Existentialism and Intellectual Culture in South Vietnam

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Among the eclecticism and diversity of the intellectual marketplace in 1960s Saigon, frequent discussions of existentialism stand out. In popular scholarly journals and literary reviews, such as Bách khoa *and* Đại học, *intellectuals, such as Nguyễn Văn Trung and Trần Thái Đỉnh, analyzed the relevance of the works of Malraux, Camus, and Sartre to Buddhism and to the situation of war-torn Vietnam. This article considers two possible reasons why existentialism appealed to intellectuals in South Du's Vietnam. First, it examines whether Vietnamese existentialists were searching for equivalency with Western nations. Second, it discusses how these authors saw existentialism as a useful way to refuse both capitalist and communist political positions.*

At the beginning of his comprehensive 1962 study of Martin Heidegger's contribution to modern thought, the prolific South Vietnamese author Bùi Giáng claims that Heidegger's existential themes should not seem foreign, strange, or abstruse to Vietnamese audiences. Indeed, Heidegger was only restating the values found in the greatest of Vietnamese classics, Nguyễn Du's romantic novel *The Tale of Kiều*. Existentialist authors like Jean-Paul Sartre tell us to grasp the absurd nature of human existence in the face of our ultimately solitary nature. Yet Bùi Giáng informs us that *The Tale of Kiều* predated Sartre by nearly 150 years in this insight by emphasizing that the self (in Buddhist terms) is like "the wind whistling through the trees." Nguyễn Du also anticipated phenomenological arguments when he compared the moon to "a mirror shining down on the forest." Bùi Giáng (1962, 9) explains how traditional Vietnamese literature was in fact existentialist in this way:

> What does the sliver of the white moon shining down upon the leaves of the trees represent? If not the solitary nature of humanity in the face of the absurd condition of living in an era of decay and decline, the falling into night and darkness, the infinite falling and descent into silence and bad faith of the subject and the reappearance of true nature in true human feelings—humanity becomes the shepherd, rearing their hollow mirror of existence, then what could it be?

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Bùi Giáng's interpretation, while interesting, seems somewhat improbable. The classic Buddhist metaphor of the moon as a mirror pertains more to the paradox of cultivating the self while simultaneously recognizing that the self is impermanent than it does to an expression of the solitary nature of the human condition (Wayman 1974).[1] Yet regardless of the plausibility of Bùi Giáng's interpretation, his attempt to mold existential philosophy into a familiar shape for Vietnamese audiences demonstrates several key aspects of intellectual culture in the Republic of Vietnam during the 1960s. First, it indicates that, even by 1962, readers of relatively popular works and commentaries of philosophy in South Vietnam had at least an elementary familiarity with existentialism. We know this because in his preface Bùi Giáng makes several references to keywords in existentialist philosophy, such as the "absurd human condition," "bad faith," and "descent into silence," without having to define them for his audience first. Given his clear writing style, the relatively large initial print run of this book, and its reprinting in 1963 and 2001, it seems that Bùi Giáng could assume that his audience was familiar with these concepts even before he began to explain them.

The second connection that this preface implies is one between Heidegger's existentialism and conceptions of Vietnamese politics, nationalism, and literature. The very fact that Bùi Giáng would see fit to compare Heidegger to the most prominent classic in Vietnamese literature is a move to grant a kind of legitimacy to Heidegger. *The Tale of Kiều* is most often interpreted as a kind of parable for unjust political conditions in nineteenth-century Vietnam, and ultimately for "the trials and tribulations Vietnam experiences under successive governments" (Nathalie Nguyen 2000, 455; Woodside 1983, xvi). Beginning one of the most significant books on existentialism with a comparison to *Kiều* might suggest that existentialism has such political value as well.

Bùi Giáng was not alone in finding these connections. In fact, European and American authors associated with existentialism—from novelists like André Malraux, Albert Camus, and William Faulkner to such philosophers as Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Friedrich Nietzsche—had such a following in South Vietnam during this time that issues of major journals, such as *Bách khoa* (Encyclopedia) and *Đại học* (Higher learning), were devoted to them. Even the journal of Buddhist thought *Tư tưởng* (Thought) devoted a volume to the relationship between Western philosophy and Buddhism, and the "Western philosophy" at issue was primarily that of Heidegger and Edmund Husserl, phenomenologists widely considered to have influenced existential thought.

If the comparison between Heidegger and Nguyễn Du indicates that Southern Vietnamese intellectuals configured existentialism with their own political and national identity, what are the implications of this connection? Put another way, why does existentialist thought come to play such a crucial role in intellectual life in the Republic of Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s? After explaining the intellectual life in South Vietnam and the circumstances leading to the popularity of existentialism there, this article will consider the two main explanations for the ubiquity of existentialism.

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[1]Nguyễn Du's reference to mirrors might recall for many readers the famous poetry competition between the Chan monks Shenxiu and Huineng, in which Shenxiu wrote that the mind was like a mirror that needed to be polished lest it collect dust, while Huineng, in a responding poem, reminded him of the transitory nature of all objects by arguing that "the *bodhi* tree was originally not a tree / the mirror also has no stand / Buddha nature is always clean and pure / where is there room for dust?" (Huineng 1967, 130–33).

First, I will consider the possibility that existentialism became the philosophy of choice for many intellectuals because intellectuals in South Vietnam sought to construct a nation that was equivalent to the modern West. This required that traits that could be found in South Vietnam could be said to be similar to ideas in Western thought, and compatible with them. South Vietnam found this equivalency by equating themes in Buddhism with those found in existentialist philosophy.

Second, I will examine the argument that existentialism offered Saigon intellectuals a way of explaining their chaotic and ambiguous wartime situation. It offered them the potential to believe that their good-faith actions might make meaning out of the seemingly random and occasionally unspeakably violent events of South Vietnam in the 1960s. An endorsement of existentialism offered Saigon intellectuals a way to reject the totalizing ideological systems provided by Marxism-Leninism, anticommunism, or modernization theory, since the existential project allowed them to reject the primacy of rational systems for explaining the world. Existentialism allowed them to define themselves against a received vision of northern intellectuals and also against the prevailing political winds in the Republic of Vietnam and the United States. First, however, I will consider the political environment out of which Vietnamese existentialism grew.

