Summary of How to Be An Existentialist 
by Gary Cox 
(Continuum, 2009) Summary by Erik Johnson (2013)

In shopping around for interesting philosophies I came across this “lightweight and hopefully rather irresponsible book about responsibility” (p. 4). It caught my eye because, “it’s a slim volume whereas most books on existentialism you’ve ever seen are fat and heavy” (p. 1-2). It is small, only 122 pages, and clearly written, which is a boon for any philosophy book but especially one about consciousness, absurdity, temporality, bad faith, being-for-others, contingency, authenticity, and facticity. On that basis I commend the book to interested readers. But alas, I do not commend this philosophy. At least not in the way Cox presents it. Here’s why.

First the good news. Existentialism embraces (more or less) several Christian notions:

Reject nihilism. “…existentialism is ultimately a positive, optimistic, anti nihilistic philosophy!” (p 14). “They are anti-nihilists because they recognize that life does in fact have a meaning: the meaning each person chooses to give his or her own existence” (p. 15). Christians oppose nihilism, too.

Accept life’s difficulties. “Existentialism offers satisfaction of a stoical kind through the acceptance of the inevitability of a certain amount of dissatisfaction” (p. 36). So does Christianity. Jesus said, “In this world you will have tribulation.”

Take action. Life isn’t just about “knowing stuff” (p. 3). True, knowledge puffs up.

Be decisive. “take control of the life they do have and make it more rewarding through decisive, realistic action” (p. 15). The KJV asks, “Why halt ye between two opinions?”

Be enthusiastic. “throwing one’s self into whatever they do without self-consciousness, misgivings or regret” (p. 10).

Be real. “You will always experience some lack, some boredom, some dissatisfaction” (p. 30). This is a Christian teaching. See Ecclesiastes.

Face death with optimism. “…death is the only fulfillment, the only possibility, left to you. This is not a bad thing, it is just the way it is, so you would be wrong to get
depressed about it” (p. 30). Facing death with optimism, hope, and visions of heaven is a Christian notion.

Recognize the negative. “The misery of missing someone or something is rooted in this negating of the world” (p. 31). Focusing on absence (negation) is a Christian doctrine popular in Eastern Orthodox churches and is called apophatic theology. Sin, death, guilt, and grief are explained as the absence of obedience, life, holiness, and love. Christians accept these losses in the present (and unlike existentialists) exercise faith in their future restoration.

Pleasures are fleeting. “…people always feel slightly dissatisfied…they always feel that something is lacking. Something is always lacking, namely the future” (p. 35). Things that satisfy (food, breath, meaning, holidays) exist in time and time is fleeting. Therefore earthly pleasures are fleeting. Christians endorse this notion.

Recognize the world is broken. “As many great philosophers and religious teachers have noted down through the centuries, ‘All is vanity’” (p. 40). Nice to hear Cox quote Ecclesiastes.

Quit complaining. “Bad faith is moaning about your circumstances but doing nothing to change them: (p. 65).

Now the bad news. I find Cox put offish because he is:

Dogmatic. “[Existentialism] aims to show you what you really are when all the nonsense and bullshit that is talked at you by scientists, preachers, parents and school teachers is binned” (p. 3). I bristle at authoritarian pronouncements to “bin” these authorities.

Autonomous. “[Existentialism] aims to reveal to you that you are a fundamentally free being...rather than living as though you were a robot programmed by other people, social convention, religious dogma, morality, guilt and all the other age old forces of oppression” (p. 3). One can be “programmed” by others without being oppressed. Cox doesn’t promote anarchy, but this gets close.

Condescending. “…everyone, including yourself, and everything around you, wants you to give up like a big sissy...” (p. 4). Cox sounds like a bully.

Snarky. “There are morbidly obese people waddling around out there who choose day after day to supersize themselves beneath the yellow arches who are now suing McDonald’s for making them fat and unhealthy”(p. 6). I’m not sure this approach will inspire change.
Anti authority. Cox lauds Bugs Bunny’s “sneering, anti-authoritarian” attitude. Bugs has, says Cox, a “truly authentic, existentialist-type attitude” (p. 8). I don’t want a philosophy that sneers. To be fair, Cox also lauds Christopher Reeves, a hiker he once met who had spina bifida, and the intrepid Captain Bligh as exemplar existentialists.

