



G A R Y . C O X

# The Existentialist's Guide

To Death,  
the Universe and  
Nothingness

B L O O M S B U R Y

**'Here the author of *How to Be an Existentialist* delivers a crunchier, more technical reading of the views of Sartre, Beauvoir, Heidegger and others on freedom, contingency, embarrassment, death and sex. Cox leads the reader well through vivid examples...' THE GUARDIAN**

*The Existentialist's Guide* is an entertaining philosophical roadmap to life, love, hate, freedom, sex, anxiety, God and death; a handbook of everything and nothing. Gary Cox, bestselling author of *How to Be an Existentialist* and *How to Be a Philosopher*, takes us on an exciting journey through the central themes of existentialism, a philosophy of the human condition. *The Existentialist's Guide* fascinates, informs, provokes and inspires as it explores existentialism's uncompromising view of human reality. It leaves the reader with no illusions about how hard it is to live honestly and achieve authenticity. It has, however, a redeeming humour that sets the wisdom of the great existentialist philosophers alongside the wit of great musicians and comedians. A realistic self-help book for anyone interested in personal empowerment, *The Existentialist's Guide* offers a wealth of profound philosophical insight into life, the universe and everything.

**GARY COX** has a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Birmingham, UK, where he is also an Honorary Research Fellow. He is author of *The Sartre Dictionary* (2008), *Sartre and Fiction* (2009), *Sartre: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2006), *How to Be an Existentialist* (2009), *How to Be a Philosopher* (2010), *The God Confusion* (2013), *Deep Thought* (2015) and *Existentialism and Excess: The Life and Times of Jean-Paul Sartre* (2016) all published by Bloomsbury.

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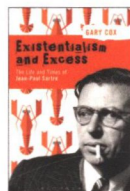
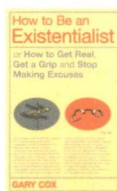
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**Gary Cox**

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**Also available from Bloomsbury and Gary Cox:**

*Deep Thought*, Gary Cox

*Existentialism and Excess*, Gary Cox

*How to Be a Philosopher*, Gary Cox

*How to Be an Existentialist*, Gary Cox

*The God Confusion*, Gary Cox

*The Sartre Dictionary*, Gary Cox

*Sartre: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Gary Cox

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# Introduction

I've long been a fan of Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, his fabulous guide to 'life, the universe and everything'. His unique blend of humour, science fiction and philosophy had a big influence on me as a youngster back in the 1980s and certainly helped inspire me to go ahead and study philosophy at university.

If I've got anywhere nearer to answering a central question that Adams poses – 'Why are people born? Why do they die? Why do they want to spend so much of the intervening time wearing digital watches?' (*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, p. 119) – it is only to say that ultimately there is probably no reason for any of it. Adams' conclusion that forty-two is the 'answer' to the question, 'What is the meaning of life, the universe and everything?', aims to illustrate that there is really no satisfactory answer and that the problem lies in the question itself. Un-ask the question, as the Buddhists say.

Existentialists tend to argue that life only has the meaning each individual person chooses to give it. Thinking about the existentialists' response to Adams' question and how many of Adams' profound thoughts existentialists would identify with generally, started me thinking what an *existentialist's* guide to life, the universe and everything would be like. What ideas and themes would existentialists include in a guide aimed at the would-be existentialist wanting to hitchhike around the universe of existentialism?

Well, in such a guide there wouldn't be a lot of talk about space travel. Existentialists are very grounded creatures, not least in the sense of being preoccupied with down to earth human life, experience and interaction as lived and suffered in the urban environment. Still, what the existentialists say about the human condition would also apply to any aliens on other planets if, like us, those aliens were organic, embodied, conscious, intelligent, social and mortal.

The existentialists' view of human life is very much coloured by their view of mortality, their view that to be human is to be a *being-towards-death* engaged in an unavoidably finite life project. This is not morbidity on the part of existentialists, simply honesty and a no-nonsense approach to the so-called *fundamental existential truths of the human condition*. Their preoccupation with death as a fundamental truth would lead them, I think, to place 'death' as opposed to 'life' in the very title of their guide, just to remind people where existentialism is coming from philosophically and where we are all ultimately heading existentially.

