

**Existence
and
Choice**



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On Dharmic Existentialism

by

WIM VAN DEN DUNGEN

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Frontispiece :

Second Ox *Herding Image* by Tenshō Shūbun (1414 – 1463).

www.sofiatopia.org/ten_ox-herding_images.htm

“Along the riverbank, I discover footprints.

Under the fragrant grass, I find them.

Deep in the woods, high on mountain tops they've been traced.

Nowhere are they absent ...

But where can the Ox be seen ?”

“To will oneself moral and to will oneself free
are one and the same decision.”

Simone de Beauvoir

The Ethics of Ambiguity, 1964.

Contents

Introduction	1
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PART I | WHO AM I ?

01 The Thought “Ego”	35
02 What is Consciousness ?	63
03 Integral Rationality	87
04 Perception and Sensation	123
05 The Death of God	143
06 From Essence to Existence	159
07 Existence is Full-Empty	173
08 Will, Freedom, and Choice	199
09 Historicism and Embodiment	217
10 Existence and Creativity	227
11 What is Nonduality ?	251
12 Quantum Nonduality	277
13 Authenticity	313
14 Theist Existentialism	345
Reflections on Part I	372

PART II | HOW TO LIVE ?

Introducing Part II	379
15 Emotions Down and Up	389
16 The Worldly Concerns	443
17 Layers of the Mind	453
18 Four Facts	479
19 From Attention to Mindfulness	493
20 A Tool for Insight	503
21 From Now to Timelessness	515
22 Dharmic Existentialism	531
Conclusion	539
Notes	541
Selected Bibliography	549
Author Bio and Biblio	579

Plus est en Vous !

motto of *van Gruuthuuse*
a 15th-century Flemish noble family

Introduction

Choice is what this book is about. Undoubtedly, to decide lies at the heart of existentialism. Do we choose, or are we set? Both. Defining existentialism, a word coined by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel in 1943, is irrelevant and impossible. Immaterial because an objectifying stance or “God’s Eye” on the matter is absent. Unfeasible because existentialists hold a wide range of *divergent* positions when answering its two basic queries:

Who am I? How to live?

Given the replies to these questions are as inexhaustible as crucial, existentialism is never outdated or on the way out. Indeed, to reduce it to “the metaphysical expression of the spiritual dishevelment of a post-war age” is wayward.¹

Existentialism, like existence itself, is forever *underway*.

Compatriots of Marcel, like Sartre and de Beauvoir, adopted the label willingly. Still, many others whose thoughts informed existentialism, like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Camus, rejected it. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche never heard of it but prepared it. But Heidegger, Sartre, and Jaspers are unthinkable without Nietzsche. Like Sartre and Camus, he rejected the Platonic/Christian God. Buber, Marcel, Tillich, and Levinas were theists at home in the Judeo-Christian fold.

Jaspers opposed the label altogether because, as an “-ism,” it suggested a doctrine, a *particular position*. He prefers to name his approach *Existenzphilosophy*. In the form of a “huge monologue”² born out of “genuine philosophizing,” it assists individuals in achieving “true existence.” It calls, according to Jasper, for a style of thinking devoid of the traditional academic referencing method, using condensed paraphrases and outlines of a system of thought. Jaspers wants to become *unreferierbar*, thinking without a

doctrine. Content is a means to transcend content and nothing more. His relentless effort poured into several bulky books intends to end the superstitious bullishness in science, theology, or academic philosophy. No neutral observation is possible, for a human being cannot be objectively grasped in its totality. The future always hangs on the responsibility of the decisions and actions made by humans – they are fundamentally defined by *freedom*. However, the latter is not a universal principle but a standard, an axiom. Freedom cannot be rejected nor proven.

Reading the existentialists, we find hardly any principles, a unifying doctrine, or a system of thought. Representatives differ widely in their views, concerns, and approaches. Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre are not in agreement on the basics. Does any of the great tomes of the existentialists contain the word “existentialism”? No.³ The term does not refer to a philosophy. Still, it is the *sticker* of a movement revolting, among other things, *against doctrine building*. Existentialists who refuse to be part of any school of thought, rejecting any belief and condemning traditional philosophy as remote from life and superficial in its academism, portray a susceptibility also found in the past (e.g., the Sophists or much later Pascal). But only in the last two centuries, in the context of political revolts, the Industrial Revolution, and two World Wars, has the *existentialist protest* become hard-edged. Impending planetary eco-apocalyptic collapse driven by greedy materialism and global consumerism, (neo)liberalism, electoral autocracy, theocracy, and one-party communism continue to suffocate the individual, generating a cohort of inauthentic citizens, a herd mentality, the blind leading the blind.

