

A Philosopher's Collection or, A Collector's Philosophy

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In high school I had a friend whose mother was a hoarder (I hear she is better now). Everything was sentimental, nothing fit for the trash. Magazines upon magazines adorned every nook and cranny of their already rather cramped apartment. By our senior year, one could take nary a free step without hearing the crunch of paper underfoot. One might imagine my friend's displeasure with his mother's "collection."

When my own mother resolved in her early twenties to depart China, one of her professors begged her to stay. Upon realizing that she could not be dissuaded, he gifted her a number of books from his own collection. These now sit in a sealed bookshelf in her study.

What do our mothers have in common? A collection, perhaps. But also this: neither is a *collector*. Why do I say this? What is a collector if not one with a collection?

In some ways, I think you, dear collector, already know why. Contest Rules (2): "Materials must be owned by one student and must have been collected by the student. In the case of inheritance of materials, the collection must have been augmented by the student." With this, my mother is disqualified. Collection Guidelines: "A collection should reflect a clearly defined unifying theme or interest." My friend's mother fares no better.

But most of all what interests me is this: Submission Requirements (3): "Wish list of materials to be added to the collection (5 item maximum)." Why a wish list and not a list of favorites, say? The answer comes: because *herein* lies the essence of the collector. A collector is one who is essentially lacking.

Ask a collector how many items compose his collection, which his favorite is, or even why it is that he began collecting in the first place and one will find very often that the collector can give no satisfying answers to these questions. "About 50 in my collection, give or take. I suppose my favorite would be this one. I don't actually quite remember when I got my first one of these." But not a collector in the world cannot tell you what he might like to add to his collection. "I am missing such-and-such. That would look perfect next this. Thus-and-so is what I'd like to have most of all." Balisong collectors call this thus-and-so the grail. I've always thought that rather poetic.

One ordinarily thinks of collecting as building something up. But this is not how the collector sees himself. Collecting is essentially a *negative* project. It

is forward-looking, future-oriented. With each addition, a collector culls one of his lacks. He needs *this*. But to need this just is to be presently lacking in this. And there can be no cure for this lack save for the acquisition of that which one is lacking—for the acquisition of *this*.

(A hoarder is merely he who cannot throw away what he should. One is inclined to say that he is lacking too little.)

Now book collecting is a rather strange form of collecting. This is again a point with which I'm sure you're intimately familiar—Collection Guidelines: "The collection does not need to consist of rare books." There are stamp collectors, trading card collectors, even stuffed animal collectors. But these collectors collect collectible things—they collect collectibles. There is a rarest trading card, a most expensive stamp, and so on and so forth. And while there are certainly rare books and expensive books and men who collect rare and expensive books, a book collector, it is plain to see, is not a *rare* book collector. What the book collector lacks is not determined by exteriorities. *He is essentially lacking in himself.*

The book which began my collection is one not actually in my collection: Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*. How it is that this book ranked in my middle school library's database as of comparable difficulty to *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, I am afraid I will never know. But what I do know is that the summer before my seventh grade I slogged meticulously through the book chapter by chapter and day by day so that I would not fail my summer reading assignment. I will not say that I understood a single page. But I did understand that I did not understand a single page, and this was a very strange thing for a middle schooler to come to understand. For it is one thing not to understand a page of maths which one has not yet learned and quite another not to understand a page of words each of which one knows like the back of his hand. That summer, I found myself lacking.

In a tribute to the late Stanley Cavell, Duke professor Toril Moi writes, "I was not a philosopher. I didn't plan to become one either. I just wanted to think forcefully and clearly about things that matter to me." If these are not a philosopher's words, then there never were any philosophers to begin with. Man is lacking in himself, and man will be lacking until he is no longer here of this Earth. But this is just to say that he is man. There is always a last stamp, a last card, a last stuffed animal. Those are collections which can be completed. But one never really completes himself, and so there never can be a last book. A completed book collection is no book collection at all.

But for all this a collector cannot always be lacking in quite the same things. For if a collector is he who is essentially lacking, then to always lack in quite the same things is to have collected nothing. My collection is a collection of philosophy. It is a search for those men who have at one point or another been lacking in the same things as I. But then it is but a collection of myself. And that the collection moves from theme to disparate theme reflects nothing more than the fact that I have not always found myself lacking in the same things. In life, in reason, in right, in language, and in world—these are the lacks which have defined my collection.