Similarly, they would want to refer to 'nothingness' rather than 'everything' in the title of their guide because of the monumental role the phenomenon of nothingness plays in the existentialist world-view generally. As this guide explains, nothingness for existentialists is the basis of consciousness, and it is only when the negating power of consciousness arises that the universe gets carved up into the distinct phenomena that we experience. For existentialists, nothingness does not lie beyond the end of the universe. It is what each of us is – a nothingness in relation to being, endlessly striving to be at one with itself and the world. If you found this paragraph confusing yet strangely intriguing then this guide is definitely for you.

*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* famously warns its readers: 'Don't panic!' Existentialists certainly recognise the importance of not panicking when confronting life's many difficulties. Like Adams, they recommend facing up to reality with positive and decisive choices and actions. They might above all else, however, prefer to warn people: 'Don't despair!'

Even though life is ultimately absurd and pointless – anyone who doesn't see this is trying to live in a fairy tale – it is still possible to give life relative meaning and value by facing every challenge with courage and dignity and striving to achieve realistic goals. To set unrealistic goals is to try to live the fairy tale, it is to hanker after impossibilities like total happiness and complete fulfilment. The existentialists argue that if you want to be happy, or at least be happier, give up struggling for total happiness as that path inevitably leads to frustration and disappointment.

This guide explores a fascinating range of interrelated themes central to the philosophy of existentialism, from time, death and nothingness to love, hate and sexual desire. But a word of warning! This guide is full of tough, uncompromising existential truths about the human condition that some people will find physically, emotionally and philosophically disturbing. Existentialists are like everyone else – free, responsible, mortal, abandoned – the only difference is existentialists know it, don't try to deny it and strive to make the most of it. Welcome to the existentialists' hard-edged world-view. Can you handle it? Can you get real?

It is important to stress that this book is a *guide* to existentialism for people who may or may not be aspiring existentialists. It is not a rule book, a book of existentialist law saying existentialists must think this and do that – wear certain clothes, eat certain foods, perform certain rituals and mumble certain words. As the guide itself shows, existentialism is not about laying down the law like some fool religion designed for sheep. It is all about encouraging people to tune into their inalienable *freedom* and to think and act for themselves. Above all, it is about encouraging people to take personal *responsibility* for their choices rather than blaming the decisions they make and the actions they take on rules or the system or society or other people or the great wide indifferent universe generally.

You can dip into this guide or read it from cover to cover. I'm confident that either way you will get a huge amount out of it and will forevermore be the centre of attention at parties when the subject of

existentialism crops up. If you don't go to the sort of parties where the subject of existentialism crops up then perhaps you are going to the wrong sort of parties. Wrong parties, right parties, it's all a matter of taste and personal choice, a matter of the value you yourself place on things.

You can certainly use this guide as a good, old-fashioned reference book, consulting it whenever you feel the need. Perhaps at difficult or special times and crucial crossroads in your life. At any time when you find yourself moved to ponder what it is existentialists tend to believe about freedom, anxiety, childhood, authenticity, indifference, sadomasochism, absurdity or God.

How you use this guide is of course your choice, as any existentialist worth his or her salt will tell you. Choose to use this guide for information and inspiration or choose to use it as a door wedge. Choose, if you must, to use it as a little rule book bible. However you use it, whatever you do, it's your doing, your existential choice, your responsibility, and no real business or concern of mine.

# 1 Existentialists and Existentialism

'What about you, madame?' he inquired. 'Are *you* an existentialist?' I can still recall my embarrassment at this question. (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 547)

An existentialist is a person whose work and ideas contribute to existentialism, or anyone who broadly subscribes to the theories and outlook of existentialism and attempts to live and die according to its principles. So, to understand what an *existentialist* is you need to understand what *existentialism* is. I'll explain what existentialism is shortly. Meanwhile, it is fair to say that to be a true existentialist a person has to know a fair amount about the philosophy and outlook of existentialism, more or less believe in existentialism rather than dismiss it as drivel and, above all, continually strive to live according to existentialism. She has to walk the walk of existentialism, not just talk the talk. She must continually strive to achieve what existentialist philosophers call *authenticity*.

Authenticity is the holy grail of existentialism, the great existentialist aspiration or ideal. Very simply, authenticity involves continually living according to the realisation that you are not a fixed entity like a rock or a table, defined entirely by circumstances, but a free being responsible for your choices. To live as though you are a fixed entity is what existentialist philosophers call *bad faith*. Bad faith is using freedom against itself by choosing not to choose, relinquishing responsibility and blaming other people and circumstances for the way you are and what you



do. Existentialists despise bad faith. There are chapters in this book dedicated to both authenticity and bad faith.

