

Condemned to Be Free

A short, honest guide to existentialism, and why a philosophy of anxiety turns out to be the most hopeful one there is.



THRESHOLD BOOKS

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Threshold Books · Lena Fischer



Chapter One: The Philosophy That Starts Where You Already Are

Most philosophy begins somewhere far away from you. It starts with abstractions: the nature of being, the categories of the understanding, the structure of the good. You have to travel a long way inward before any of it touches your actual Tuesday.

Existentialism does the opposite. It begins exactly where you are sitting right now, inside a single human life that you did not ask for, that will end, and that you are somehow responsible for anyway. It takes the experiences most philosophies treat as noise, the anxiety, the boredom, the sense that you should be doing something with your one life and are not quite sure what, and it says: this is not noise. This is the data. Start here.

That is why, a hundred years after its heyday, existentialism still lands. It was built to describe the condition of a person who has lost the old certainties and has to work out how to live anyway. That person is not a relic of postwar Paris. That person is most of us.



Existentialism was argued out in cafés, not lecture halls. It begins with the person sitting in the chair, not with the system on the blackboard.

What the existentialists agreed on, and what they didn't

Here is an honest complication that the textbooks often smooth over: the existentialists disagreed with each other constantly, and

several of the people we file under the label spent their lives rejecting it. Camus denied he was an existentialist. Heidegger loathed the term. Even Sartre, who eventually embraced it, spent years resisting.

So what holds this quarreling family together? Not a doctrine. A starting point. Every thinker in this book begins from the same refusal: they refuse to explain the human being from the outside, as if we were one more kind of object in a world of objects. They insist that a human life has to be understood from the inside, as it is lived, chosen, dreaded, and enjoyed. Philosophy, for them, is not a spectator sport. It is written in the first person.

"Existentialism is not a set of answers. It is a refusal to let the answers be handed to you."

DEFINITION — Existentialism is a loose tradition of thought, running roughly from the 1840s to the 1960s, that places individual existence, freedom, and lived experience at the center of philosophy. Its recurring claim is that human beings have no fixed, pre given nature, and are therefore responsible for creating who they become.

Before we go further, meet the family. You do not need to memorize them. But it helps to have faces for the ideas.

Thinker	Lived	Big idea	Where to start
Søren Kierkegaard	1813 to 1855	Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom; faith is a leap	<i>Fear and Trembling</i>
Friedrich Nietzsche	1844 to 1900	"God is dead," and we must create our own values	<i>The Gay Science</i>
Martin Heidegger	1889 to 1976	We are thrown into a world and live toward death	<i>Being and Time</i>
Jean Paul Sartre	1905 to 1980	Existence precedes essence; we are condemned to be free	<i>Existentialism Is a Humanism</i>

Simone de Beauvoir	1908 to 1986	Freedom is situated; ethics begins with the other	<i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i>
Albert Camus	1913 to 1960	Life is absurd, and we must live it without appeal	<i>The Myth of Sisyphus</i>

The rest of this book walks through their best ideas, roughly in the order that makes them easiest to understand. We begin with the sentence that the whole tradition turns on.