Judgmental. “…it’s up to you to come up with a more optimistic conclusion that isn’t just a naive fairytale or wish list” (p. 16). Who made Cox judge of others’ conclusions? I choose to ignore this rant and embrace what I consider an optimistic conclusion. If he thinks I’m naïve, believe in fairytales, or engaging in wishful thinking, so be it.

Inconsistent. “Any meaning that is to be found in this world must be established by each person from within the sphere of his own individual existence” (p. 18). Cox didn’t establish his meaning from “within the sphere of his own individual existence.” He borrowed it from French existentialists. I therefore happily establish my own meaning by borrowing from others, IE., Jesus.

Hypocritical “A person who supposes that his meaning comes ready-made or that there is an ultimate purpose to human existence established by a deity or deities is deluded and a coward in face of reality” (p. 18). More bullying. Didn’t Cox adopt his philosophy ready-made from Sartre and Camus?

Snide. “In short, he is an ignorant dork who needs to grow up and get real” (p. 18). Cox needs help branding his message. Marketing with intimidation suggests his product is inferior, without merit, and can’t survive the marketplace of ideas on its own.

Critical. “We constantly encounter a world characterized and defined by the motives, intentions and attitudes we choose to have and the evaluations we choose to make” (p. 27). I agree. But I object to Cox’s disparagement of others’ motives, intentions, attitudes, and evaluations.

Unfriendly. “Like most people I am full of resentment about other people” (p. 41). Does psychology precede philosophy? Does one develop a philosophy and then grow a personality around it? Or does one grope for a philosophy and then validates the oppositional personality one already has? Cox later admits, “[Critics] argue that existentialist philosophers like de Beauvoir, Camus and Sartre speak too much from their own miserable personal experience” (p. 43).

Bigotry. [A disabled person] is not free to walk in the sense of being at liberty to walk, but he is still free to choose the meaning of his disability” (p. 49). Yet Cox does not tolerate those who choose a religious meaning for disabilities.

Condescending. “…couch potatoes I know, who through greed, laziness and general self-neglect, have made themselves unhealthy and hugely overweight….those slobs” (p. 50). “…would you rather aspire to be a whining, irresponsible slob?” (p. 54). What
criteria does Cox use to critique greed, laziness, and self neglect? Also, how many people will be eager to become existentialists after being called slobs?

**Hypocritical.** “...it is authentic to respect and affirm one’s own freedom, so it is authentic to respect and affirm the freedom of others” (p. 62). This makes sense; I wish Cox practiced it.

**Name calling.** “This doesn’t mean you have to read [this book] on a leather couch while paying £50 per hour to a nodding dog...” (p. 69). Did Cox just call therapists a “nodding dog?” I’m an American therapist who nods a lot and am unfamiliar with this term; I hope “nodding dog” is an English colloquialism for “compassionate care giver.”

**People hating.** “Sartre’s philosophy is characterized by an abiding hatred and distrust of people...” (p. 73). Hmmm, tell me more of this philosophy of yours; I’m terribly interested. Did Sartre study life and conclude people are to be hated, or did Sartre hate people and then create a philosophy to validate his hatred?

**Harsh.** “The priority here is not to be fair to everyone, to avoid saying what is harsh just in case someone gets offended...Nobility and dignity are true existential virtues” (p. 90). When is being abrasive noble and dignified?

**Critical.** “When existentialist philosophers criticize a person for his inauthenticity—as they are very fond of doing—they do not seem to fully appreciate that the person may simply not realize his is inauthentic” (p. 93). “Nietzsche was very fond of wittily insulting other thinkers in his writings” (p. 97-98). Existentialists are fond of criticizing and insulting? What an odd philosophy.

**More bad news.** I find existentialism put offish because it is:

**Short sighted.** “Human existence is ultimately pointless and absurd” (p. 14). Maybe. Maybe not. His comment prompts three questions and a comment: 1) Why is Cox disappointed when life doesn’t appear meaningful or make sense? 2) Isn’t Cox’s expectation that existence have a point a clue that there is one? 3) Is it logical to make this claim when many people lead happy, meaningful lives? And my comment: a color blind person who argues all day that the world is monochromatic won’t convince me that life doesn’t have color; existentialists who argue all day that life doesn’t have meaning won’t convince me that life doesn’t have meaning.