1 Annotated Bibliography

1.1 In Life: Existentialism

1. Bakewell, Sarah. *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails*. Other Press, 2017.

With *At the Existentialist Café*, Bakewell joins the ranks of those few authors capable of telling a story of philosophy (and not just a philosophical story or worse yet, a story *about* philosophy). Deftly weaving together the lives and philosophies of eleven existentialists, the book explores existentialism not as branch or inquiry but as movement and tradition.

2. De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage, 2011.

One does a disservice to *The Second Sex* in speaking of it merely as a masterpiece in feminist literature. *The Second Sex* is an exploration of what it means to be Other—that is, of what it means to be-in-the-world *simpliciter* (one recalls here Heidegger’s asserveration that *Dasein* is essentially *Mitsein*). Toril Moi acknowledges de Beauvoir as one of her three “tutelary spirits.” She has been credited with reviving interest in de Beauvoir in modern academia. I have her excellent taste to thank for much of the literature on life and language in my collection.

3. Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. Grove Press, 2012.
4. Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Translated by Matthew Ward, Vintage International, 1989.
5. Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground*. Edited by Michael R. Katz, W. W. Norton Company, 2001.
6. Ibsen, Henrik. *Four Major Plays*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
7. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Nausea*. Translated by Lloyd Alexander, New Directions, 2013.

As Bakewell acknowledges, one misunderstands existentialism if one considers it analogous to epistemology or metaphysics, say—that is, if one forgets that it is not just a field but a tradition. Then one is inclined to interpret existentialist fiction as fiction which embodies an existentialist philosophy as opposed to fiction which *is* existentialist philosophy in its own right. Fiction is an essential outlet for existentialist thinking.

Waiting for Godot is the quintessential exercise in simplicity—a handful of characters and even fewer scenes paint an entire picture of life. *The Stranger* recounts the tale of a man who has failed to be-in-the-world-with-others. “Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know”—his every word drips with intense dispassion (what an oxymoron!). I read this, as most people did, sometime in high school. And while it is a young

man's read, I wish I had benefited from the scaffolding of *The Myth of Sisyphus* first. The narrator of *Notes from Underground* is a vile man. He is plagued by a superiority and inferiority complex simultaneously. And yet one cannot help but find bits of himself in Dostoyevsky's "underground man." Ibsen's *Four Major Plays* counts among them *Hedda Gabler*, one of the few works of existentialist fiction to possess a female protagonist. There is a universality at play in the titular Hedda, a romantic and an idealist who finds herself anachronistic in the trappings of modern society. Lastly, Sartre's *Nausea* tells the story of a man beset by a nausea which rises up from within the world itself. Sartre's nausea, Camus's absurd, and Heidegger's anxiety throw in sharp relief existentialism qua tradition—in the evolution of these concepts, one finds a conversation at play.

8. Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Translated by Justin O'Brien, Vintage International, 2018.

9. Rhein, Phillip H. *Albert Camus*. Twayne Publishers, 1989.

For a long time, *The Myth of Sisyphus* was my recommendation for those looking for a gateway into existentialism. Camus always maintained that he was an author and not a philosopher. And accordingly what *The Myth of Sisyphus* lacks in strict philosophical rigor it more than makes up for in extravagant lyricism. Camus concludes that the solution to the absurd is not suicide but revolt. The word is well chosen. One wants to scream upon finishing the essay. Rhein's *Albert Camus* was an opportunistic pickup I rescued from my school's trash. There is no existentialism without the existentialist.

10. Cioran, E. M. *A Short History of Decay*. Translated by Richard Howard, Arcade, 2012.
11. Cioran, E. M. *The Trouble with Being Born*. Translated by Richard Howard, Arcade, 2012.
12. Cioran, Emil. *On the Heights of Despair*. Translated by Irinca Zarifopol-Johnston, The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

It is a shame that Cioran has not enjoyed popularity of the likes of Camus or Sartre in the States. A Romanian writer plagued all his life by a crippling insomnia, Cioran is second perhaps only to Nietzsche (and that is a strong perhaps) in his grasp of the aphorism: "Sometimes I wish I were a cannibal—less for the pleasure of eating someone than for the pleasure of vomiting him" (*The Trouble with Being Born*). In the sheer nakedness of his expression, Cioran brings one face to face with the experience of being thrown into the world—whether one would like to be here or not.

