodor Dostoevsky, who many hail as an influential figure in existentialist thought.<sup>21</sup> Carr credited Dostoevsky as the source of his insight that liberal elite values can be, and must be, challenged. 'The quality in Dostoevsky which gives him his permanent place among the great writers of all time', Carr wrote in his biography of the Russian author, 'is his faculty

<sup>18</sup> George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Sean Molloy, *The Hidden History of Realism: A Genealogy of Power Politics* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> On the IR side of the aisle, John H. Herz and Hans Morgenthau fled Germany in the 1930s to escape Nazi prosecution. Turning to existentialist thinkers, Camus, Sartre, and Beauvoir all either contributed to the French Resistance or served time in incarceration at the hands of the occupying force. The interested reader can consult their life stories for more detail.

<sup>21</sup> On Dostoevsky's place in existentialist thought, see Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Plume, 1975), pp. 12–14.

of creating for us a new world, of lifting us on to a new plane of existence, where our old hopes, fears, ideals lose their meaning and are transfigured in a new light.<sup>22</sup>

Around the same time Carr finished work on this text, Raymond Aron was debating the merits of phenomenology with Sartre and Beauvoir over cocktails in Paris. One of the leading lights of IR at the time, Aron was also ‘present at the birth of existentialism.’<sup>23</sup> Across the Atlantic, Reinhold Niebuhr, a pivotal figure in the evolution of realist thought, developed his thought in dialogue with the Christian existentialism of Paul Tillich and others.<sup>24</sup> Then there is the curious case of Hannah Arendt. On the one hand, although Arendt did not identify as a card-carrying existentialist, she was deeply involved with the existentialist movement via her close personal and intellectual relationships with Martin Heidegger, Hans Jonas, and Gunther Anders, among others.<sup>25</sup> On the other, while her work was not widely discussed by the IR scholars of her day, its influence on later generations of IR theorising has been notable.<sup>26</sup> She was also, it should be noted, an ‘intellectual companion’ to Hans J. Morgenthau, who extolled the ‘enormous suggestiveness of her insights into political matters.’<sup>27</sup>

Morgenthau himself marks an interesting study. Arguably best known for the systematising account of classical realism he offered in the textbook *Politics among Nations*, Morgenthau wrapped that book by framing post-World War II international politics as an existential tragedy in which humanity’s survival hinges on the very issue about which it cannot agree or mobilise: ‘in no period of modern history was civilization in more need of permanent peace, and, hence, of a world state, and [yet] in no period of modern history were the moral, social, and political conditions of the world less favourable for the establishment of a world state.’<sup>28</sup> Moreover, existentialist themes pervade many of his other writings. Morgenthau noted his intellectual debt to Nietzsche in his diaries, where he celebrated its profound influence upon his own scholarly development.<sup>29</sup> Echoes of Nietzschean prose redound in Morgenthau’s use of the term ‘will to power’ and, most obviously, his celebrated line that today’s nations ‘meet under an empty sky from which the gods have departed.’<sup>30</sup> The theme of absurdity features in some of his later writings, most notably his 1971 essay on the relation between the activity of politics and the possibility of theorising it. ‘Man admits to the irremediable impotence of action in the face of the threatening world, to the existential dread only superficially stilled by action’, he observes, while also acknowledging that ‘from the admission of that fate, he gains the strength to maintain himself against that fate.’<sup>31</sup> Humanity’s strength, he continues, is thus revealed to reside in our ability to ‘become conscious of experience through

<sup>22</sup>Quoted in Molloy, *The Hidden History of Realism*, p. 73.

<sup>23</sup>See Ben Zala, ‘“No one around to shut the dead eyes of the human race”: Sartre, Aron, and the limits of existentialism in the nuclear age’, *Review of International Studies*, forthcoming (2023), pp. 1–18, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210523000086>}.

<sup>24</sup>On Niebuhr, see the excellent recent symposium, Liane Hartnett and Lucian Ashworth (eds), ‘Reinhold Niebuhr in our times’, *Journal of International Political Theory*, 17:2 (2021), pp. 118–220.