INTELLECTUALS AND POLITICS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

Existentialism was an important tool for Vietnamese intellectuals in part because of the way in which intellectual discussion was intertwined with political development in Vietnam. The 1920s and 1930s saw an explosion in the popularity of newspapers and other print media, expanding literacy, and the increased use of a phonetic writing system (*quốc ngữ*). These in turn gave rise to dizzying cultural changes and facilitated the growth of diverse political parties and opinions (McHale 2004, 4–10). After 1945, elite educated families from urban environments often sent their brightest young people to universities in France and Belgium to escape the chaos of the First Indochina War (1946–54), leading them to be inculcated in contemporary European thought. Back at home, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the State of Vietnam government and the Viet Minh continued efforts to recruit intellectuals and to construct unified state ideologies, though the war hindered those efforts (Dommen 2001, 217; Pelley 2002, 3–4).

The process of recruiting intellectuals to build a society increased in urgency in the aftermath of the de facto partition of Vietnam at the Geneva Conference in 1954. In the north, intellectuals working predominantly for state-run universities and institutes worked together to produce an official history, philosophy, and literature that would legitimate the state (Pelley 2002, 15). Certainly, some northern intellectuals were able to express dissent, as the abortive 1956 attempt of the journals *Nhân văn* and *Giai phẩm* to articulate an "independent agenda" indicates (Zinoman 2011, 60). Even within orthodox party journals, polemical disputes were frequent. However, this dissent took place within a state-run context, and interparty disputes could become dangerous if taken too far. The repression of the *Nhân văn–Giai phẩm* affair and the 1967 Anti-Party affair are only the two best-known examples of how political dissidence could lead to one's arrest and imprisonment (Lien-Hang Thi Nguyen 2012, 68–70).

In the south, however, the relationship between intellectuals and the state was much more fluid. To be sure, the various regimes in the south tried to influence and even at times to directly control intellectuals and universities, but they did so in a much less centralized environment. Though some of the largest universities in the Republic of Vietnam were endowed by the state, South Vietnam also boasted several private universities. Catholic Universities (such as the University of Đà Lạt and Minh Đức University in Saigon) were present, as well as a university run by the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (Vạn Hạnh University). A most interesting case is that of An Giang University, founded in 1970 in a peculiar partnership between the millenarian Buddhist Hòa Hảo sect and the Mormon-run Brigham Young University (Vietnam Feature Service 1971, 5–6, 14–15). In addition to the various universities that provided an environment for independent thought, intellectuals in the south continued the proliferation of journals representing different political parties and schools of thought that had been such an important part of Vietnamese intellectual life before 1954.

South Vietnamese intellectuals were not immune from political restriction. As in the north, most publications had to be approved by government censors, though censors may have used a relatively light hand in editing texts (Hoang 2013, 465; Nu-Anh Tran 2006, 174). At public universities, the state, especially during the regime of Ngô Đình Diệm, was capable of altering a professor's academic career. When Nguyễn Văn Trung's writings—which could be sympathetic to Marxism—were proving inconvenient, Diệm's older brother, Ngô Đình Thục, arranged for him to be transferred to Saigon University (Hoang 2013, 476). The state also used more subtle means to influence publications through having state-related writers on the boards of journals; the United States Information Service also participated in this kind of influence through sponsoring Vietnamese journals and radio broadcasts (Hoang 2013, 121–22). Under the Diệm presidency, the Republic of Vietnam was not above shutting down universities and jailing students when they became restive, as happened during the Buddhist crisis of 1963 (Jacobs 2006, 153–54). But this did not stop some students from playing integral roles in calls for a "third force," in protests against the regimes of Diệm and later Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, and for calling for U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam (Topmiller 2002, 144–45).

This political fervor emerged from the same rich intellectual environment as protest movements in other areas of the world. In 1960s Saigon, it was not difficult to find accessible explanations of the ideas of Kant, Freud, or Marx, whose theories were also popular and widely discussed and debated among intellectuals at the time. In fact, some of the same philosophers who introduced existentialism also wrote extensively about these authors (Nguyễn Văn Trung 1967, 1968b; Trần Thái Đinh 1969a, 1969b). The Saigon intellectual scene was so avant-garde that by the late 1960s, Saigon writers were already declaring such thinkers as Heidegger, Marcel, Jaspers, and Merleau-Ponty passé. Reporting on the conversations in which he had participated and the books he had read during a trip to Paris in the spring and summer of 1967, the philosopher Trần Thái Đinh was quick to note that the existentialism and phenomenology that had been *en vogue* in the 1940s and 1950s when many Vietnamese intellectuals were studying in France had largely been eclipsed. Instead, he argued that new structuralist ideas represented "in the works of such figures as Levi-Strauss, Benvéniste, Althusser, Barthes, Lacan, and especially Foucault" were the most interesting and cutting-edge works emerging from contemporary France (Trần Thái Đinh 1968a). Young Vietnamese intellectuals

worked hard to appear to be on top of these new trends (Nguyễn Trọng Văn 1967, 1968b).

In addition, by 1968, Vietnamese intellectuals were being influenced by the radicalization of American universities. By the late 1960s, Vietnamese intellectuals began to write articles on hippie culture, the American civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. Vietnamese journals both reported on and engaged in the latest analyses of race consciousness and international racism (Lý 1967; Nguyễn Ngọc Lan 1968; Nguyễn Trọng Văn 1968a; Trường Kỳ 1970; X 1968). Thus, the same countercultural elements that were transforming American universities were very much present in Vietnamese intellectual and youth culture as well.

Yet despite these parallels with American ideology, the reliance of Vietnamese philosophers on French and especially existential writers continued until the end of the war. To understand why this is the case, one must examine the nature of existentialism and its development in Vietnam in more detail.