Interestingly, it seems it is quite possible for a person to be authentic without ever having heard of existentialism. Otherwise, we would be claiming that authenticity can only be achieved as the result of a lot of bookworming. Some people seem to hit on being authentic through their direct experience of life or because they choose to be particularly brave, unselfish or original. We might call such people true existentialists, but really they are not existentialists at all, they are simply what swots who have studied existentialism describe as *authentic*.

They don't describe themselves as *authentic* because they don't think of themselves in that way. They just get on with absorbing themselves in whatever it is they do without self-consciousness, worries or regrets. It is not actually at all authentic for a person to think she is authentic. The person who declares 'I am authentic' thinks she *is* something, a fixed entity, an authentic-*thing*. A person who thinks like this or has this attitude is, in fact, in bad faith.

So, it is possible to be authentic without being an existentialist, but it is not possible to be a true existentialist without striving hard to be authentic. What matters is that the journey towards authenticity can begin with learning about existentialism. Many people have been inspired to pursue authenticity as a result of studying existentialism. Studying existentialism highlights the basic, inescapable, *existential truths* of the human condition, it exposes bad faith and emphasises the necessity of freedom and responsibility. Studying existentialism can, therefore, be a process of profound personal enlightenment that influences the very nature of a person's way of existing in the world.

So, what on earth is existentialism? Well, basically, existentialism is a broad intellectual movement of largely continental philosophers, psychologists, novelists, playwrights and other assorted egg-heads that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and remains influential today. The existentialist movement is defined by its shared concerns rather

than by a set of common principles to which all existentialist thinkers subscribe, although there are principles common to many of them.

Existentialism is primarily concerned with providing a coherent description of the human condition that fully recognises and incorporates the fundamental or existential truths relating to that condition. Existentialism explores what it is for each of us to be in this bizarre and wicked world; what being alive in this world does and does not mean. It tells it like it is without going easy or bullshitting. The fundamental or existential truths of the human condition according to existentialism are as follows.

None of us are fixed entities like tables or stones, but indeterminate, ambiguous beings in constant process of becoming and change. We are all free and can't stop being free. We are all responsible for our actions and our lives are burdened with desire, guilt and anxiety, especially anxiety about what other people think of us. This leads us to suffer such bothersome emotions as guilt, shame and embarrassment. And, if all this isn't terrible enough, we are doomed to die from the moment we are born into a meaningless universe where there is no God, or at least a very elusive one. Amazingly, despite this tale of woe, existentialism is ultimately a positive and optimistic philosophy! But how can that be?

Well, because it outlines how a person can live a valuable life despite the fact that human existence is essentially meaningless and full of pain and misery. The general idea is that you can't create a genuinely honest and worthwhile life for yourself on the basis of a fantasy. You have to build your life on an understanding and acceptance of how things really are, otherwise you will always be fooling and deluding yourself as you yearn to live happily ever after. Only the person wise enough to become disenchanted with chasing the illusion of *total* satisfaction can hope to achieve *relative* satisfaction.

In a philosophical essay he wrote called *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the existentialist philosopher, Albert Camus, compares human existence to the plight of the mythical figure Sisyphus who is condemned forever to

push a large rock to the top of a hill only to watch it roll down again. Camus asks if life is worth living given that it is as absurd and ultimately futile as the plight of Sisyphus. 'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy' (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 11).

In choosing to live, in refusing the ever present possibility of suicide, a person confers value and significance on a life that has no value or significance in itself. In choosing to live her life rather than end it a person takes on responsibility for her life. Camus' seemingly pessimistic account of the existential truths of the human condition yields an optimistic conclusion: although life's struggle has no ultimate purpose and always the same end result, a person can still create a sense of purpose through the struggle itself and through the way she plays life's game. If you think this is not a very optimistic conclusion then I challenge you to come up with a more optimistic conclusion that isn't based on false assumptions about the way life really is, a conclusion that isn't just a deluded wish list when you look at it honestly.

It was the eccentric Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and the atheistic, romantic philosophers, Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, who, in their different ways, set the agenda for what later became known as existentialism. All three of them were concerned with identifying and exploring the perennial truths of the human condition.

The concerns of Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were taken up during the first half of the twentieth century by Karl Jaspers in his *existence philosophy*, and by Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Albert Camus. The last four in this list all knew each other and hung out together in Parisian cafés in the 1930s and '40s, chain-smoking and discussing the enormous books they were working on.

The writings of Heidegger, Sartre and the rest established existentialism as a distinct branch of philosophy. The ideas of these