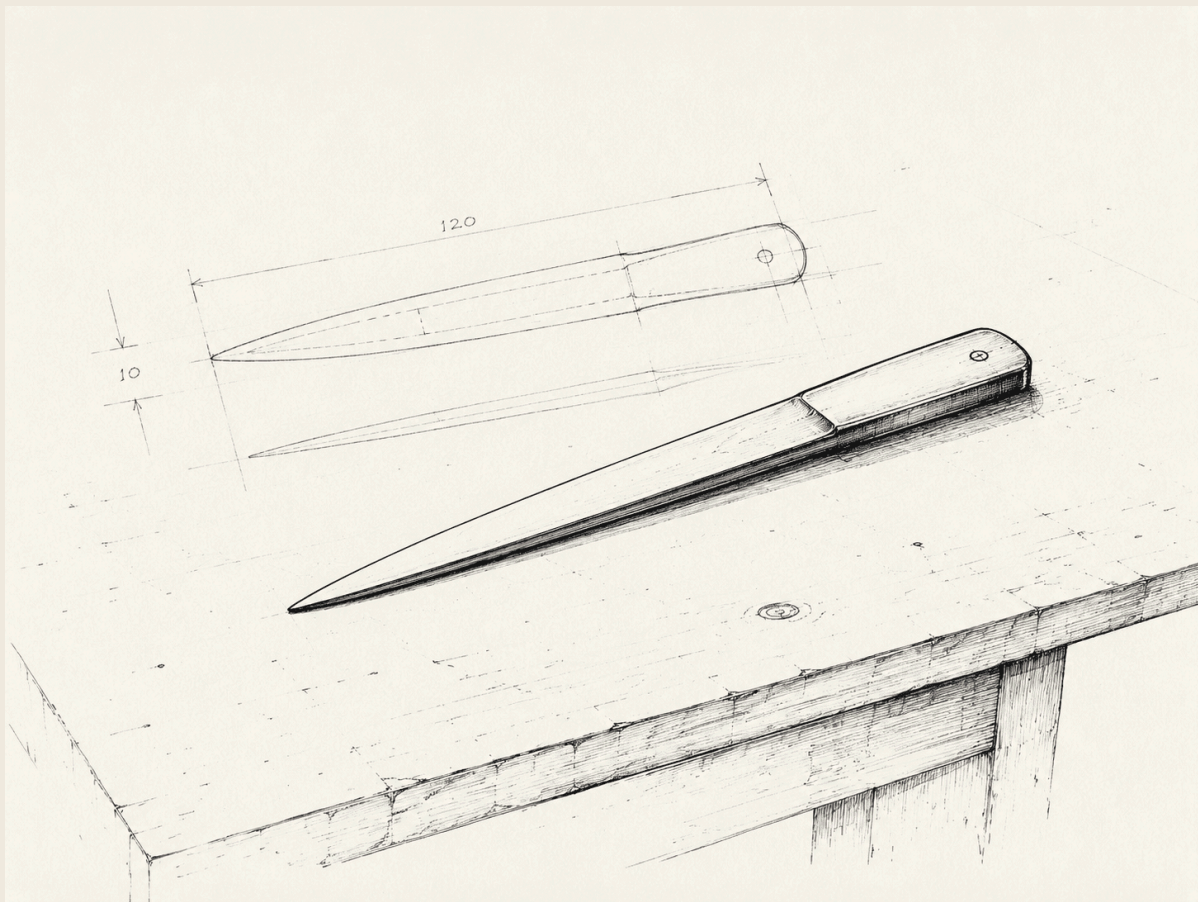


Chapter Two: Existence Precedes Essence

Jean Paul Sartre compressed the core of existentialism into three words: *existence precedes essence*. It sounds like grammar. It is actually a small explosion. To feel it, you have to understand the ordinary order it overturns.

The paper knife

Consider a paper knife, Sartre says. Before the knife exists, its essence already does. Someone conceived of its purpose, opening envelopes, and designed it to serve that purpose. The idea of the knife, its "what it is for," comes first. Then a craftsman makes it. For the paper knife, and for every manufactured thing, essence precedes existence. The purpose is decided in advance, and the object is built to match.



A paper knife has its essence before it exists: someone imagined its purpose, then made it. Sartre's radical claim is that a human being is the one thing in the universe for which this order is reversed.

For most of Western history, we quietly assumed human beings worked the same way. There was a human nature, a divine blueprint or a fixed essence, that said in advance what a person is for and what a good person looks like. You existed in order to fulfill a purpose that was set before you arrived.

Sartre's move is to deny the blueprint. There is no designer, no prior specification, no human essence waiting to be filled in. We simply show up. We exist first, as raw, unfinished, undefined beings, and only afterward, through the accumulation of everything we choose and do, does anything like an "essence" take shape. And even then it is never finished, not until we are dead and can choose no more.