THE ORIGINS OF EXISTENTIAL THOUGHT IN SOUTH VIETNAM

Existentialism, or more broadly a "philosophy of existence," is most closely associated with Jean-Paul Sartre's rise to philosophical prominence in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Many of the main ideas of existentialism, however, can be found in the work of phenomenologists, such as Heidegger and Husserl, in the 1920s. Moving back further to the late nineteenth century, one can find many existential concepts in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. By the time Sartre's work came to be widely disseminated, the basic foundations of existentialism had been laid by a group of French thinkers, including Gabriel Marcel and Jean Wahl, who translated the works of Heidegger, Husserl, and Karl Jaspers from German and English (Dieckmann 1948, 33–34).

In Vietnam, the phenomenological antecedents to existentialism began to enter the vocabulary of intellectuals in secondary schools by the 1930s. The first generation of instructors of philosophy were priests, such as Bửu Dưỡng and Đỗ Minh Vọng, whose knowledge of philosophy was gained through their French language abilities and their ecclesiastical training (Nguyễn Văn Lục 2006, 91). These intellectuals inspired students at the largely Catholic schools at which they taught, and their teaching was influenced by works of Christian phenomenology, in particular the "personalism" of Emmanuel Mounier, which was later incorporated as an official state philosophy during the Diệm regime. After 1954, many of the priests located in the north emigrated south, and several of them taught at the Institute for Higher Learning in Đà Lạt. But their influence remained restricted to those who happened to be students at the high schools or institutes in which they taught (Nguyễn Văn Lục 2006, 92–93).

The most significant existential philosophers in Vietnam, however, came from a new generation of thinkers. Vietnamese intellectuals fled the chaos of their native country to France and Belgium at "unprecedented levels" during the First Indochina War. There, they sought a refuge in which to continue their interests and to start academic careers (Thompson 1952, 55). During these years, the universities that were often destinations for Vietnamese students were also hotbeds of new existential thought and of the left-leaning politics that often came with it (Nguyễn Văn Trung 1968b, 119). Vietnamese

students of European philosophy followed the example of earlier thinkers, such as Trần Đức Thảo, who had left Hanoi for Paris in 1936. By the mid-1940s, Thảo had achieved some notoriety in France for his Francophone works on phenomenology and dialectical materialism and therefore influenced a new, younger generation of intellectuals eager to study European philosophy (McHale 2002; Thompson 1952, 55–56).

The version of existentialism that captured the imagination of this new generation of Vietnamese philosophers and writers, however, was Jean-Paul Sartre's. Sartre's epistemology, which he termed "atheistic existentialism," holds that human beings are placed on the world in a more or less random fashion. Our existence, says Sartre, predates our essence: the mere fact of our being on earth is prior to our own determination of who we are. The implication of this insight is that, rather than our actions being determined by a supreme being that puts us on earth, or for that matter by a correct ideology that points us toward an objectively better course, humans make their own world by acting on it. They define themselves through making their own decisions, and they make sense for themselves of an otherwise chaotic, confusing, amoral, and godless life. Thus, "not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence. Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (Sartre 1957, 15).

Having been steeped in this existential ideology, many of these same students returned to South Vietnam in the mid- to late 1950s. During this period, they participated in the burgeoning of a vibrant new culture of intellectual and university research that led to the formation of a number of significant new journals. One such journal was Saigon's *Bách khoa* (Encyclopedia), which began publication in 1957 and was published bimonthly through April 1975. The first issue of *Bách khoa* was published on January 15, 1957, and included a brief statement of philosophy. The statement emphasized that since "constructing the nation is the responsibility of everyone," *Bách khoa* was being published so that it could contribute "a little bit of labor and all of our sincere hearts for the purposes of building a prosperous country" (*Bách khoa* 1957). *Bách khoa* vowed to take a cosmopolitan and multidisciplinary approach to its project of nation building and to work with a central philosophy of "humanism" (*nhân*) at heart. It emphasized that its contributions did "not have to be highbrow, because the experiences of working people are just as important as the theories of scholars." Articles in the journal did "not have to be only about one religion, because the morality of Buddhism is as worthy of our respect as the humane spirit of the Lord Jesus" (*Bách khoa* 1957).

A second major South Vietnamese periodical that was substantially devoted to Western philosophy, and especially existentialism, in the 1950s and early 1960s was *Đại học* (Higher learning). *Đại học* was the research publication of the Hue Institute for Higher Learning, which was involved in several important international projects to preserve and translate important Nguyễn dynasty documents in the early 1960s. Throughout this period, *Đại học* was edited by a young philosopher, Nguyễn Văn Trung, who had been deeply influenced by existentialism, particularly that of Sartre and Camus (Schafer 2007, 158; Võ 1986, 192–93). Though *Đại học* was located in Huế, it nevertheless was well read by intellectuals in Saigon, who often shuttled back and forth between these two intellectual centers of Vietnamese culture. It is not surprising that, according to the editors, *Đại học*'s initial purpose involved establishing South Vietnam's "role in the world of nations." To do this, the editors of *Đại học* proposed that the journal be a

haven for "independent thinking" that was nevertheless connected and rooted in "the people" and "social life" (*Đại học* 1958).

In practice, this meant that *Đại học* emphasized articles expressing continuity between the values that the authors saw expressed in Vietnamese philosophy and culture and the values of noncommunist philosophers in the West. Early articles examined how to establish a national history, with one article even claiming that throughout history, Vietnamese people have fled south to escape Chinese oppression, and that those Northern Vietnamese who fled south to escape communism between 1954 and 1956 had done the same (Nguyễn Toại 1958, 17–18; Trương Bửu Lâm 1958). More philosophical articles examined the ideas of "freedom" (*tự do*), "humanism" (*con người*), and "democracy" (*chủ nghĩa*) in both Vietnamese and Western contexts.