**Dogmatic.** “...there are no ideal, otherworldly, God-given, abstract, metaphysical essences giving reality or meaning to particular things” (p. 17). This could be true. But Christians, in good existential fashion, choose to believe otherwise.
Condescending. “... he hopes in vain to be fulfilled and at one with himself” (p. 30). “In vain?” Existentialists have already decided the outcome of other’s choices? How do they know the future will not give anyone meaning? Setting and achieving goals brings satisfaction. Hoping that the future will give meaning is an existential choice that gives meaning to many people!

Aimless. “…my relentless journey to nowhere” (p. 30). Christians choose to believe they are going somewhere.

Oblivious. “Existentialism claims that it is fundamental to what we are to want to be at one with ourselves, to be what we are instead of having always to strive to be it, to achieve a future state of total completion in which we no longer lack anything” (p. 35). Christians claim this desire is evidence we’re made for a different world.

Disingenuous. “Tomorrow all the pubs will have free beer, but as even the least philosophically minded person knows, tomorrow never comes” (p. 35). Tomorrow never comes, but the free beer does and with it, satisfaction. Christians value enjoying earthly delights. God made them for our pleasure as a foretaste of eternal pleasures.

Despairing. “... people will actually be happier and relatively more satisfied if they accept what the endless temporal flight of consciousness towards the future implies, namely, that it is alien to the human condition for a person to be completely satisfied and contented for any length of time” (p. 35-36). Spoken like a true fundamentalist. Evangelists have been preaching this for millennia with one important addition, the possibility of life everlasting.

Paranoid. “To be an object in the world of the Other, to be for the Other, to be in danger of being belittled by the Other, this is the meaning of being-for-others” (p. 37). Existentialists believe being under the gaze of other people is unnerving. Christians believe being under the gaze of God is unnerving (IE., “the fear of God”).

Doom merchants. “As doom merchants, existential philosophers are a bit slow to admit there is also an upside for being-for-others. Shame, embarrassment, humiliation, pride, dignity, these are all aspects of what makes a fully rounded person (p. 39-40). Christians have been preaching about doom, shame, embarrassment, humiliation, pride, and dignity for millennia; welcome to the club, Cox.

Inconsistent. “Sartre... did his bit to stem the rising tide of fascism and Nazism...” (p. 54). Cox fails to explain how, if there’s no God, Sartre was able to condemn fascism. Aren’t fascists simply choosing their own meaning? I suffer from that deplorable Christian condition of being unable to figure out how atheists establish ethics with no transcendent law giver. Human made ethics are universal? I don’t believe so.
Out of touch. “Such a psychic duality cannot exist within the unity of a single consciousness” (p. 58). Has Cox never heard of conflicting desires, subpersonalities, or the battle between the nucleus accumbens (favoring quick results) and the prefrontal cortex (favoring long term goals)? Dismissing our duality is an ambitious (and some would say foolhardy) goal.

Guilt making. “Confession that aims at absolution is bad faith” (p. 67). “Some religious groups …offer…confession…as a cure for the disease of guilt they spread around for free” (p. 67-68). Cox suggests an alternative to absolution: contemplating one’s sin continually, possessing the sin, and staying perpetually responsible for it. Christian say confession and grace offer freedom.

Inconsistent. “Part of being a true existentialist is wanting to be what we make ourselves be by the way we choose to act…” (p. 68). Is this true for Nazis who chose to act like Nazis? Sartre opposed Nazis who wanted to be Nazis.

Confusing. “Ignorance, Sartre notes, is not a lack of knowing. In fact, it is a type of knowledge. To choose to ignore reality is to confirm that it is knowable. Sartre says, ‘Ignorance itself as a project is a mode of knowledge since, if I want to ignore Being, it is because I affirm that it is knowable’” (p. 69). So do those who ignore God really affirm that God is knowable? Interesting.

Blind. “The woman [with tuberculosis] refuses to acknowledge that she has TB despite having all the symptoms...she views each symptom in isolation, refusing to recognize their collective meaning. She engrosses herself in activities that do not afford her time to visit the doctor, activities that distract her from making the choices required by her situation. Her symptoms place her at the threshold of new knowledge, but she chooses ignorance because she does not want the responsibility of dealing with her TB, of seeking a cure for it and so on...” (p. 70). Cox is describing what St. Paul called suppressing the truth. A person in sin refuses to acknowledge that they have true moral guilt despite having all the symptoms (consciousness, morality, desires, guilt, design, etc), they view each symptom in isolation, refusing to recognize their collective meaning. They engross themselves in activities that do not afford time to visit their soul, distract themselves from making faith choices. Their symptoms place them at the threshold of new knowledge, but choose ignorance because they do not want the responsibility of dealing with sin, of seeking a cure for it and so on.