DEFINITION – Essentialism *is the older view Sartre rejects: the idea that things, including people, have a fixed inner nature or purpose that exists before and independent of them. Existentialism reverses this for human beings only. A rock has an essence. You are writing yours.*

You are the sum of your acts

The consequence is bracing. If there is no human nature, then there is no excuse hiding inside it. You cannot say "that is just who I am," because there is no fixed "who I am" underneath your actions. There is only what you do. A person is not a secret inner self that

occasionally leaks out into behavior. A person *is* their behavior, the total of their choices, revised with every new one.

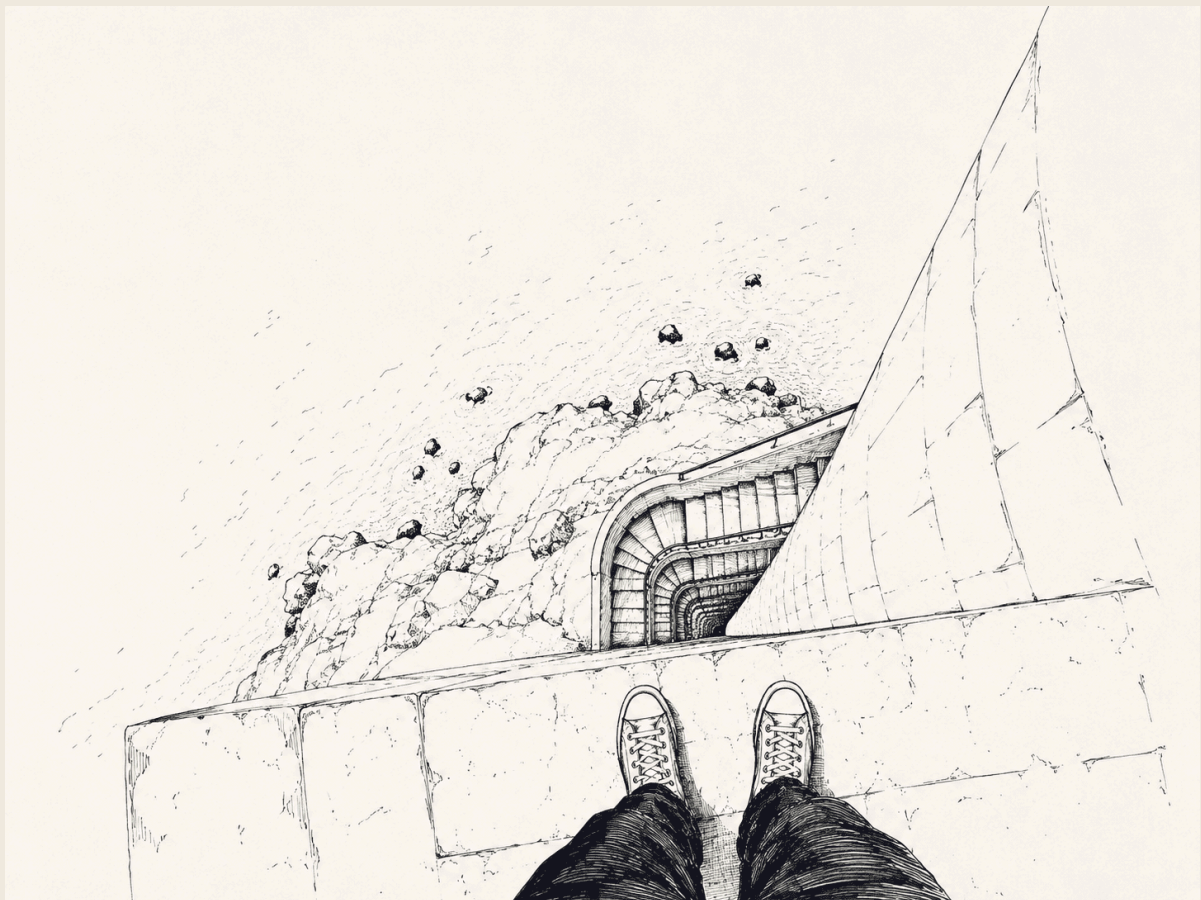
This is why existentialists are so unimpressed by good intentions. The coward who insists he is "really" brave inside, if only circumstances allowed it, is telling himself a story. There is no brave self locked in a basement. There is a man who acts like a coward, which makes him one, until the day he acts otherwise. What you are is not a possession you carry. It is a verb you are conjugating, right now, whether you notice or not.