Of particular importance in the development of these trends through existential philosophy was writer and philosopher Nguyễn Văn Trung, who, though located in Huê, published extensively in both *Bách khoa* and *Đại học*, the latter of which he edited. Trung eventually influenced the direction of the curriculum of the philosophy department at the University of Saigon as well as many Saigon intellectuals. As John Schafer has noted, he introduced Saigon intellectuals to the ideas of major existentialists, such as Sartre, Camus, and Malraux—not to mention philosophers like Robbe-Grillet and Merleau-Ponty (Schafer 2007, 157–59). Though the topics he covered were often obscure, Trung developed a remarkable following during the late 1950s and early 1960s through his accessible prose and an embracing of his role as a popularizer of European literature. Nguyễn Trọng Văn, who criticized existentialism for its abstruseness, nevertheless argued that "all of Trung's presentations and explanations" were "so clear and cohesive, easy to understand" but at the same time "so comprehensive" that each of his articles could reach an audience of college professors, writers, students, and laypeople (Nguyễn Trọng Văn 1968b, 52). It was in part because of his influence that writers in South Vietnam were so obsessed with philosophy, since philosophy allowed them a complexity without which writers and poets felt that they "had not said all that they needed" and that writing without an injection of philosophy would be "bland and colorless" (53).

Nguyễn Văn Trung, The Buddhist Synthesis, and Existentialism in South Vietnam

Nguyễn Văn Trung was born in Hà Nam Province in Northern Vietnam in 1930. In 1950, he left Vietnam to study philosophy in Europe. Between 1950 and 1955, he studied at the University of Toulouse and after that at the University of Louvain. Since Louvain was a Catholic University and Jean-Paul Sartre was a well-known critic of the church, Trung became more familiar with those philosophers whose existentialism could be reconciled with religious practice, such as Husserl, Trần Đức Thảo, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Emmanuel Mounier. Nevertheless, Trung's main interest was Sartre. He had been introduced to Sartre through reading his play *The Devil and the Good Lord* while at Toulouse in 1952, and continued reading Sartre outside of class while at Louvain (gio-o.com 2008; Nguyễn Văn Trung 1968b, 119–21).

In 1957, Trung was invited by the influential scholar and priest Cao Văn Luận to develop the study of philosophy at the University of Huê (Nguyễn Văn Trung 1968b,

121). From this position, he introduced many intellectuals in the Republic of Vietnam to existentialism with a 1958 article in the newly formed *Đại học*, which was founded by the Đại Học Institute at which Trung was then a professor. In the opening two issues in 1958, he introduced Saigon audiences to existentialism, first through a work interpreting *The Tale of Kiều* through the use of existentialists, such as the German philosopher Karl Jaspers. He became famous, however, for a long piece in the second issue entitled "Issues of Human Release in Buddhism and the Philosophy of J. P. Sartre," which was also published as part of the final chapter in his 1958 book *The Dialectics of Release in Buddhism* (Nguyễn Văn Trung 1958a, 1958b).

In this piece, Trung draws several comparisons between the basic concepts of Buddhism and existentialism. He suggests that the Buddhist "*dukkha*," translated as "complexities" or "suffering," is equivalent to the Sartrean conception of "nausea." In his famous novel *Nausea*, Sartre explains that we feel unease when we reflect on our lives and realize that they lack genuine meaning. This realization causes us to contemplate our existence in a physical body, which reminds us that we are merely a collection of simultaneously firing synapses, and that our existence is temporary and insignificant (Dreyfuss and Wrathall 2006, 247; Sartre 1964b). Eventually, however, our nausea can be overcome. Once we realize that our existence does not have to depend on values external to us, we may experience a kind of release.

Trung's analysis is that *dukkha* operates in a very similar way: we suffer, according to Trung, because we compensate for the essential impermanence of our lives. We do so by completing selfish tasks that do not lead to our permanent satisfaction. Instead, they only distract us from our impermanent condition, much the same way as a lack of consciousness of the nature of our own existence provides only a temporary cure for nausea in Sartre's existentialism.

Both nausea and *dukkha* arise from the same realizations. Nausea and suffering, in other words, present us with the possibility of release. When we experience existential nausea, we realize our corporeality, and thus acknowledge the contingency of our existence. Yet, because of the very fact that our existence is temporary and particular, we are free to define ourselves in the here and now and to act against cruelty, bad faith, and suffering. *Dukkha* presents a similar upside: accepting the insight that life is full of painful complications caused by temporary desires also allows us to free ourselves of such desires and put ourselves in a position to attain *nirvana*. In both cases, the insight that produces release is our comprehension of the meaning of our existence. As Trung puts it: "The refusal of life in Sartre, just like that of Buddhism, is not just an attempt to clear away a ridiculous life, or exchange the reasons for one's misfortunes or failures from one explanation to another. On the contrary, nausea and *nirvana* appear before one as a complete, abundant, supernatural realization of one's own existence" (Nguyễn Văn Trung 1958b, 41).

Trung then relates Sartre's idea of being-in-itself with Buddhist criticisms of endless *samsara*, or cycles of reincarnation. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre makes the distinction between "being-in-itself" (*l'être en soi*) and "being-for-itself" (*l'être pour soi*), a distinction that can be approximated by the philosophical distinction between conscious and unconscious being (Barnes 1964, xviii). According to Sartre's world view, the world is full of "brute, inert matter," but that matter has no way of explaining its existence, defining itself as different from other matter, or understanding its place in the world. Being-for-itself, on the other hand, is the need to form an identity out of the mere fact

of existence offered by being-in-itself (Moran 2000, 327; Sartre 1964a, 621). In Trung's words, "being (*l'être*) has many of the good characteristics of existence. But, while it has them, it cannot perceive that it does. To put it another way, being is not conscious of its existence. It is not in an awakened state; because 'being is what it is'" (Nguyễn Văn Trung 1958b, 41).

