

Is existentialism due for a comeback?

BY Pat Stokes 14 AUG 2023

Today feels eerily like the age that spawned the philosophy of radical freedom in defiance of the absurdity of life. Perhaps it's time for a revival.

Parenting during the Covid-19 pandemic involved many new and unwelcome challenges. Some were obvious, practical things, like having the whole family suddenly working and learning under one roof, and the disruptions caused by lockdowns, isolation, and being physically cut off from extended family and friends.

But there were also what we might call the more *existential* challenges, the ones that engaged deeper questions of what to do in the face of radical uncertainty, absurdity and death. Words like “unprecedented” barely cover how shockingly the contingency of our social, economic and even physical lives were suddenly exposed. For me, one of the most confronting moments early in the pandemic was having my worried children ask me what was going to happen, and not being able to tell them. Feeling powerless and inadequate, all I could do was mumble something about it all being alright in the end, somehow.

I'm not sure how I did as a parent, but as a philosopher, this was a dismal failure on my part. After all, I'd been training for this moment since I was barely an adult myself. Like surprisingly many academic philosophers, I was sucked into philosophy via an undergraduate course on existentialism, and I'd been

marinating in the ideas of Søren Kierkegaard in particular, but also figures like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, ever since. These thinkers had described better than anyone such moments of confrontation with our fragility in the face of an uncaring universe. Yet when “the stage sets collapse”, as Camus put it, I had no great insight to share beyond forced optimism.

In fairness, the existentialists themselves weren't great at giving advice to young people either. During World War II, Sartre was approached by a young pupil wrestling with whether to stay and look after his mother or join the army to fight for France. Sartre's advice in reply was “You are free, therefore choose” – classic Sartre, in that it's both stirringly dramatic and practically useless. But then, that's all Sartre really *could* say, given his commitment to the unavoidability of radical choice.

Besides, existentialism itself seems to have fallen out of style. For decades, fiction from *The Catcher in the Rye* through to *Fight Club* would valorise a certain kind of existential hero: someone who stood up against mindless conformity, exerting a freedom that others – the unthinking masses that Heidegger derisively called *das Man*, ‘the They’ – didn't even realise they had.

These days, however, that sort of hero seems passé. We still tell stories of people rejecting inauthentic social messages and asserting their freedom, but of an altogether darker sort; think Joaquin Phoenix's take on the Joker, for example. Instead of existentialist heroes, we've got nihilists.

I can understand why nihilism staged a comeback. In her classic existentialist manifesto, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir tells us that “Nihilism is disappointed seriousness which has turned in upon itself.” For some time now, the 2020s have started to feel an awful lot like the 1920s: worldwide epidemic disease, rampant inflation and rising fascism. The future that was promised to

us in the 1990s, one of ever-increasing economic prosperity and global peace (what Francis Fukuyama famously called the “end of history”) never arrived. That’s enough to disappoint anyone’s seriousness. Throw in the seemingly intractable threat of climate change, and the future becomes a source of inescapable dread.

But then, that is precisely the sort of context in which existentialism found its moment, in the crucible of occupation and global war. At its worst, existentialism can read like naïve adolescent posturing, the sort of all-or-nothing philosophy you can only believe in until you’ve experienced the true limits of your freedom.

At its best, though, existentialism was a defiant reassertion of human dignity in the face of absurdity and hopelessness. As we hurtle into planetary system-collapse and growing inequality and authoritarianism, maybe a new existentialism is precisely what we need.

Thankfully, then, not all the existential heroes went away.

Seeking redemption

During lockdowns, after the kids had gone to bed, I’d often retreat to the TV to immerse myself in Rockstar Games’ epic open-world first-person shooter *Red Dead Redemption II*. The game is both achingly beautiful and narratively rich, and it’s hard not to become emotionally invested in your character: the morally conflicted, laconic Arthur Morgan, an enforcer for the fugitive Van Der Linde gang in the twilight of the Old West. [Spoiler ahead.]

That’s why it’s such a gut-punch when, about two-thirds of the way through the game, Arthur learns he’s dying of tuberculosis. It feels like the game-makers have cheated you somehow. Game characters aren’t meant to die, at least not like this and not for good. Yet this is also one of those bracing moments of

existential confrontation with reality. Kierkegaard spoke of the “certain-uncertainty” of death: we know we will die, but we do not know how or when. Suddenly, this certain-uncertainty suffuses the game-world, as your every task becomes one of your last. The significance of every decision feels amplified.

Arthur, in the end, grasps his moment. He commits himself to his task and sets out to right wrongs, willingly setting out to a final showdown he knows that, one way or another, he will not survive. It’s a long way from nihilism, and in ‘unprecedented’ times, it was exactly the existentialist tonic this philosopher needed.

We are, for good or ill, ‘living with Covid’ now. But the other challenges of our historical moment are only becoming more urgent. Eighty years ago, writing in his moment of oppression and despair, Sartre declared that if we don’t run away, then we’ve chosen the war. Outside of the Martian escape fantasies of billionaires, there is nowhere for us, now, to run. So perhaps the existentialists were right: we need to face uncomfortable truths, and stand and fight



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