"You are not the person you intend to be. You are the person you keep deciding to be, one act at a time." — after Sartre

There is something frightening in this, and something enormously freeing. Frightening, because the alibis are gone. Freeing, because nothing is settled. If you are only ever the sum of your acts, then the next act is always open. No essence has locked the door.

Chapter Three: The Dizziness of Freedom

If Sartre named the freedom, it was Søren Kierkegaard, writing decades earlier in Copenhagen, who first described what it feels like from the inside. And what it feels like, he saw, is not exhilaration. It is dread.



Kierkegaard noticed that when we stand at a great height, part of the fear is not of falling. It is the terrible awareness that we could jump. That, he said, is what freedom feels like.

Fear has an object; anxiety does not

Kierkegaard draws a distinction between fear and anxiety that, once it clicks, you will find yourself reaching for again and again. Fear always has an object. You are afraid of something: the dog, the deadline, the diagnosis. Fear points at a thing in the world, and in principle the thing can be removed or escaped.

Anxiety, in Kierkegaard's sense, has no object. It is not fear of any particular thing. It is the mood that rises up when you become aware of your own freedom, of the sheer open possibility of your life, with nothing telling you which way to go. Stand at the edge of a cliff, he says, and you feel two things. You feel the fear of falling, which is fear of an object. But you also feel something stranger and worse: the dizzying awareness that nothing physically prevents you from throwing yourself off. Nothing but your own choice. That vertigo, the reeling before your own freedom, is anxiety.

DEFINITION – Anxiety (*angst*), in the existential sense, is not a disorder or a passing nervousness. It is the fundamental mood of a free being confronting its own possibilities. Kierkegaard called it "the dizziness of freedom." It is the price of admission for being the kind of creature that gets to choose.

	Fear	Anxiety
Has an object?	Yes: a specific thing	No: it is objectless
What triggers it	A threat in the world	Awareness of your own freedom
Can you escape it?	Escape the threat, escape the fear	You cannot escape being free
What it reveals	Danger	That your life is yours to decide

Why this matters

Most of us treat anxiety as a malfunction, a sign that something has gone wrong and needs fixing. Kierkegaard offers a stranger and more useful thought: your anxiety is not always a symptom. Sometimes it is accurate. It is the correct emotional response to a true fact about your situation, which is that your life is genuinely undetermined and genuinely yours, and no authority is going to step in and choose for you.

This does not make the anxiety pleasant. But it changes your relationship to it. The anxiety you feel before a real decision is not evidence that you are broken. It is evidence that you have understood the stakes. The person who feels nothing before a life

defining choice has not achieved peace. They have simply not yet noticed that they are free.

“Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.” — Søren Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard's own answer to the dizziness was faith, what later readers called the leap: a commitment made in full awareness that it cannot be justified by reason alone, a willingness to stake your life on something you cannot prove. You do not have to share his religious destination to keep his insight. The insight is that at the decisive moments, reason runs out before the choice does. Sooner or later you have to leap. The only question is whether you leap deliberately, or get pushed.



Chapter Four: Bad Faith, or the Thousand Ways We Flee

Freedom, Kierkegaard showed us, is dizzying. So naturally we spend enormous energy trying not to feel it. Sartre gave the most common escape route a name, one of the most useful ideas in all of existentialism: *bad faith*.

Lying to yourself about your own freedom

Bad faith (in French, *mauvaise foi*) is a particular kind of self deception. It is the lie we tell ourselves in order to avoid the anxiety of our freedom. In bad faith, we pretend that we are not free, that our situation, our role, our nature, or our past has decided things for us, so that we can be relieved of the burden of choosing.



Sartre's famous waiter performs "being a waiter" a little too eagerly, as if trying to become a thing with a fixed nature. In the effort to escape his freedom, he reveals it.