<sup>25</sup>Samantha Rose Hill, *Hannah Arendt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

<sup>26</sup>For example, Patricia Owen, *Between War and Politics: International Relations and the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>27</sup>Barry Gewen, ‘Hans Morgenthau and Hannah Arendt: An intellectual passion’, *National Interest* (25 August 2015), available at: {<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/hans-morgenthau-hannah-arendt-intellectual-passion-13682>}.

<sup>28</sup>Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1948), p. 402; we thank Liane Hartnett for pointing out this link.

<sup>29</sup>Christoph Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), pp. 94, 99, 102; Michael Laurence, ‘Nietzsche, Morgenthau, and the roots of realism’, *E-International Relations* (24 June 2015), available at: {<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/06/24/nietzsche-morgenthau-and-the-roots-of-realism/>}; see also Ulrik Enemark Petersen, ‘Breathing Nietzsche’s air: New reflections on Morgenthau’s concepts of power and human nature’, *Alternatives*, 24:1 (1999), pp. 83–118; Ty Solomon, ‘Human nature and the limits of the self: Hans Morgenthau on love and power’, *International Studies Review*, 14:2 (2012), pp. 201–24. Frei and others make the additional case that Morgenthau was also influenced by Heidegger.

<sup>30</sup>Hans J. Morgenthau, ‘The twilight of international morality’, *Ethics*, 58:2 (1948), pp. 79–99 (p. 99).

<sup>31</sup>Hans J. Morgenthau, ‘Thought and action in politics’, *Social Research*, 38:4 (1971), pp. 611–632 (p. 626).

thought'.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, this capacity is man's alone, that is to say, it is not shared with other creatures. 'To be conscious of himself, of his fate in the world', Morgenthau writes, 'is the specifically human quality in human existence; it is the property of man alone. ... Man, by seeking refuge from the disappointment of action in theoretical thought, returns home from abroad.'<sup>33</sup> Similar concerns arise in the influential book *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, where they are yoked to a polemic directed against 'the illusion of rationality'.<sup>34</sup> There, Morgenthau argues that the 'scientism' of the modern age means that humanity is ill equipped, not only intellectually but politically and also morally, to tackle the challenges of nuclear era.<sup>35</sup>

The argument we are moving toward here, we should be clear, is *not* that Morgenthau and his peers saw themselves as existentialists or understood their thinking in its terms. Nor is it that existentialism was the main operative influence on their work. As is well known, the figures canvassed here – Carr, Aron, Niebuhr, Arendt, and Morgenthau – were inspired by a much wider and more diverse array of thinkers than the existentialist tradition alone can offer. Rather, what we hope to show is simply that there was a significant amount of convergence between IR and existentialism while both traditions of inquiry were still in their formative stages.<sup>36</sup> That they here and there intersected, cross-cut, and even overlapped one another should really be no surprise. Indeed, given the force and range of existentialism during this period, it would be more remarkable if we found *no* affinities with the IR scholarship of the day. The challenge arising from this, we believe, is to consider how existentialism and IR developed in light of, and were coloured by, their mutual association.

If these claims sound fanciful, this is because the mutual association we have traced was subsequently arrested. The main line of IR moved away from rather than towards the existentialist concerns its progenitors encountered and, it seems, sometimes shared. Indicative here is how realism begat structural realism, which embraced the idea, so alien to Morgenthau et al., that the rough and tumble of international politics is amenable to scientific explanation.<sup>37</sup> Where Morgenthau had urged IR scholars to approach the collapse of the grand narratives of Enlightenment rationality as the appropriate starting point for their inquiry, successor generations preferred to seek refuge in modelised thought which reproduces world politics in rationalised abstract terms.<sup>38</sup> The result of this move was, among other things, to cut IR off from existentialist currents of thought that catalysed its early development. Thus, existentialism receded into the shadows of IR, taking up a dark and murky residence in the discipline's subconscious, where it could be easily overlooked.<sup>39</sup> Our intention here, however, is not to lament existentialism as *the road not travelled* for IR, but to investigate what traces of it endured in IR scholarship, for good or for ill.