Desperate. “For Sartre, to dispense with willful ignorance and irresponsibility and instead to courageously affirm the existential truths of the human condition—abandonment in a Godless universe, freedom, responsibility, mortality and so on—is to overcome bad faith in favor of authenticity” (p. 70). Do existentialists need courage to embrace atheism? Do they require bolstering, encouragement, or threats? Sounds like Sartre found rejecting God unpleasant and concluded, “I’ll invent a philosophy dedicated to supporting unbelief by shaming, mocking, and deriding believers.”
Intolerant. “...there is a widespread tendency among people to avoid confronting what life is really all about” (p. 70). “…existence is...absurdly superfluous. It is a grotesque cosmic accident that need not exist but does...for no reason and no purpose” (p. 71). As far as I can tell, Cox gets meaning from stomping out faith. This seems like a funny way to cope in an accidental universe that he claims is absurd, superfluous, and grotesque.

Terrifying. “Human consciousness is capable of a sickening and terrifying awareness of being submerged in an existence that is absurd, pointless, superfluous and contingent” (p. 71). Christians believe that the sickness we feel is a clue that we are created for something else. We hope to someday experience that something else. Existentialism is dedicated to the belief there is no hope and there’s nothing we can do about it but stifle the existential gag reflex.

Hateful. Sartre especially hated people who tell themselves they are, “created with humankind as its centerpiece. They assume that they have an immortal essence, that their existence is inevitable, that they exist by some divine decree rather than by accident....moral values are objective, absolute and unquestionable...” (p. 73). This means Sartre hates me. I’d understand frustration, but hatred? This raises several questions. Does he envy those with faith? Is he angry that others have hope? Does others’ joy make him feel guilty? The overweight person who hates the skinny person has some serious issues. And so, it seems, does Sartre.

A minority. “…existentialists...fare just a near extinct handful hiding out in cheap cafes and dingy garrets” (p. 75). With such disdain, condescension, and hatred for others is it any wonder existentialism isn’t more popular? Who’d want to join a club whose mission is to call others “swine or bastards” (p. 75)?

Unwarranted moral values. Sartre consistently despises,“... the bad faith that so characterizes the middle classes... unthinking, lazy and life denying...oppresses the true, free human spirit....banal evil central to hypocrisy and irresponsibility that causes so much trouble, strife and suffering in the world ... injustice and violence...” (p. 79). Where did he get these values and how does he defend them in a universe without God? Why are his values superior to others’? If God doesn't exist, objective moral values don't exist, they’re merely a function of biology and social construction. If values come from evolution then morals are totally random. Dawkins says, ”There is no design, no evil, no good, just machines propagating DNA.”

Inconsistent. “The authentic person not only recognizes [we are free and responsible], he strives to come to terms with it and even to treat it as a source of values” (p. 82). To Christians, the need to come up with values is a clue that we’re made in the image of God. The atheist claims there is no God yet strives to come up with values. This seems
fishy to me. If the universe is as absurd, pointless, and meaningless as claimed, why even bother with meaning or values?

Unable to explain desires. “The desire to have a foundation [of oneness with self]...is fundamental to the human will so it can never abandon this desire. Sartre says... ‘it is the transcendental structure of human reality.’ Any attempt to abandon altogether the desire for foundation collapses into a project of nihilism” (p. 85). Christians call the aversion nihilism a sign of being made in the image of God. If the universe is absurd where did this aversion to nihilism come from?

Foundationless virtues. “Nobility and dignity need to be reinstated as important virtues, with a lot less emphasis on sympathy and the toleration of failure, negligence and self neglect. Today, the failure and sloppiness of too many greedy, lazy, irresponsible, willfully ignorant, other-blaming people who whine that they did their best when they clearly didn’t is just too readily excused” (p. 89). Without transcendent objective values how can one person’s idea be better or worse than another’s?

Uncooperative. “...authenticity involves refusing to live according to the expectations of others” (p. 95). I would find such a roommate, partner, coworker, employee, employer, and friend very difficult to live with. Happily, Cox adds, “...a degree of social conformity is required for a person to meet the demands of most situations” (p. 95-96).