At first glance, Sartre's conception of being-in-itself seems to be quite opposed to the Buddhist conception of perpetual rebirth. Sartre's idea of the being-in-itself as a mass, undifferentiated object would seem to contrast with the Buddhist worldview in which all things are in a state of constant transformation. But Trung tells us that these two worldviews are united "because this apparent contradiction only affirms a principle upon which both are the same: *Both are utterly discontented with the idea that things represent nothingness, silence, dormancy, and immutability*" (Nguyễn Văn Trung 1958b, 46; emphasis in original). Trung's claim is that both the classical Buddhist texts and Sartre's novels and essays view the phenomenological fact of existence as something from which human beings should seek to be released, for which they should seek alternatives. For Sartre, human beings move beyond being-in-itself through the consciousness of the capability of humans to act in the world and resolve the contradictions between the bad-faith actions of other human beings and the phenomenal world of the in-itself. Trung notes that for Sartre, we cannot transcend reality by inventing a kind of "total being," like God or a totalizing ideological or political paradigm, which would integrate the for-itself with the in-itself. Instead, we must release ourselves from such misconceptions and accept "the real" as a "disintegrated whole" (Nguyễn Văn Trung 1958b, 58–59; Sartre 1964b, 623; Tymieniecka 2002, 329). In practice, this means that the insight that we cannot rely on a totalizing principle or a God to organize our lives has the upside of giving us both the freedom and the responsibility of realizing that our own actions as individuals—however imperfect they may be—have an independent meaning and impact on the world.

Ultimately, then, Buddhism and Sartre's existential phenomenology share a common "simple" goal, according to Nguyễn Văn Trung. For Buddhists to "go down the path of release," they must "by themselves resist the world, their society, and indeed their own selves." To attain a proper view of the for-itself and use ontology as a foundation for ethics, existentialists must "by themselves see the path of release and fight against their society and their rulers with all of the rest of humanity with the insight that existence is merely the appropriation and plundering of the ego by the self" (Nguyễn Văn Trung 1958b, 41). The act of making a choice as an individual to reject the perpetuation of norms by society, to Trung, underlies the basic philosophy of both Buddhism and existentialism.

At first glance, there are several ways in which Nguyễn Văn Trung's analysis of the synthesis of Buddhism and existentialism seems flawed. First, Trung's conception of Buddhism seems disconnected with the intricacies of Buddhist practice in South Vietnam. It is worth noting that Trung places emphasis on the Theravadin vision of Buddhism. He relies on the *Dhammapada*, the ancient verses many Buddhists attribute to the Buddha himself, and other elements of the Pali *Tripitaka*, such as the *Samyutta Nikata*. He cites no Mahayana scripture. Furthermore, his vision of the Buddhist ideal is that of an individual attaining *nirvana*, resisting the world, and ceasing to exist. This view is consistent with the *arhat* ideal of Theravada Buddhism, rather than the ideal

image of the *Bodhisattva* arguably more popular in Vietnam, where historically Zen and Pure Land sects of Mahayana have dominated (Cuong Tu Nguyen 1995, 81–83).

Moreover, Trung's analysis elides differences between the Buddhist and existential conceptions of the individual and the phenomenal world. In the Buddhist ideal, the idea of an individual self is an illusion. In many Mahayana sects, the entire phenomenal world is believed to be an illusion. The realization of the illusory or transitory nature of the self is a necessary prerequisite to the attainment of *nirvana*. As Ninian Smart deftly sums up: "In nirvana you are beyond the cosmos. Or rather 'you' have disappeared but what supervenes on that individual conventionally called Gunapala is beyond the realm of rebirth and worldly constitutions" (Smart 1999, 144).

On the other hand, for Sartre, the phenomenal world is seen *a priori* to all other ethical discussion; it is in essence the only thing that exists. Sartre's concept of "being-in-itself" celebrates the capacity of the individual to transcend God and ideology. While Sartre was quick to defend his philosophy as humanist rather than individualistic and to emphasize human co-responsibility, his method suggests that individuals have the freedom and responsibility to act upon the world and against collective ideology. The difference between Sartre's view, in which there is nothing except the actions of individuals, and Buddhist conceptions, in which there is no truly individual action, seems vast, and Trung seems too quick to fill a need to find the two to be equivalent.

Trần Thái Đỉnh and the Expansion of Existential Thought in South Vietnam, 1958–1967

Regardless of these potential problems with Trung's interpretation, his essay, as well as the book that it spawned, had a profound impact on South Vietnam's intellectual and literary circles. It popularized existentialism. Trung became known as the "nucleus" of philosophical discussions. His cross-cultural comparisons between existentialism and Buddhism played an important role in making Western philosophy familiar to youth in Saigon. It inspired the blending of Buddhist and existential themes in the literature of the well-known writer Trần Văn Nam and the iconic music of Trịnh Công Sơn (Nguyễn Trọng Văn 1968b, 54; Schafer 2007, 158).

As a consequence, Buddhist intellectuals frequently engaged in cross-cultural discussions of phenomenology and Buddhism in the 1960s. The publication *Tư tưởng* (Thought), which was published by the research institute at the Buddhist-led Vạn Hạnh University in Saigon, regularly included articles on the relations between Buddhist thought and the philosophies of Kant, Heidegger, and Husserl, among others. The establishment of Vạn Hạnh, in fact, had been led by Buddhists who had been trained in American and European universities and who were interested in intercultural analysis, such as by Thích Nhất Hành, Thích Minh Châu, and Ngô Trọng Anh. The unity of the academic analysis of these problems is striking given the starkly different politics of Châu, who was reportedly sympathetic to the National Liberation Front, and the staunch anticommunist Anh (Ngô 1968; Thích 1968).

As one of the editors of a journal as influential as *Đại học*, Trung also had a venue to continue his publications on existentialism. He did so in a series of articles throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1960, after the death of the famed French existentialist

writer Albert Camus in an automobile accident, Trung devoted an issue of *Đại học* to Camus, including an abridged translation of Camus's famous novel *L'Étranger* (Camus 1960). In subsequent issues, *Đại học*, under Trung's guidance, expanded its interest to other prominent existentialist philosophers, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Karl Jaspers, and became a frequent venue for other Vietnamese philosophers to write about existentialism. During the early 1960s, one particular Vietnamese Catholic priest who was also a phenomenologist stood out in prominence for these articles: Father Trần Thái Đỉnh.