## Present

This is an especially propitious moment for such an undertaking. The belated realisation of the human cost of military follies in the Middle East, the putative return of great power competition, the resurgence of populist far right politics, the alienating effects of a lockdown pandemic,

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 627.

<sup>34</sup>Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (London: Latimer House, 1947), p. 177.

<sup>35</sup>Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, p. 189.

<sup>36</sup>Tellingly, Albert William Levi considered this possibility in 'The meaning of existentialism for contemporary international relations', *Ethics*, 72:4 (1962), pp. 233–51.

<sup>37</sup>For a discussion of the processes that muted explicit philosophical reflection early IR realism, see Andrew R. Hom, 'Truth and power, uncertainty and catastrophe: Ethics in IR realism', in Brent J. Steele and Eric A. Heinze (eds), *Routledge Handbook on Ethics in International Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 130–45.

<sup>38</sup>Nicolas Guilhot, *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Relations in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 22; Molloy, *The Hidden History of Realism*, p. 81.

<sup>39</sup>For example, it became common during this period to refer to 'existential threats' without elaborating or explicating what made them specifically existential.

the endless cycle of culture wars, the weaponisation of social media platforms, the collapse of financial institutions, and the spectre of environmental disaster all combine to produce a pervasive sense of dread about what the future might hold. The optimism that marked the turn of the millennium has been rent asunder, and faith in the liberal international order severely tested. Human existence, perhaps more than any time since the end of the Cold War, has become an issue of doubt, uncertainty, and anxiety. One might expect, therefore, to find some of the existentialist concerns that were present at the birth of IR, but since suppressed, bubbling back to the surface. Has this been the case?

The answer to this question is, at first glance, a muted ‘not really’. Major journals in the field are not bursting at the seams with articles espousing the renewed relevance of existentialist thought for contemporary IR scholarship.<sup>40</sup> Primarily, the existentialist renaissance as a matter of global politics has occurred in public letters.<sup>41</sup> However, in the past decade, there have been two moves towards directly addressing the relationship between existentialism and IR, both resulting in a series of insightful essays.

The first of these openings culminated in the production of a symposium on existentialism in the *Journal of International Political Theory*. Edited by Patrick Hayden, this 2013 collection of essays comprises four articles, each treating in a slightly different key the ‘unexamined connections’ between existentialism and international political theory (IPT).<sup>42</sup> The essays which make up this symposium reflect a common conviction that the conditions of contemporary global life raise anew ‘many of the foundational philosophical and political questions of freedom, justice, responsibility, and identity’, while also sharing a determination to explore ‘how the existentialist tradition can shed light into the nature and dynamics of current world affairs.’<sup>43</sup> Brent Steele’s contribution to this symposium is notable, not only for introducing the work of Søren Kierkegaard to IPT, but also for using it to think differently about how questions of subjectivity pertain to world politics – and were implicated in the neoconservative movement.<sup>44</sup> Paul Voice’s entry explores an issue we alluded to earlier, namely the relation of Hannah Arendt to both existentialism and IR. Voice contends that Arendt’s unique approach to understanding political life, which links the material and biological conditions of human existence with the political conditions of human freedom, provides especially rich soil for new ways of thinking about environmental ethics.<sup>45</sup> Finally, Hayden draws in his own essay on the writings of Camus to reflect on the interstices of violence, modernity, and postcolonial justice.<sup>46</sup>

The second opening centres on a 2021 symposium on anxiety and international politics published in *The Journal of International Relations and Development*. The centrepiece of this symposium, which is edited by Jelena Subotic and Filip Ejdus, is a keynote address by Bahar Rumelili on the potential of existentialism as an intellectual resource for contemporary IR theorists.<sup>47</sup> Her intention, specifically, is to mine the writings of Martin Heidegger on ‘mood’ for insight into how

<sup>40</sup>Jelena Subotic and Filip Ejdus, ‘Towards the existentialist turn in IR’, p. 1015, conclude succinctly that existentialism has been ‘mostly ignored by IR’.