Weird. “A person’s fundamental choice is arbitrary and groundless but it is nonetheless a choice of self that establishes grounds for all subsequent choosing” (p. 109). Grounding all of one’s choices on choices that are arbitrary and groundless seems not only circular but risky. The existential emperor is wearing no clothes; am I the only one to notice?

Religiously irreligious. “...it is possible for a person to undergo a radical conversion in which he redefines himself, hopefully for the better, by establishing a new fundamental choice of himself” (p. 109). Yet several pages earlier Cox disdains the “belief that you have been born again” (p. 100). Christians and existentialists apparently agree that conversions that make people better are not only possible but desired. Existentialists base conversion on making choices. Christians base their conversions on Christ.

Intolerant. “...only people themselves can give their lives any meaning through the goals they set themselves, the choices they make and the actions they take” (p. 113). And yet Cox disapproves of any meaning people give themselves that don’t meet with his approval.

Conclusion
This philosophy denies the existence of God and of hope. This approach apparently feels awkward so existentialists convince themselves to live with the awkwardness through grit and determination. They chide those who choose religious faith with charges of being “irresponsible.” In other words, embracing a hopeless atheism is like hitting their head against a wall but instead of stopping the pain by exercising faith they rationalize why continued head bashing is responsible, good faith, authentic, and real. My, oh my, oh my.

**My Amazon review.**

This book inspired a Christian existentialist to renounce existentialism

Reviewer: Erik Johnson

Dr. Cox clarified my thinking. Before reading this book I considered myself an existentialist because I want to face death bravely, live authentically in an absurd universe, eschew nihilism, prioritize choice making, and be responsible. Thanks to Cox I discovered existentialism is much, much more. Here's what I learned from a book that, "just lays the hard existential truths on the line with little or no soft soap" (108):

Existentialism means insulting people.

"...nonsense [of]...scientists, preachers, parents...school teachers" (3).
"...morbidly obese people waddling around...supersize themselves" (6).
"...he is an ignorant dork who needs to grow up and get real" (18).
"...I am full of resentment about other people" (41).
"...couch potatoes...greed, laziness...general self-neglect...slobs" (50).
"...whining, irresponsible slob..." (54).
"...Sartre's ...abiding hatred and distrust of people..." (73).
"...sloppiness...greedy, lazy, irresponsible, willfully ignorant" (89).
"...existentialists...criticize...as they are very fond of doing..." (93).
"...Nietzsche...very fond of wittily insulting other thinkers" (97-98).
In other words, brace yourself when the existentialists show up!

Existentialism means endorsing all choices but metaphysic choices.

"...come up with a more optimistic conclusion that isn't just a naïve fairytale or wish list" (16).
"...there are no ideal, otherworldly, God-given, abstract, metaphysical essences giving reality or meaning to particular things" (17).
"A person who supposes...meaning comes ready-made or that there is an ultimate purpose to human existence established by a deity or deities is deluded and a coward in face of reality" (18).
"Some religious groups...confession...as a cure for the disease of guilt they spread around for free" (67-68).
"...courageously affirm the existential truths of the human condition--abandonment in a Godless universe" (70).
"[Sartre hated those who believed] they have an immortal essence...their existence is inevitable...they exist by some divine decree rather than by accident...[and that] moral values are objective, absolute and unquestionable" (73).
"...take responsibility...rather than...the belief that you have been 'born again'" (100).
In other words, our choices are valid only if they pass muster with the existentialists!

Existentialism means making our own meaning, values, and ethics.

"the meaning each person chooses to give his...own existence" (15).
"meaning...must be established by each person from within" (18).
"[The disabled are]...free to choose the meaning of his disability" (49).
"The authentic person...treat[s] [freedom] as a source of values" (82).
"A person's fundamental choice is arbitrary and groundless but...establishes grounds for all subsequent choosing" (109).
"...people...give their lives any meaning through...goals...choices" (113).
In other words, don't count on the existentialists to arbitrate ethical issues; all is relative!

In conclusion, Cox and his pals preach, "it is authentic to respect and affirm the freedom of others" sometimes, "when we tease and tantalize them is to fall into a certain kind of bad faith" unless you're writing a book, and there is "ethical and moral behavior" (62), but woe to the person whose ethics are faith based.

Erik Johnson
Former Christian existentialist, now just Christian