In contrast to Nguyễn Văn Trung's interest in applying existentialism to Buddhist philosophy and in the relationship between existentialism and politics, Trần Thái Đỉnh gravitated toward analytic philosophy and metaphysics. Born in 1922 in Hưng Yên Province, he studied at Saint-Sulpice (Xuân Bích) seminary, which was then in Hanoi. He was ordained in 1947. In 1953, he went to Paris to study, completing a doctorate in philosophy at the Institut Catholique de Paris in 1958 while simultaneously attending philosophy courses at the Collège de France. Returning to Vietnam, he taught at Saint-Sulpice, which by then had been moved to Vĩnh Long, as well as at the Universities of Huế, Đà Lạt, and Saigon. Demoted after the fall of Saigon, Đỉnh taught French literature for many years before his death in 2005 at the age of eighty-three (Đỗ 2008; Nguyễn Văn Lục 2005; Trần Văn Đoàn 2008).

As a philosopher, Đỉnh was much more concerned with the phenomenological and methodological aspects of existentialism, including such topics as perception. He was also interested in ethics, especially as it concerned religion, which was in keeping with the perception of his colleagues that he regarded himself as a priest more than as a thinker or philosopher (Nguyễn Văn Lục 2006, 104). From the late 1960s through the early 1970s, Đỉnh was known for writing introductory textbooks on a wide range of philosophers, such as Descartes and Kant, and on thematic issues, such as Buddhist philosophy or existentialism. These introductions featured relatively large publication runs and were designed for the average reader (104). These philosophical textbooks grew out of his earlier work. Beginning in the early 1960s, Đỉnh began to publish journal articles on phenomenology and existentialism, primarily in *Bách khoa* under the pen name Trần Hương Tử, but also under his own name in *Đại học*. These series of articles introduced readers to a wide variety of figures in phenomenology and existentialism, including Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, and Karl Jaspers. However, Đỉnh was best known as an admirer of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Nguyễn Văn Lục 2006, 105; Trần Văn Đoàn 2008).

In his "Introduction to the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty," published in *Đại học* under Trung's editorship in 1960, Đỉnh drew a sharp contrast between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. Since Nguyễn Văn Trung had been primarily influenced by Sartre, Đỉnh's distinction can be read not only as a discussion of the difference between these two French phenomenologists, but also as the difference between Trung and Đỉnh, the two best-known existentialists in Vietnam. Đỉnh is quick to refute the notion that Sartre is more "popular" and therefore more credible than Merleau-Ponty. To disabuse his audience of this idea, he paints a picture of Merleau-Ponty's method as more scholarly and deliberate. While Sartre wrote prolifically and introduced his ideas chiefly through novels and plays, Đỉnh argues, Merleau-Ponty was contemplative and got his ideas across through academic volumes, such as *Humanism and Terror* and *The Visible and the Invisible*.

Whereas Sartre was influential in popular culture, Đinh claims, Merleau-Ponty was more influential in producing new methods for the academic study of psychology and philosophy (Trần Thái Đinh 1960, 13). Moreover—and this is of some consequence to an ordained Catholic priest—unlike Sartre, Merleau-Ponty did not believe it was the "role of metaphysics" to "take an oppositional attitude against religion" (47). Rather, believing in God could play a role in making us realize our connections (or "dialectical relations") with one another. Religion makes us conscious of how our identities are constructed intersubjectively. This insight, in turn, keeps us from treating others with "inhuman regard" (47–48).

Implicit in Đinh's discussion is the well-known debate between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre over whether philosophers should be engaged in politics. Sartre once recalled a conversation on a train with Merleau-Ponty in which the latter argued that they should not "breathe another word about politics" because "brute force would decide the outcome" of wars anyway, so there was no need to "speak to deaf ears." Sartre, who was an advocate of politically engaged philosophy, "remained in a state of shock until the journey's end" (Carman and Hansen 2004, 344). This episode, however upsetting to Sartre, is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's belief that philosophy in the twentieth century was in a state of ruins and needed to be totally reconstructed. Thus, "when Merleau-Ponty is not thinking about politics, he sees philosophy working at its best, in a constant process of being rethought" (345). As I will show, this same debate between political engagement and apolitical contemplation played out between Nguyễn Văn Trung and Trần Thái Đinh as well.

Trần Thái Đinh was able to publish his article on Merleau-Ponty in *Đại học* because Nguyễn Văn Trung used *Đại học* as a forum for existential thought. This strategy brought the popularity of existential philosophy to a new height by the early 1960s. By this time, *Bách khoa* had also begun publishing extensively on existential philosophy. Increasingly, translations, editions, and commentaries began to appear on Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Camus, and existential philosophy expanded out of academic journals and began to play a major role in literature and music as well (Bùi 1962; Camus 1963; Thế 1967). The rest of this essay will analyze two possible explanations for this popularity of existential thought in Vietnam from the late 1950s to the early 1970s: a search for equivalency with the West, and the desire to generate a theory of an engaged third way between capitalism and communism.

Two Explanations for the Influence of Existentialism in South Vietnam

1. A Search for Equivalency

The first plausible explanation for the prevalence of existentialism in the culture of the Republic of Vietnam is that existential philosophy, through its perceived similarity to Buddhist philosophy, offered a point of comparison that allowed South Vietnamese to claim that they had a genuine "modern culture." Since Buddhism had been practiced in Vietnam for centuries and could be made to seem equivalent to existentialism, it might follow that Vietnamese had beaten cutting-edge French philosophers in adopting existential concepts by several hundred years.