<sup>41</sup>See footnote 2 above, as well as Malcom Bull, ‘Great again’, *London Review of Books*, 38:20 (19 October 2016); Skye C. Clearly, ‘Applied existentialism’, *Los Angeles Review of Books* (23 April 2016); Phil Torres, ‘The dangerous ideas of “longtermism” and “existential risk”’, *Current Affairs* (28 July 2021); Charles M. Blow, ‘An age of existential uncertainty’, *New York Times* (7 April 2022).

<sup>42</sup>Patrick Hayden, ‘Exploring existentialism and international political theory: Introduction’, *Journal of International Political Theory*, 9:2 (2013), pp. 155–7.

<sup>43</sup>Hayden, ‘Exploring existentialism and international political theory’, p. 155.

<sup>44</sup>Brent Steele, ‘The politics and limits of the self: Kierkegaard, neoconservatism, and international political theory’, *Journal of International Political Theory*, 9:2 (2013), pp. 158–77.

<sup>45</sup>Paul Voice, ‘Consuming the world: Hannah Arendt on politics and the environment’, *Journal of International Political Theory*, 9:2 (2013), pp. 178–93 (p. 178).

<sup>46</sup>Patrick Hayden, ‘Albert Camus and rebellious cosmopolitanism in a divided world’, *Journal of International Political Theory*, 9:2 (2013), pp. 194–219.

<sup>47</sup>Rumelili, ‘[Our] age of anxiety’. This article builds on her earlier work, e.g. Bahar Rumelili, ‘Integrating anxiety into International Relations theory: Hobbes, existentialism, and ontological security’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 257–72.

anxiety both manifests in, and primes us to encounter, international politics.<sup>48</sup> Anxiety is, on this view, a fundamental mood, the 'ground of other ways of experiencing the world'.<sup>49</sup> Thus, in furnishing us with a set of ideas for exploring the highly charged yet hitherto-overlooked relation between anxiety and international relations, Rumelili argues, existentialism provides IR scholars with a perspicacious new way of thinking about how world politics hangs together. She cashes this claim out by demonstrating how existentialist thinking on anxiety illuminates contemporary debates about securitisation and ontological security.

The four accompanying essays in the symposium take up the gauntlet laid down by Rumelili. Brent Steele endorses Rumelili's proposal that existentialist thought should be front and centre in ontological security studies, a field he has done much to shape.<sup>50</sup> He extends her position to suggest that, updating Waltzian orthodoxy, the structural imperative of international politics is not actually power competition but 'anxiety management'.<sup>51</sup> Karl Gustafsson takes on Rumelili's contentions regarding the emancipatory potential of anxiety, especially in relation to how human creativity might be channelled to transform relations of enmity to amity.<sup>52</sup> In addition, then, to addressing existentialist ideas to questions of identity and nationality, Gustafsson demonstrates how they can be deployed to revivify emancipatory IR theorising. Andreja Zevnik argues along similar lines to Gustafsson, but where he draws on Paul Tillich, she engages the psychoanalytic writings of Jacques Lacan. This line of approach enables Zevnik to argue that anxiety is not just a mood that pervades international political life, it is constitutive of the 'social reality' that conditions it.<sup>53</sup> Last but not least, Felix Berenskötter tracks anxiety, not just in general moods, but in the narratives political leaders deploy when presenting themselves to public audiences.<sup>54</sup> In this way, he reveals how anxiety intersects with, and illuminates, matters of identity and temporality as they bear on those who command the levers of power in international politics.

These symposia do not exhaust the field, of course. There have been other entries in recent years on the relation between existentialism and IR. The works of Liane Hartnett, Maja Touzari Greenwood, and Maša Mrovlje stand out here, alongside the wider body of scholarship on ontological security. Hartnett uncovers existentialist themes travelling in both directions across several avenues of IPT, from the political theology animating the existentialist literature of Tolstoy, Camus, and Tagore, to the existentialist underpinnings of justice in Niebuhr's thought, to the importance of an existentially oriented dialogue between Arendt and Augustine for theorising love in global international theory.<sup>55</sup> Touzari Greenwood unpacks the existential crises experienced by Danish residents upon their return home after having fought with jihadist militias in the Middle East, showing how these experiences drove them to reinterpret and create meaning about their journeys

<sup>48</sup> Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', p. 1021.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1023.