It has been contended that the common ground shared by existentialists is the “individualistic turn.” It is a move away from a dominant, objectifying intellect. Instead, one faces *the human condition as it is lived*. It cannot be fully captured by a conceptual system or solely answered with academic intellect. But while

critical of formal reason, existentialism is *not* a form of irrationalism. Nor a surreal elevation of contradictions for catharsis or psychic mechanics. To be sure, Carnap found inconsistencies when reading the first page of *Sein und Zeit*. Still, Heidegger's intent was *not* to promote the futility of words. On the contrary. Even Jaspers used a sea of orations, sermons, and appeals⁴ to assist the individual in moving beyond the dictates of *referential* reason. Nor are the works of Kierkegaard well-formed. He advocated for passion, criticizing hypocrisy and the theoretical approach to human existence. He rejects reason. Contrast this with Nietzsche, who did not extol moods at the expense of rationality, rebuffing Christianity as the archenemy of reason,⁵ seeking *another format* than the Platonic, Apollonian stance.

Traditional accounts of existentialism usually begin with an overview of the thoughts of the significant representatives of the movement. Historical precursors like Pascal, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche are mentioned. In varying degrees, they influenced protagonists like Heidegger, Jaspers, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Marcel, Tillich, Ortega y Gasset, Levinas, and Buber. The objectifying, representational approach runs against the existentialist intent. So chief dignitaries like Heidegger and Jaspers advanced their "own" Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, juxtaposing quotes from different books to satisfy their outlook at the expense of what was written. In the case of Nietzsche, this is detrimental to understanding his *perspectivism*, for most of what he writes can only be genuinely grasped *if the context is known*, and the latter constantly varies. How often does he present and elaborate his topics as part of a performance? As a stage play in which the characters concretize abstractions, he does not want to epitomize them as such. So just quoting him runs the risk of *misunderstanding* the matter at hand. Indeed, with great learning but in conflict with the principles of literary criticism, the Nietzsche interpretations of Heidegger and Jasper "prove"

different conclusions. Heidegger found Jasper's Nietzsche inconclusive, never evolving a philosophy. In turn, Jaspers sees Heidegger as someone who started with existential pathos but ended as another metaphysician like *his* Nietzsche.

Who is right ? Existentialism is not academism.

This text on existentialism is in tune with the quest for an *integrated reason*. It does not advance a critical reading of the "great existentialists," compare them, and find some "standard" key to bring about a "unified system of existentialism." Such a thing is futile and vain. The "masters" will be consulted and, if need be, briefly quoted. Central concepts will be joined when required, and a new sense may be put forward.

The difference between historical existentialism and how the present book tackles *the standing of the I* and *how we live our lives lies in its attempt to inform existentialism regarding* what both West and East have to say about core issues. Even "great" thinkers like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger appreciated Eastern thought.⁶ Still, they could not probe enough to gather the gems to be kept. Deciding in what sense the East may contribute to this project, the Buddhadharma is, for reasons to become apparent, an obvious choice. However, only after 1959, with the XIVth Dalai Lama fleeing Tibet for India, did the *full extent* of the treasure house of the Buddhadharma become known to the West. New decisive translations of primary Vajrayāna texts were made possible while the classic rendition of the *Pāli Canon* by Bhikkhu Bodhi was still underway.⁷

The overlapping themes in the works of our champions are :

1. Existence Precedes Essence

Humans differ from minerals, plants, animals, and cultural artifacts. We are not only objectively present. We make choices and take action. *Our existence* always comes first. We become and individualize based on how we choose and act. No pre-given

“essence” (Gr. *eidos*) allows a definitive and complete account of our existence, for nothing grounds or secures it. As “not yet”⁸ (Ortega y Gasset), we are *always* in the process of self-making, pressing forward to realize *who we are* projecting a future.

2. The Self as Antinomy

The existentialists view our identity or “I” (“ego” or “self”) as the dialectical result of an *antinomy* between *facticity* and *transcendence*. These two vectors determine our singular but fragile sense of identity. On the one hand, our identity is determined by our physical body and socio-historical situation – our facticity. On the other hand, we surpass these by *taking a stand on them*, giving them *meaning*, and thus generating our own identities – our transcendence. Thus we move from personhood to individuality.

3. Freedom

Because of our transcendence, *we are free and responsible for who we are and what we do*. We alone are accountable for the choices and actions in our lives. As Sartre said, “we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. – We are left alone, without excuse.”⁹ Hence, there are no moral imperatives, utilitarian computations, or natural laws to explain or justify what we do. For Sartre, this realization of our freedom is often accompanied by anguish. Does it not remind us that we are alone and responsible for our choices, decisions, and actions ?