Sartre's most famous example is a café waiter. Watch him, Sartre says. His movements are a little too precise, a little too eager. He

balances the tray with exaggerated care, inclines toward the customer with exaggerated attention. He is not simply working. He is *playing at being a waiter*, performing the role so completely that he seems to want to disappear into it, to become a waiter the way a stone is a stone: fully, essentially, with no remainder of freedom left over.

But of course he cannot. He is a free human being pretending to be a fixed thing. And that pretending, that flight from his own freedom into the safety of a role, is bad faith.

DEFINITION – *Bad faith* is self deception about your own freedom. It is the move by which you treat yourself as a thing determined by your role, your past, your feelings, or your circumstances, in order to deny that you are, at every moment, free to choose otherwise.

You already do this. Here is how to catch yourself.

Bad faith is not an exotic philosophical error. It is your default setting, and mine. It sounds like this:

- "I had no choice." (You almost always did. You had choices you disliked, which is not the same thing.)
- "That is just the way I am." (This freezes a lifetime of future choices into a fixed nature you did not actually receive.)
- "I am only doing my job." (The role is real, but you chose to keep occupying it, and you choose again each morning.)
- "I will start really living once things settle down." (You are treating your real life as a rehearsal, which lets you avoid the risk of the performance.)

Each of these is a small act of hiding. Each takes a free choice and disguises it as a fact of nature, so that you can feel that your life is happening *to* you rather than being authored *by* you. The disguise is comforting. It is also the main thing standing between you and an honest life.

"We are our choices, especially the ones we pretend we didn't make."

The opposite of bad faith is not some heroic, agonized authenticity that you have to sustain every waking second. It is simpler and quieter than that. It is the ongoing willingness to tell yourself the truth about what you are actually choosing, even when a comforting lie is available. That is all authenticity really asks, and it is harder than it sounds.

COMMON MISTAKE — People often hear "bad faith" and assume it means being a hypocrite toward others. It does not. Bad faith is a lie you tell yourself, and its target is your own freedom. You can be scrupulously honest with everyone in your life and still live almost entirely in bad faith, if you have quietly convinced yourself that you could not have done otherwise.

Chapter Five: The Absurd, and Why Camus Says Keep Going



Camus takes the punished Sisyphus, condemned to roll a boulder uphill forever, and finds in him not a symbol of despair but a strange model of how to live.

We have named the freedom, felt its dizziness, and caught ourselves fleeing it. Now the harder question, the one that sits underneath all the others: what if none of it means anything? Albert Camus built his whole philosophy on refusing to look away from that question.

The collision that Camus calls "the absurd"

Camus starts from a simple observation about human beings: we crave meaning. We are meaning seeking animals, forever asking why, demanding that our suffering count for something, that the universe make sense. And then he sets that craving against the universe as we actually find it: silent, indifferent, offering no answer, no cosmic purpose, no reply to our questions.

The absurd, for Camus, is not a property of the world, and not a flaw in us. It is the *collision* between the two: our desperate need for meaning meeting the world's flat refusal to provide any. Neither side will yield. We cannot stop demanding meaning, and the universe will not start supplying it. That grinding mismatch, that is the absurd, and Camus insists it is the basic fact of the human condition once the old comforts have fallen away.

DEFINITION — *The absurd is the confrontation between the human hunger for meaning and the silent indifference of the universe. It is not despair and not a mood. It is a permanent structural feature of being a meaning seeking creature in a world that offers none for free.*

The one serious question

Camus opens *The Myth of Sisyphus* with a famous provocation: he says there is only one truly serious philosophical question, and it is whether or not to kill yourself. If life is absurd, if it means nothing, why go on?

His answer is the heart of everything. Suicide, he argues, is not a solution to the absurd. It is a surrender to it, an admission that life must have external meaning to be worth living, and that lacking it, we quit. But there is another response, and Camus calls it *revolt*. To live in revolt is to keep living fully, passionately, and lucidly, in full awareness that the universe will never justify the effort, and to refuse to pretend otherwise and refuse to give up. You hold both truths at once: life has no given meaning, *and* I will live it intensely anyway. That refusal to resolve the tension, that is rebellion, and for Camus it is the only honest form of freedom.