<sup>50</sup> 'Existentialism provides a necessary deepening for understanding ontological security in contemporary life', Brent Steele, 'Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide: Inescapable dread in the 2020s', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24 (2021), pp. 1037–43 (p. 1037).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1041.

<sup>52</sup> Karl Gustafsson, 'Why is anxiety's positive potential so rarely realised? Creativity and change in international politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24 (2021), pp. 1044–9.

<sup>53</sup> Andreja Zevnik, 'Anxiety, subjectivity, and the possibility of emancipatory politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24 (2021), pp. 1050–6.

<sup>54</sup> Felix Berenskötter, 'Anxiety and the biographical gestalt of political leaders', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24 (2021), pp. 1057–63.

<sup>55</sup> Liane Hartnett, 'Love as a practice of peace: The political theologies of Tolstoy, Gandhi and King', in Vassilios Paipais (ed.), *Theology and World Politics: Metaphysics, Genealogies, Political Theologies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 265–88; Liane Hartnett, 'Love in a time of empire: An engagement with the political thought of Tolstoy, Tagore and Camus', PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2018; Liane Hartnett, "'The impossibility of love": Reinhold Niebuhr's thought on racial justice', *Journal of International Political Theory*, 17:2 (2021), pp. 151–68; Liane Hartnett, 'Love is worldmaking: Reading Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* as international theory', *International Studies Quarterly*, 66:3 (2022), pp. 1–12.



abroad as well as in their home contexts.<sup>56</sup> Mrovlje develops a systematic account of the points of contact between Arendt and existentialism in an incisive monograph and extends these to the issue of how protest movements deal with disappointment and hope in the wake of hamstrung or failed revolutions.<sup>57</sup> We finally wish to draw attention here to the fine work of Nathan Sears, who tragically passed away in 2023. Of particular note is his 2021 article, 'International politics in the age of existential threats'. Taking seriously the spectre of anthropogenic threats to human civilisation and survival, Sears asked: 'What is the significance of humanity's capacity for self-destruction to the meaning of "security" and "survival" in international politics?'<sup>58</sup> This line of inquiry is suggestive of the general overlap between security studies and existential thought and notably opens with an epigraph from Morgenthau.

This Special Issue, then, steps into the aforementioned broad breach in IR, inspired in part by the bodies of work just noted. As indicated earlier, it aims to consider the degree to which existentialism has, in fact, been hiding in plain sight in IR all this time – and whether its vestigial presence is something to be embraced or resisted. Thus, Ben Zala and Rens van Munster both present studies of the ways that existentialist thought historically commingled with (but was subsequently denied in) what we might loosely call realist nuclear theorising. Eileen Hunt finds existential and political concerns animating the modern science fiction of Mary Shelley, whose work in turn provided key literary and philosophical resources for mid-20th-century existentialists and IR theorists alike. In doing so, she opens up the possibility of a more 'literary IR' that is also better equipped to confront post-apocalyptic politics. Dahlia Simangan uses existentialism to unpack the ascendant concept of the Anthropocene, finding in ecological anxieties some deep-rooted currents of anthropocentrism, universalism, and hubris in IR, while also showing how existentialism might help us begin to rethink climate change from the ground up. Cian O'Driscoll likewise argues that existentialist concerns have historically been more central to just war thinking than one might first suppose – and adds that their subsequent marginalisation has been to the detriment of contemporary just war theory. Andrew Hom traces an antagonistic temporal politics of authenticity from Heidegger's work through the philosopher's own extensive embrace of Nazism and on to contemporary right-wing extremism, finding problematic resonances between Heidegger's thought and action, on the one hand, and today's white power and mass casualty incidents, on the other. Brent Steele and Xander Kirke link existentialism to ontological security, highlighting how dread and angst links both and cultivating Hans Blumenberg's work for new ways of thinking about myths as anxiety-management tools that enable collective action but remain vulnerable to bad faith actors – as seen in the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, reading his intellectual autobiography as a quintessentially existential journey, Luke Ashworth ponders in his own inimitable way the space that existentialism occupies (and/or vacates) in the self-image of the IR discipline.