Yes.

4. First-Person Perspective

Because human existence cannot be studied from the outlook of detached objectivity, we can only understand ourselves if we adopt the *insider’s stance*. It means we have to come to grips with *what it means to exist as a human*, as an “I,” an ego. It is the experience of existing within the horizon of my situation, my *Lebenswelt*, to observe my life *as I live it*.

5. Authenticity

Most humans are conformists, so they adopt the downgrading and leveled-down identities advanced by the “public.” How to be true to oneself ? Is one a “knight of faith,” an “individual” (Kierkegaard), an “overman” (Nietzsche), or an “authentic individual” (Heidegger) ? Authentic existence does away with mummifying nihilism and inconsistent “anything goes” philosophy. It dares *to say Yes ! to life* with Dionysian joy and exultation (Nietzsche). In the face of suffering, death, and absurdity, humans may decide on meaningful, committed, and fulfilling lives. The existential choice is critical to addressing our situation.

6. Moods

Detachment, objectifying thought, or deductive proof is rejected to grasp human existence. The question is : How to end *inauthenticity* ? Only visceral events and frontier situations are strong enough. In the latter, we *hit a wall*, and existence becomes a “floating question mark,” a “reality of total shipwreck” (Jaspers). Man has to accept this and leap from despair to the self as freedom, from fear to peace. It can only be done from the unique experience of “being given.” (Jaspers). Moods and boundaries inform us about *how we feel*. They have no object touching the *whole* of our existence. *Despair, sin, guilt* (Kierkegaard), *anxiety* (Heidegger), *nausea* (Sartre), *absurdity* (Camus), *being given* (Jaspers), and *mystery* (Marcel) shake us out of complacency and self-deception. They prompt us to be *honest with ourselves* and commit to our existence with renewed *intensity* (engagement).

7. Non-Objectifying Reason

Even the precursors of historical existentialism identified various *uses* of reason. In his *Pensées*, Pascal distinguished three types of rationality : geometry, accuracy, and finesse, each characterized by a *mode* of reasoning but always from principles. The spirit of

geometry has palpable principles that are far from everyday use. Conclusions are drawn using many tenets and understanding them without confusion. The spirit of accuracy has the property of gathering data based on a few principles and penetrating their results deeply. The former is strength and uprightness of mind. The other is the amplitude of the mind.¹⁰ Lastly, the spirit of finesse has principles *in everyday use and in front of everyone's eyes*. It is *not* associated with the “*logique du coeur*” as in Pascal’s other famous saying : “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.” Nevertheless, in its *everydayness*, the spirit of finesse unveils another usage of reason besides distant objectification. For Pascal, “We know the truth not only by reason but by the heart.” And on the dominion of reason, we find :

“Two extremes : to exclude reason, to admit reason only.”¹¹

In various shades, historical existentialists dismiss *objectifying* rationality as capable of tackling the concerns of human existence. In Kierkegaard’s view, I can only lead a complete human life by committing to (my) *subjective* truth. Nietzsche, turning Plato upside down, seeks *Dionysian, life-celebrating thinking*. Heidegger wants to replace representational, calculative, technological reason with *thinking that recalls (das andenkende Denken)*. It tries to remember and call back that we are part of (namely Being). It reminds of Plato’s *anamnesis*. Jasper’s *Existenzphilosophie* replaces referential thought with a *philosophizing mode* dwelling up from one’s existence.

The protest against theoretical, distancing, objectifying rationality is systemic – existentialism objects against *theoretical* reason without rejecting reason. Facticity works for nonhuman agents, but it is useless to tackle the human condition. A new perspective on rationality is called for, for only humans possess free will.

Does integrated rationality exist ?

How to bridge transcendence and facticity ?

Freedom and necessity ? Transcendence and facticity ?

8. Responsibility

Finally, in acknowledging freedom, can one do otherwise than recognize that we are *not free from being responsible for our actions* ? No. Are we not *always* informed by our free, authentic existence of the obligation to *cultivate* the ideal of *freedom for others* (de Beauvoir) ? Yes. Although no normative moral principle is or can be advanced, existentialism is not amoral. The good, valuable, meaningful way to exist simultaneously accosts freedom and takes responsibility. For what ? For the after-effects of our actions on our own lives and the lives of others. This mutuality is basic.

The above common thread linking our Western existentialists will be confronted with the Buddhadharma. Where needed, there is the correction. If possible, the content is extended. The main text provides the latter.