13. Cutter, Mary Ann G. *Death: A Reader*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2019.

Death features prominently in the existentialist tradition. Heidegger said famously that authentic living was being-toward-death. Beauvoir and Sartre emphasized the finitude of man. Pulling sources from philosophy to gerontology and the Western canon to classical Asia, *Death: A Reader*, is a fascinating and multi-disciplinary exploration of one of the two certainties in life: the end of man.

14. Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling*. Edited by C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Kierkegaard is often called the first existentialist or the father of existentialism. Accordingly, one finds *Fear and Trembling* cited in almost every work of existentialist literature thereafter. I am not truly a religious man, and neither, Kierkegaard argues, are you. For our notion of faith has been at once cheapened and degraded. To have genuine faith à la Abraham is to become paradox.

15. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Translated by Carol Macomber, Yale University Press, 2007.

One makes a knife because one has something which one would like to cut. Its essence precedes its existence. *Existentialism Is a Humanism* explores the peculiar being of human beings, beings for whom existence precedes essence. Though Sartre was later dissatisfied with the work, the brevity and accessibility of *Existentialism Is a Humanism* explains its longevity. It was many's—and my—introduction to Sartre's thought.

16. Thacker, Eugene. *Cosmic Pessimism*. Univocal Publishing, 2015.

This is the quaintest book in my collection. A small, black tome of aphorisms, *Cosmic Pessimism* is unassuming in its pocket-sized veneer. I first borrowed this book on a whim to pass the time. A few pages in, I offered to buy it from my friend at once. I carry it with me everywhere I go.

1.2 In Reason: Epistemology, Philosophy of Mind, and Philosophy of Science

1. Beardsley, Monroe C. *The European Philosophers from Descartes to Nietzsche*. Modern Library, 2002.

For one reason or another, there are always old and unread philosophy books on the verge of being thrown out at every library I come across. I try to rescue these wherever I can. *The European Philosophers from Descartes to Nietzsche* is one such save. One can never go wrong with primary anthologies.

2. Feldman, Richard. *Epistemology*. Pearson, 2003.

Feldman's *Epistemology* was assigned to me by my research mentor, Benjamin Eva. I have him and his class to thank for igniting my love for

epistemology, a discipline I once thought to be the driest of all fields. I have mixed feelings about *Epistemology* itself. It is accessible to a fault, an exceptionally welcoming read whose rigor suffers for it.

3. Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. The University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Toril Moi introduced me to this book. One would never think to incorporate a work titled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* into a class on Wittgenstein and literary criticism, but one is not Toril Moi. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn provides a radically new conception of the way in which science progresses, not by moving towards “the truth” but rather by abandoning and adopting various paradigms (the book is in fact responsible for the popularity of the phrase, “paradigm shift”).

4. Ludlow, Peter, et al., editors. *There’s Something About Mary: Essays on Phenomenal Consciousness and Frank Jackson’s Knowledge Argument*. The MIT Press, 2004.

This book was a grail of mine. While I was searching for it I had developed something of a strange obsession with hardcover books, and hardcover versions of this collection had long since gone out of print. I used up a year’s worth of luck to find a used book seller on eBay offering an old library copy for only five dollars. *There’s Something About Mary: Essays on Phenomenal Consciousness and Frank Jackson’s Knowledge Argument* is exactly what it says on the cover: an excellent anthology of responses to Frank Jackson’s knowledge argument.

5. Plato. *Plato: Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, Hackett Publishing Co., 1997.

I’ve never cared much for the Greeks. But one cannot erect a building without a foundation, and so even I own a copy of Plato. I will say that there is something particularly fun about reading dialogues.