## Future

The essays collected in this Special Issue, we think, build on those previous openings while presenting a robust case for engaging with existentialism in a more sustained way. Crucially, they do so neither to celebrate nor to champion existentialism per se, but to approach its darker and murkier contours in chastened fashion – fully aware that existentialism might provide underappreciated resources for grappling with contemporary problems while also being implicated in the emergence of those same predicaments by virtue of its historic influence on modern thought

<sup>56</sup>Maja Touzari Greenwood, 'When foreign fighters come home: The story of six Danish returnees', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 13:4 (2019), pp. 27–38.

<sup>57</sup>Maša Mrovlje, *Remaking Political Judgement: Arendt and Existentialism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Maša Mrovlje, 'Disappointed hope: Reimagining resistance in the wake of the Egyptian Revolution', *The Journal of Politics*, forthcoming, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1086/726935>.

<sup>58</sup>Nathan Alexander Sears, 'International politics in the age of existential threats', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6:3 (2021), pp. 1–21 (p. 3); Nathan Alexander Sears, 'Existential security: Towards a security framework for the survival of humanity', *Global Policy*, 11:2 (2020), pp. 255–66.

and culture. We leave it to readers to judge which elements of existentialism warrant embrace, resistance, rejection, or adaptation, and we expect (and indeed hope) that these assessments might change depending on reader's own intellectual concerns and issues areas. Essence, after all, only emerges from the concrete particulars of one's own situation. That said, we want to highlight some areas where further inquiry would almost certainly pay dividends for IR. Consider these IR's existentialist roads not (yet) taken.

The first concerns the more global or non-Anglo-European currents of existentialist thought. While this Special Issue tackles a wide range of issues and thinkers, it has not grappled with Black and Africana existentialism, or with race and postcolonialism in earnest. Long ignored by canonical presentations of the philosophy as a primarily white, male, and European project,<sup>59</sup> Black and Africana existentials offers expanded philosophical tools and novel worldviews from which to grapple with social inequalities and the possibilities of action, resistance, and freedom in the midst of crushing structural asymmetries.<sup>60</sup> Here, IR scholars might benefit from retrospectives and anthologies of the work of Mabogo Percy More and Robert Gordon, among others. More charts the rise of a South African existentialism as a liberation project against the apartheid system.<sup>61</sup> Gordon's research shows how existentialist concerns animated independent (rather than European-influenced) philosophical movements across Africa, where shared but yet contextually distinct concerns about the possibilities of existence at the end of colonialism drove a number of dynamic intellectual interventions.<sup>62</sup> He has also edited an important collection, *Existence in Black*,<sup>63</sup> which counterbalances Kaufmann's Eurocentric anthology with a distinctive collection of writings that address issues of growing concern in IR, such as the Black Atlantic and Caribbean,<sup>64</sup> decolonising knowledge,<sup>65</sup> private property as an accomplice of sovereign statism,<sup>66</sup> the colour line in Western democracies,<sup>67</sup> and the embodied and gendered structure of the modern international system.<sup>68</sup> More recent works in this vein can help IR further come to grips with the international politics of the colour line, race, and racism through investigations of, *inter alia*, Black Lives Matter,<sup>69</sup> popular culture,<sup>70</sup> and the formation of social movements.<sup>71</sup> They might be joined with

<sup>59</sup> Kaufmann, *Existentialism*.

<sup>60</sup> Linwood G. Vereen, Lisa A. Wines, Michael D. Hannon, Natasha Howard, and Isaac Burt, 'Black existentialism: Extending the discourse on meaning and existence', *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling*, 56:1 (2017), pp. 72–84.