In his classic work *Liang Ch'i Chao and the Mind of Modern China* (1951), Joseph R. Levenson argues that behind the many different positions of Chinese reformers and intellectuals in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was "a need for conviction of China's equivalence to the West." In practice, this need for equivalence often manifested itself through an embrace of Western critiques of imperialism or Western civilization, since "for them, the existence in the West of revolutionary ideas, critical of the very civilization that had impinged upon China, offered one way out" of the humiliation of having been colonized by a Western culture even in an era in which vague appeals to the essences of Chinese tradition had been discredited (Levenson 1951, 5–6). One way in which Liang found equivalency with the West during one phase of his life was by explaining modern Western thought through the mechanism that its main insights—republicanism, democracy, advances in science—could be found within Chinese traditional thought, so that Chinese culture could be said to have been thousands of years ahead of Western culture in its political development (2).

Could such a structure of configuration with the West be at work in the popularity of existential philosophy in South Vietnam? A glance at Bùi Giáng's previously analyzed efforts to find Martin Heidegger in *The Tale of Kiều* and at Nguyễn Văn Trung's view of the equivalency of Sartre and the *Tripitaka* on such key areas as nausea and *dukkha*, or being-in-itself and *samsara*, suggests that Levenson's analysis of nineteenth-century Vietnam might apply to Saigon or Huế in the late 1950s and early 1960s as well. Early works on existentialism certainly did usually explain existential themes in the context of Buddhism and the classics of Vietnamese literature.

Ultimately, however, this explanation is also not entirely satisfactory. At one level, it seems that there is a difference of degree between turn-of-the-century Chinese intellectuals and intellectuals in South Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s. While existential themes were often introduced in comparison with Buddhist or Vietnamese literary themes, by no means was this exclusively the case. Trần Thái Đỉnh, for example, almost always explained existential philosophy in its own European context, without reference to its role in Vietnamese politics or its potential contributions to Vietnamese literature (Trần Thái Đỉnh 1969a). Additionally, the comparison between existentialism and ideas already immanent in Vietnamese culture could have a more banal explanation: when introducing new and potentially familiar ideas, it seems inevitable that authors would explain these ideas in ways that were familiar to their audience.

Also, Levenson's explanation is premised on the idea that Chinese intellectuals were attempting to respond nationalistically to the humiliation of having been dominated by Western powers. But such a defensive cultural nationalism does not seem to characterize most Vietnamese intellectuals who contributed to such journals as *Đại học* or *Bách khoa*. On the contrary, from their foundation, both journals expressed a desire to contribute to the development of the nation in South Vietnam through creating an eclectic and cosmopolitan culture that embraced new ideas, rather than working them into a rubric of existing traditional culture. Indeed, *Bách khoa*'s explicit embracing of internationalist humanism in its original mission statement seems to suggest something very different than a reactionary need of Vietnamese intellectuals to prove their national worth.

2. The Applicability of Existentialism to South Vietnamese Politics

The most satisfying explanation for why existentialism rose to such prominence in South Vietnamese thought is that existential philosophy could be applied in relevant ways as an explanation for the politics and current affairs of South Vietnam. To say this is not to imply that a group of philosophers associated with a term as vague as "existentialism" had only one political theory, or had a theory related to politics at all. In fact, in 1967 and 1968, the two leading figures in South Vietnamese existentialism, Nguyễn Văn Trung and Trần Thái Đỉnh, had a very public debate on the question of existentialism and politics, one that strangely mirrored the same debate between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, the philosophers that each admired the most.

In the June 15, 1967, issue of *Bách khoa*, Nguyễn Văn Trung published a brief review of Đỉnh's recently published *Existential Philosophy* (Nguyễn Văn Trung 1967; Trần Thái Đỉnh 1967). While the review was generally favorable of the work as a general introduction to existentialism, Trung did make several key criticisms. In particular, Trung argued that the book did "not discuss the interrelation of existentialism and Marxism in Sartrean philosophy." To Trung, this was an important point because it distorted Sartre's political roots: "moreover, this book also does not deal with a very important topic and also a very special point concerning the originality of the existentialist movement, especially where it concerns the philosophy of Sartre: and that is that they are works of *political philosophy*" (Nguyễn Van Trung 1967, 81; Trần Thái Đỉnh 1968b, 9; emphasis in original). In another article in the journal *Đất nước* (Homeland) in 1967, Trung argued that apolitical approaches to existentialism "distorted existentialist philosophy in order to separate it out from the theory and practice of politics upon which it was founded" (Trần Thái Đỉnh 1968a, 9).

In response, Đỉnh argued that it was Trung who was distorting existentialism, by focusing narrowly on one aspect of the philosophy of one existentialist figure, Jean-Paul Sartre:

> Writing in response to this line of thinking, I will present my view of whether I have distorted Sartre or not, and at the same time I hope that Professor Trung will come to understand why I do not present information on political issues regarding Sartrean philosophy. The Professor says that politics were the foundational principle of existentialist philosophy, in particular of Sartre's philosophy. I think that this is not correct: of the four philosophers I present in this book, I found that only Sartre wrote about and was involved in political action. Heidegger did not. Jaspers did not. And Marcel also did not, even though he did write an essay while in school on the nature of war. Saying this does not mean that Heidegger, Jaspers, and Marcel did not have a political theory. It is merely to say that it is impossible to know clearly their political point of view, and in any case their philosophies do not discuss present social issues, especially not the details of current politics. Their philosophies fall into the category of humanism, of helping people interested in problems of consciousness, of understanding their own worth and fate as well as that of humanity: that is their philosophy. For human consciousness, surely, raises itself up to defend itself against cruelty, even under formal conditions of war, even under conditions of social repression. (Trần Thái Đỉnh 1968b, 9)

Đinh seems to be arguing that while existential philosophy inevitably has political implications, that does not imply that those implications are at the center of its philosophy. He also understands humanistic and political philosophies as having fundamentally different ends: humanistic philosophies attempt to help the individual with personal or psychological issues, Đinh implies, while political philosophies, such as that offered by Marxist theory, focus on collective, rather than individual, problems (Trần Thái Đinh 1968b, 9).