Imagine him happy

Which brings us to Sisyphus. In the myth, the gods condemn Sisyphus to roll a boulder up a mountain, only to watch it roll back down, forever. It is the perfect image of futile, meaningless labor, life stripped of any purpose or payoff.

Camus does something astonishing with it. He tells us to focus not on the endless pushing but on the moment at the top, when the boulder rolls away and Sisyphus walks back down the mountain to begin again. In that walk down, Camus says, Sisyphus is conscious. He knows exactly how absurd his situation is, and he is not crushed by it. He has claimed his fate as his own. The struggle itself, undertaken lucidly and without illusion, is enough to fill a human heart.

“*One must imagine Sisyphus happy.*” — *Albert Camus*

The point is not that Sisyphus enjoys the boulder. The point is that meaning does not have to be handed to you from outside for a life to be worth living with full commitment. You can face the absence of cosmic meaning without flinching, and then, precisely there, in the teeth of it, create your own. The happiness is not despite the absurd. It is on the far side of accepting it.



Chapter Six: Other People

So far this has sounded like a philosophy of the solitary individual, one person, one freedom, one heroic confrontation with the void.

But the existentialists knew perfectly well that we do not live alone. Some of their sharpest insights are about what happens when another consciousness enters the room.

The Look

Sartre describes a small, ordinary experience with enormous consequences. Imagine you are alone in a hallway, crouched at a door, peering through the keyhole. You are absorbed, pure watching subject, aware of the scene but not of yourself. Then you hear footsteps behind you. Someone has seen you.

In that instant, everything flips. A moment ago you were a free subject looking out at the world. Now you are an object in someone else's world, a person caught spying, pinned by their gaze, suddenly seeing yourself the way they see you: shameful, exposed, defined from the outside. Sartre calls this *the Look*. The other person's gaze has the power to freeze you into an object, to fix an identity on you (the snoop, the eavesdropper) that you did not choose and cannot simply refuse.



For the existentialists, you do not first exist alone and then meet others. You come to know yourself, at least in part, through the eyes of the people looking back at you.

This is why shame is such a revealing emotion for Sartre. Shame is not something you can feel entirely alone. Shame is the recognition that you are, right now, an object for someone else, being judged, being defined, by a freedom that is not yours.

INTERESTING FACT — Sartre's most quoted line, "Hell is other people," comes from his play *No Exit*, in which three dead strangers are locked in a room together for eternity with no torturers in sight. They torment each other simply by looking, judging, and defining. It is one of the most misunderstood lines in philosophy.

What "Hell is other people" actually means

People take "Hell is other people" to be simple misanthropy: other people are annoying, so avoid them. Sartre spent years correcting this. His point was not that other people are unpleasant. It was that we depend on others for our sense of who we are, and that this dependence can become a kind of prison. When we let other people's judgments become the mirror in which we see ourselves, when we live entirely for and through their gaze, we hand them the power to define us, and we lose ourselves. Hell is other people only when we let their Look replace our own freedom.

"Hell is other people." — Jean Paul Sartre, and it does not mean what you think

De Beauvoir turns freedom into ethics

If Sartre showed how the presence of others threatens our freedom, it was Simone de Beauvoir who worked out the positive, ethical side of the story, and in doing so wrote what many now consider the most livable existentialist philosophy of all.

De Beauvoir agreed that we are radically free. But she insisted, more clearly than Sartre ever did, that our freedom is always *situated*. You are free, yes, but you are free from within a specific body, a specific history, a specific web of circumstances that you did not choose and cannot wish away. Freedom is not floating and abstract. It is the freedom of *this* person, here, hemmed in on all sides, choosing anyway. That word, situated, is her great correction to the fantasy of the lone unbounded chooser.

And from this she draws an ethics. If I value my own freedom, de Beauvoir argues, then I am committed, on pain of contradiction, to valuing yours as well, because your freedom is the same kind of thing as mine. My freedom is not diminished by yours. It is bound up with it. I become most free not by dominating others or escaping them, but by acting to expand the freedom of everyone around me. Existentialism, in her hands, stops being a philosophy of the isolated hero and becomes a philosophy of solidarity.