<sup>61</sup> Mabogo Percy More, *Looking through Philosophy in Black: Memoirs* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

<sup>62</sup> Lewis R. Gordon, with Rozena Maart and Sayan Dey (eds), *Black Existentialism and Decolonizing Knowledge: Writings of Lewis R. Gordon* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023); Lewis R. Gordon, 'French- and francophone-influenced Africana and Black existentialism', *Yale French Studies*, 135–6 (2019), pp. 119–33.

<sup>63</sup> Lewis Gordon (ed.), *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>64</sup> For example, Robbie Shilliam, 'What about Marcus Garvey? Race and the transformation of sovereignty debate', *Review of International Studies*, 32:3 (2006), pp. 379–400; Robbie Shilliam, 'Race and revolution at Bwa Kayiman', *Millennium*, 45:3 (2017), pp. 269–92.

<sup>65</sup> E.g. Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, 'Writing International Relations from the invisible side of the abyssal line', *Review of International Studies*, 43:4 (2017), pp. 602–11; Zeynep Gülşah Çapan, 'Decolonising International Relations?', *Third World Quarterly*, 38:1 (2017), pp. 1–15; Siphamandla Zondi, 'Decolonising International Relations and its theory: A critical conceptual meditation', *Politikon*, 45:1 (2018), pp. 16–31.

<sup>66</sup> Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics, and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso, 2003); Alexander Anievas and Cristian Gogu, 'Capitalism and "The international": A historical approach', in Benjamin de Carvalho, Julia Costa Lopez, and Halvard Leira (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 138–52.

<sup>67</sup> Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda, and Robbie Shilliam (eds), *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>68</sup> Charlotte Epstein, *Birth of the State: The Place of the Body in Crafting Modern Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Vivien Lowndes, 'How are political institutions gendered?', *Political Studies*, 68:3 (2020), pp. 543–64.

<sup>69</sup> Julius Bailey and David J. Leonard, 'Black Lives Matter: Post-nihilistic freedom dreams', *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 5:3–4 (2015), pp. 67–77.

<sup>70</sup> Charles F. Peterson, 'Fear of a Black museum', in Edwardo Pérez and Timothy E. Brown (eds), *Black Panther and Philosophy* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2022), pp. 247–55.

<sup>71</sup> Madeline Martin-Seaver, 'Begin from disappointment: Black existentialism and political solidarity', *Perceptia*, 1:1 (2010), pp. 1–7. We want to note here also three PhD theses in philosophy, history, and clinical psychology, respectively, with evident

investigations of Arab existentialism or analyses of Beauvoir's work on race and racism.<sup>72</sup> At stake in such intellectual liaisons is the issue of whether existentialism, broadly construed, helps or hinders the decolonisation of IR.

Second, we have not said much (at least not directly) in this Special Issue about a range of existentialist touchstones, including ambiguity, bad faith, irony, absurdity, and the very meaning of human existence itself. Yet there are promising lines of inquiry to be explored here. Consider, for example, the opportunity to develop Kimberly Hutchings's deployment of Simone de Beauvoir's work on ambiguity as a platform for feminist thinking on the ethics of political violence.<sup>73</sup> Elsewhere, the idea of bad faith has the potential to illuminate debates in normative IR theory about moral agency and responsibility in the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI).<sup>74</sup> Indeed, as a movement intent on escaping *inter alia* the 'idle chatter' of unfree society, existentialist thinking presumably has a lot to say to the fraught issue of what it means to be distinctively human in a world of generative AI. Existentialist ideas might also be usefully extended to cast a post-foundationalist light on the freighted relation between politics and ethics; recent work in this area suggests that it is a rich seam to mine, but there is plainly more work to be done.<sup>75</sup> IR scholars interested in the tragic dimension of world politics will also find much to think about in the link existentialists draw between irony and absurdity. For example, the literary output of John Dos Passos, hitherto neglected by IR scholars, could prove a useful resource for scholars interested in the tragedy of modern politics. Finally, IR's growing interest in intellectual and disciplinary history might turn the dialogue around by offering a fuller account of the impact of existentialism in IR as well as the international political influences on early existentialism. Hunt's article broaches such themes; but, given the imbrication of early existentialist and post-World War II international politics, we suspect there is much more to the global origin story of the 20th century's most successful philosophy.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