While insisting that he "cannot engage in a debate with Father Trần Thái Đinh," Trung nevertheless implicitly responds with a biographical essay on his intellectual relationship with Sartre that appeared as a serial in several volumes of *Bách khoa* in 1968. Throughout this essay, entitled "Sartre in My Life," Trung emphasizes that for Sartre, philosophy is useless unless it can respond to the present context, so that "there is no such thing as a general context, an indeterminate context, or an atemporal context. There is only the context of *my* era, of *my* country, of politics, *of the now, at this time and on this day*" (Nguyễn Van Trung 1968b, 117; emphasis in original). Faced with this realization, Trung argues, Sartre will only be useful to Vietnamese intellectuals if they are able "to apply his thought to the position of our own era, our own people, our own politics, right here and right now" (117).

Applying Sartre's political life to the politics of South Vietnam was not difficult for Trung, since Sartre frequently commented on at least two issues of relevance to South Vietnamese politics in the 1950s and 1960s, namely communism and the role of the Catholic church in politics. As for the first, Trung embraced Sartre's own fractured relationship with communism as an inspiration for his own political views. Throughout his life, Sartre tried to reconcile his ideas about free will with Marxist theory, and his hesitancy about the possibility of having free will within a communist movement caused him to avoid ever joining a communist party. In Trung's hands, Sartre's position on the problems of organized communism becomes something that looks more like an anticommunist critique: "There can be no such thing as a communist intellectual, because the proper role of intellectuals in any society consists of participating in freedom of thought, and not in following the instructions and orders of a communist party" (Nguyễn Van Trung 1968a, 24).

For a follower of Sartre's political thought, it would be wrong to "fight against communism," because doing so would foreclose the possibility of a future revolution of workers, but it would also be wrong to participate in doctrinal communism, since doing so would foreclose the possibility of freedom of thought (Nguyễn Van Trung 1968a, 24). The ultimate implication of this point of view is that followers of Sartre should be engaged in a critique of both the doctrinal power of the communist party and of the brutality with which anticommunist regimes repress communism. Nguyễn Văn Trung's brand of soft anticommunism, in which communism itself is seen as potentially laudable but doctrinal communism is to be mistrusted, was laid out in great detail in the pages of the journal *Hành trình*. After moving from Huế to Saigon, Trung started this journal, which laid out his left-leaning, anti-Diệm, somewhat anticommunist political philosophy, in 1964. The journal published nine issues before ceasing publication late in 1965.

Trung argues that Sartre's critique of religious ideology puts him in a superior position to Christian phenomenologists, such as Gabriel Marcel and Emmanuel Mounier. Though Sartre had great respect for Mounier, Trung tells us, Mounier's philosophy is still flawed in the sense that it prevents the kind of religious skepticism that allows freedom of thought. As a partisan of the Catholic Church, Mounier could not endorse

such freedom. This skepticism of being a partisan of any ideology, Trung argues, is what led Sartre to decline the Nobel Prize for Literature. Such a noncommittal position allows Sartre to act as an engaged intellectual "in the here and now," stepping in to defend humanity in the face of cruelty, destruction, and bad faith (Nguyễn Van Trung 1968a, 28).

Trung's point of view about Catholicism and Mounier corresponds with Trung's own political position. While an admirer of many of Emmanuel Mounier's concepts, including personalism, Trung detested Ngô Đình Diệm, whom he met at the University of Louvain in 1954 and who made a negative impression on Vietnamese students at Louvain by launching into a long and rambling monologue. Trung reports that Diệm became very upset when students would ask him questions about current affairs that he could not answer (Nguyễn Van Trung 1968a, 121).

At first glance, Trung and Đinh's positions on existentialism and politics seem irreconcilable, particularly since Đinh, as a priest, was in the kind of partisan position that Trung criticizes. But in fact Trung and Đinh's positions, like the positions of their intellectual mentors Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, are not as far apart as they originally appear. In Đinh's humanist philosophical ideal, the philosopher's job is to contemplate and explain the world from a position that is detached from politics. Any political implications that can be imputed from such detached philosophical work are ancillary to the process of personal and individual social analysis. Trung's philosophical world, like Sartre's, is a world in which the philosopher, due to his or her position as a defender of free will and freedom of thought outside of systems of ideological domination, can act as a fly on the wall, criticizing the cruelty of power from a position of individual autonomy and freedom.

What these two share in common is a rejection of the idea of a commitment to any one particular ideological formation. When Vietnamese intellectuals interpreted Sartre's existentialism as a political theory, as Nguyễn Văn Trung did, this allowed them to critique the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as an example of doctrinal Marxism's inability to grant intellectuals free will. At the same time, through this interpretation, they could critique American policies of escalation in Vietnam as being imperialist—as Sartre himself did. Through the lens of Sartre's existentialism, it was possible for Trung to criticize *both* the north *and* the Americans for fighting an imperialist war (Nguyễn Van Trung 1965, 4). From this vantage point, it was even possible for Trung to argue that "the issue is not whether the North should win or the South should win, but whether the Vietnamese people will win, whether the Vietnamese nation will win" (21). In short, Sartre allowed Trung, and those "bastard children" who followed him, to carve out a political position that could criticize both the Americans and the north, both communism and capitalism, both Ngô Đình Diệm and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, and still be politically and socially feasible.

Upon close analysis, the more detached phenomenology of Trần Thái Đinh, while seemingly opposed to Trung's politically active existentialism, actually accomplishes the same goal. By arguing that intellectuals should remain above the fray of contemporary politics, Đinh fights against the imposition of ideologies upon South Vietnamese intellectuals. Whereas Trung uses his political writings to criticize doctrinal communism, or the American army, or the Diệm regime as part of a politically engaged existentialism, Đinh stays above the fray of these developments by simply ignoring them and focusing on helping people with their personal, moral, and psychological development.

But these two different approaches arguably have the same effect: they refuse the effort on the part of all sides to define the lives of Southern Vietnamese ideologically,

to force loyalty to labels like "communist" or "Buddhist" or "Catholic" or "anticommunist." Existentialism's resistance to simple political labels may well be its main contribution to the development of intellectual culture in the Republic of Vietnam.

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