1.3 In Right: Ethics, Political Philosophy, and Philosophy of Law

1. Benatar, David. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

For beings who spend so much time thinking about death, I’ve always found it strange that little to no attention has been given to birth. Benatar’s *Better Never to Have Been* is one of the few serious philosophical attempts to argue for antinatalism, the position that having children is unethical. His argument hinges on what he believes to be a crucial asymmetry between pleasure and pain: the absence of pain is good even if there is no one around to enjoy it, but the absence of pleasure is just neutral.

2. De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Translated by Bernard Frechtman, Open Road Media, 2018.

In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir writes that no work is without its own ethical background. *The Ethics of Ambiguity* constitutes her own attempt to reconcile an ethics with an existentialism à la *Being and Nothingness*.

3. Fautrot, Jean H. *The Philosopher and the State: From Hooker to Popper*. Chandler Pub. Co, 1971.
4. Hart., H. L. A. *The Concept of Law*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
5. Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*. Translated by Harvey Claflin Mansfield, The University of Chicago Press, 2006.

In the summer before my junior year, I worked on a paper on legal epistemology (and more specifically statistical evidence). This marked the conclusion of a brief flirtation with the philosophy of law. Fautrot's *The Philosopher and the State: From Hooker to Popper* is another anthology saved alongside Beardsley's *The European Philosophers from Descartes to Nietzsche*. Hart's *The Concept of Law* is a classic in legal positivism—the view that there is no intrinsic connection between law and morality. I traded a second copy of Plato to a friend for *The Prince*, a brutal political treatise.

6. Frenzel, Ivo. *Friedrich Nietzsche in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*. Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995.

Also in the summer before my junior year, I studied abroad in Berlin. I regard this summer as the best of my life. At the close of my studies, my German professor gifted me a number of books from her own personal collection. I can just barely read them (with copious help from a dictionary).

7. Ivanhoe, Philip J., and Bryan W. Van Norden. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Hackett Publishing Company, 2007.

Analytic philosophy has long suffered from an exceptional Eurocentricity. This book and a corresponding course in comparative ethics marked the first of my attempts to branch out into non-canon literature. I was astounded to find a sect of utilitarians centuries before the likes of Mill and Bentham in the Mohists. And Laozi and Zhuangzi formed a particularly interesting fruitful for my later studies of Heidegger and the American pragmatists. I never particularly cared for Confucius.

8. Kant, Immanuel. *Grundlegung Zur Metaphysik Der Sitten*. Reclam Verlag, 1986.

I found this in a small bookstore in Hamburg. With this, Kant kicks off a whole field of ethics, a field to which I have always been particularly sympathetic: deontology. It is safe to say that Kant is no easier to read in German than in English.

9. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Edited by Robert C. Holub. Translated by Michael A. Scarpitti, Penguin Classics, 2013.
10. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann, Vintage, 1974.

I am happy to report that about a decade later, Nietzsche has become (at least somewhat) understandable. *On the Genealogy of Morals* is as much a philological work as it is a philosophical one. It traces the history of modern Christian morality. *The Gay Science* was found in tatters on the floor of one of Duke's common rooms. It is a diverse work which contains the first formulations of both Nietzsche's eternal recurrence and his oh so famous "God is dead."

11. Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation*. Harper Perennial, 2009.

I have always thought it my greatest fault that I am not a vegetarian. *Animal Liberation* is a lucid utilitarian analysis of animal rights, and we have it to thank for the term, "speciesism." I have always greatly respected Singer (in part for practicing what he preaches), but I have never been sympathetic to utilitarianism of any kind.

12. Voltaire. *Candide*. Translated by Lowell Bair, Bantam Classic, 2003.

Voltaire's *Candide* tells the story of the disillusionment of a young man who leaves paradise. It closes with an exhortation to cultivate one's own garden. This theme is attacked by Beauvoir for being empty in "Pyrrhus and Cineas."

1.4 In Language: Logic, Philosophy of Language, and Ordinary Language Philosophy

1. Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Edited by James O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, Harvard University Press, 2009.

The line between linguistics and the philosophy of language is exceedingly blurry. Austin's theory of speech acts, first presented in *How to Do Things with Words*, is proof of this point. What is the distinction between saying and doing? Nothing—to speak just is to do. One cannot overstate the influence of this idea.

2. Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge University Press, 2015.
3. Cavell, Stanley. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Cavell was without a doubt the most original ordinary language philosopher after Wittgenstein himself. In his works, the notions of forms of life, criteria, skepticism, faith, and language are taken apart and explored

from every direction. I am told that Cavell was something of a mentor to Professor Moi (I am jealous). One certainly sees his influence in the sorts of works she assigns.

4. Malcolm, Norman. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*. New York, 2001.
5. Monk, Ray. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. Penguin Books, 2005.

Biographies of genius have always been a guilty pleasure of mine. I have seen almost every “genius movie” one can imagine. Of these biographies, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* and *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* are without a doubt the best I have ever had the pleasure of consuming. Malcolm was one of the only friends Wittgenstein ever made. I found his book, which includes a collection of letters from Wittgenstein himself, high up in an antique bookstore in Manhattan. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* is a masterpiece in biography. I have never read through 704 pages so quickly.

6. Moi, Toril. *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell*. The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Toril Moi was a literary critic before she was a philosopher. And so she brings to philosophy an exceptionally peculiar point of view. In one semester, I took a course with her on Wittgenstein and another with Kevin Hoover on American pragmatism. I have never experienced such an upheaval in thought. *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* is the sort of book one would expect Moi to write: an intricate interplay between the best of ordinary language philosophy and literary criticism alike.

7. Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung*. Suhrkamp Verlag, 2016.
8. Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe et al., Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

It is not a very original take, but Wittgenstein is probably my favorite philosopher. One finds him senseless until all at once his words strike one and become clear, and then one cannot remember how it is that one ever disagreed with them in the first place. There is a strange sense of amnesia that sets in—problems which once beguiled fall to pieces.

Wittgenstein has written only two books. The first, my friend gifted me in Berlin. Its terse style lends itself to German practice, although it is impenetrable content-wise. The second is without a doubt one of the greatest books I have ever read. I can never recommend it enough. Interestingly, it is a complete repudiation of the first.

1.5 In World: Metaphysics

1. Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Writings*. Edited by David Farrell Krell, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008.

2. Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh, State University of New York Press, 2010.

Heidegger was shocking departure from the sorts of ontology one finds in the West. While my metaphysics professor, Peter van Inwagen, is busy arguing that chairs do not exist, Heidegger exhorts the importance of taking the beings we encounter seriously. We have forgotten the question of being he says, and there can be no philosophy unless we retrieve it.

3. Kant, Immanuel. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Edited by Gary Hatfield, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

It is received wisdom to read this before Kant's *Critique of Pure Wisdom*. I think of it as the *Existentialism Is a Humanism* to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*.

4. Kripke, Saul. *Naming and Necessity*. Blackwell Publishing, 2016.

I was in class when I first learned of Kripke's death. I shot out of my seat (my apologies to the professor). If anyone merited the title of genius, Kripke was a good bet. By my age, he had already established himself in philosophy with a complete semantics for modal logic. *Naming and Necessity*, his magnum opus, revived metaphysics in the West

5. Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation: Volume I*. Translated by E. F. J. Payne, Dover Publications, 1969.

6. Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation: Volume II*. Translated by E. F. J. Payne, Dover Publications, 1966.

Schopenhauer was the first philosopher to catch my eye after Nietzsche. I recall long subway rides hunched over these two tomes. I don't know if I ever managed to read more than five pages an hour. Schopenhauer was one of the first Western philosophers to seriously incorporate Eastern thought—one finds obvious traces of Buddhist philosophy in his declaration that the nature of all things was will.

7. Schultz, Uwe. *Immanuel Kant in Selbstzeugnissen Und Bilddokumenten*. Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2001.

This is the companion to *Friedrich Nietzsche in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* above.

8. Sider, Theodore, et al., editors. *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

I think all philosophy "textbooks" ought to be written like this, as a series of real debates between contemporary thinkers.

2 Wish List

1. Inwagen, Peter Van. *Material Beings*. Cornell University Press, 2007.
2. Kripke, Saul A. *Reference and Existence*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
3. Lewis, David. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Blackwell Publishers, 2013.
4. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Walter Arnold Kaufmann, Vintage, 2011.
5. Sider, Theodore. *Logic for Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, 2010.