The departure point for this Special Issue is the observation that IR is already up to its neck in existentialism, even if it has taken a sustained period of global crisis for us to realise this. As the waters rise, and the bodies start floating to the surface, a political and intellectual reckoning beckons. We hope that, by provoking scholars to view (and perhaps rethink) IR through the prism of existentialism, the articles that follow pave the way for this process. We hope, in short, that the discussions you are about to read offer, not just an exercise in coming to terms with existentialism's impact on IR past and present, but also a new way of thinking about its future.

Where might this lead? We will be happy if this Special Issue encourages IR scholars to approach world politics, not as a set of givens over which we have no control, but as a domain of human life that we must commit to making anew. While we must take seriously the rigid structural forces that bear on international relations, it would be a mistake to fall into the torpor of thinking that

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IR relevance: Elizabeth Roosevelt Moore, 'Being Black: Existentialism in the work of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin', University of Texas, 2001; Joe Street, 'Liberation culture: African American Culture as a political weapon in the 1960s civil rights movement', University of Sheffield, 2003; Orlandria A. Smith, 'Understanding racial trauma from a Black existential perspective', Point Park University, Pittsburgh, 2022.

<sup>72</sup>Yoav Di-Capua, 'Arab existentialism: What was it?', *Yale French Studies*, 135–6 (2019), pp. 171–88; Margaret A. Simons, 'Beauvoir's long march', *Yale French Studies*, 135–6 (2019), pp. 63–74; Lauren Du Graf, 'Existentialism's "white problem": Richard Wright and Jean-Paul Sartre's "The Respectful Prostitute"', *Yale French Studies*, 135–6 (2019), pp. 134–50.

<sup>73</sup>Kimberly Hutchings, 'Simone de Beauvoir and the ambiguous ethics of political violence', *Hypatia*, 22:3 (2007), pp. 111–32.

<sup>74</sup>Consider the work being conducted by Toni Erskine, e.g. the AI, Automated Systems, and Future Use-of-Force Decision Making: Anticipating Effects' project funded by the Commonwealth Department of Defence.

<sup>75</sup>Madeleine Fagan, *Ethics and Politics after Poststructuralism: Levinas, Derrida, and Nancy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

<sup>76</sup>More than any other 20th-century philosophy, existentialism 'was able to cross the frontier from the Academy to the world at large'. It manifested in art, literature, film, culture, and lifestyle and, for a period, became a marker of generational change. Its leading scholars were public figures, hailed as visionaries by their followers and repudiated as dangerous charlatans by their detractors. See Barrett, *Irrational Man*, p. 8.

this is all there is (and ever can be) to it. The existentialist creed of radical freedom coupled with responsibility challenges us to consider, not just how we can think about international relations differently, but how we can transform it through the actions we take and the stances we assume. 'One must imagine Sisyphus happy', Camus once exhorted.<sup>77</sup> Could the same logic be applied to international relations? We believe it is incumbent on IR scholars to consider this possibility; the fierce urgency of now demands it. What if this turns out to be a dead end, or if existentialism is categorically revealed to be the wrong way to think about world politics? If Sartre et al. have taught us anything, however, it is that there are sometimes worse things than being wrong. In that spirit, we hope that this Special Issue will prompt scholars to think anew on the challenge that, when it comes to world politics, it may well be *better to be wrong with Sartre than right with the same old IR theory*.<sup>78</sup>

**Video Abstract.** To view the online video abstract, please visit: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210523000451>.

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<sup>77</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 123.

<sup>78</sup> This is an allusion to the adage – discussed in Ben Zala's contribution to this Special Issue – that it is better to be wrong with Sartre than right with Raymond Aron.