INTERESTING FACT — In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir applied all of this to the situation of women with a single devastating sentence: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Womanhood, she argued, was not a fixed essence but a role a society imposes and a person is pressured to inhabit, existentialism's core claim, aimed straight at the deepest assumption of her age.

She also gave the tradition its most honest name for the human condition: *ambiguity*. We are, she says, at once free subjects and objects in the world, at once the authors of our lives and things that circumstances happen to. We are both, always, and the mature response is not to deny either half but to live inside the tension. That is *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and it may be the most usable existentialist book ever written.



Chapter Seven: How to Actually Live This

We have covered a lot of ground: freedom, anxiety, bad faith, the absurd, the gaze of others. It would be easy to close the book feeling intellectually stirred and practically stranded. So let me end with the

question the whole tradition is really asking. Not "what is true?" but "how, then, shall I live?"

First, what existentialism is not

Let me clear away the most common misreading, because it stops people from taking the good part. Existentialism is not nihilism. Nihilism says nothing matters, so do as you please, or do nothing at all. Existentialism says almost the reverse: nothing matters *in advance*, no meaning is handed to you, and *therefore* everything you do matters intensely, because it is you, and no cosmic script, that gives your life whatever meaning it will ever have. The absence of pre-given meaning is not a permission slip for indifference. It is a summons to responsibility.

WARNING — *Do not mistake "existence precedes essence" for "anything goes." The existentialists are among the most demanding moralists in philosophy. Remove the external rulebook and you do not get less responsibility, you get more, because now there is no authority to blame and nowhere left to hide. Freedom without excuses is a heavier thing to carry, not a lighter one.*

What it asks of you

Strip the tradition down to its practical core and a few instructions remain. They are simple to state and hard to do.

Own your freedom. In any situation, however constrained, there is a margin of choice, including the choice of how to respond to what you cannot change. Locate that margin and act inside it. Stop narrating your life as a series of things that happened to you.

Refuse bad faith. Catch the little lies, "I had no choice," "that is just who I am," "later, once things settle," and trade them for the harder truth about what you are actually choosing right now. Not once, in a burst of resolve. Continuously, in small honest corrections.

Commit anyway. Camus and de Beauvoir agree on this above all: lucidity about the absurd is not an excuse for paralysis. You look clearly at the fact that nothing guarantees your projects matter, and then you throw yourself into them completely. Commitment in full knowledge that it is unguaranteed is not naïve. It is the bravest thing a person can do.

Widen others' freedom. De Beauvoir's addition, and the one that keeps existentialism from curdling into selfishness. Use your freedom in ways that open up more freedom for the people around you. A free life spent shrinking other people is a contradiction.

"Freedom is not a feeling you wait to have. It is a thing you practice, badly at first, until it becomes the shape of your life."

The hopeful part

I promised at the start that a philosophy of anxiety would turn out to be the most hopeful one there is, and here is why. Every philosophy that hands you a ready made meaning also takes something from you: it makes your life a matter of conforming to a plan you did not write. Existentialism refuses to do that. It looks you in the eye and says the frightening thing first, that no one is coming, that the meaning is not out there waiting to be found, that you are, terribly and wonderfully, on your own.

And then it says the hopeful thing, which only sounds hopeful once you have accepted the frightening one. Because the meaning is not fixed in advance, it is still open. Because no essence has been assigned to you, you get to write it. Because you are condemned to be free, you are also, at every single moment, free to begin again. That is the whole of it. The door is open. It was always open. Walk through.



Existentialism does not tell you which door to walk through. It only insists, relentlessly, that the door is open, and that walking through it is up to you.

The next idea is already open.

If this made a hard subject feel clear, that is the whole point of what we do. Threshold publishes short, beautifully made primers on the ideas that shape how people think, written for smart readers who never want to open a textbook. Join the newsletter for one essay every week, plain language, real depth, no filler, and be first to read the next primer in the series, from Stoicism to the philosophy of mind.