Comparative Synopsis

1. Our Precious Human Life

Human existence is rare, exceptional, and precious. As an amazing human being, the Buddha made an efficient, deliberate choice and *moved away* from suffering to end it altogether. In his view, humanity is not the *only* family of conscious presence. The Buddhadharma spots six states of enslaved embodiment, six “worlds” of *shared suffering*, each acting on its plane of existence (cf. hylic pluralism).¹² Hell-beings, hungry ghosts, demigods, and gods are mentioned next to human existence and the natural world (minerals, plants, and animals). These “speculative” realms also inhabit our *human mentality*, ranging from hellish to inflated. They all *lack* freedom, and perhaps that’s the main point. Our existence is precious because of our *capacity to decide*. The most superior choice is *to end suffering once and for all*. It is a decision that includes facticity and transcendence. There is more in us !

Contrary to Vedic and Upaniṣadic henotheism and Abrahamic monotheism, no eternal and self-sufficient soul is moved forward. Humans do not exist *from their own side*, each possessing a separated and enduring (eternal) core or essence (*eidōs*). There is no self-existing, self-powered, and autarchical identity – *no substantial I exists*. Human existence is *insubstantial*, meaning : *in no way substance-based*. There is no *ātman*, only *anātman* – nothing but our choices and actions complete human existence. We are a process.

2. Three Layers of Mind

In Indian Saṃkhya and Royal Yoga (Patañjali), spiritual emancipation is *a turning away* from the world (the seen or matter) towards the seer, the “great man” or spirit (*puruṣa*).¹³ Here, facticity must be eliminated and transcendence (aloneness or *kaivalyam*) fully embraced. The Platonic divide between a world constituted by material substance (*prakṛti*), and a realm of “pure” (read : isolated) consciousness or spirit (*puruṣa*) is pertinent.

The same insoluble problems ensue as in the West with its “nihilistic” Platonic divide between the sensuous world of becoming (*Diesselts*) and the abstract world of ideas (*Jenseits*).

Inwardmindedness, as practiced in the Buddhadharmā, reveals that consciousness is *the mere arising and illuminating cognitive engaging with the contents of momentary experience*, the ego’s sensate, and mental objects. It is noetic light, luminous cognizance, clarifying awareness.¹⁴

As experienced by the yogi, consciousness has coarse, subtle, and very subtle layers. Each features a separate identity and function. The coarse mind is the oft-interrupted ordinary thinking mind generating concepts and propositions. It is dual, positional, and intentional. The subtle mind underpins this thinking mind by being *uninterrupted*. It also contains the cause of suffering : ego-cherishing. The very subtle mind is the mind of humanity itself. It is uninterrupted but impersonal. It stores all conscious activity.

From moment to moment, life after life, suffering endures in youth and old age because the subtle mind identifies with a part of the very subtle mind and reifies it. When this misuse ends, the veil drawn over the very subtle mind is no longer, and the always-awake mind is seen. This *ur*-consciousness is insubstantial, pure awareness, and spontaneous compassion.

3. Human Free Will

Freedom is the *core existential* of the human condition. The Buddha aims to advance *complete* responsibility. His last words : “Now monks, I declare to you : all conditioned things are of a nature to decay – strive on untiringly.”¹⁵

It is all in our own hands.

Other sentient beings besides humans cannot arrest their suffering. Their identification with afflictive emotions and wrong views is so tenacious that no space, interval, or pause between their agony and their apprehension of it can occur. There is *no split-second of solace*. Anger, greed, stupidity, envy, or pride “enflame” the mind, setting everything ablaze and permeating it with dissatisfaction, despair, and disease. *Only by willing can things veer*. Joyous effort turns the tide. We are free to decide, but what we choose only comes if we put in the right effort. In the case of humans, *diligent, inspired work* is called for.

4. Mindfulness

In Classical Yoga, the yogi turns *inwards* (*pratyak cetanā*) towards the seer (*puruṣa*), transcending matter, the seen (*prakṛti*). Turning inwards serves an *ātman*-based ontology.¹⁶ The primary practice of the Buddha was *mindfulness*, calming the mind by merely *being aware of everything that happens* in terms of sensate and mental objects *without any reactivity*, just witnessing what occurs, without adding to it or taking something away.¹⁷

The first-person perspective is the outlook taken to cease suffering. Mind co-conditions experience. The *Dhammapada*

opens with : “All things have the nature of mind. Mind is the chief and takes the lead. If the mind is clear, whatever you do or say will bring happiness that will follow you like your shadow.”¹⁸

5. Liberation and Awakening

Suffering is inauthentic. Human existence is not fundamentally absurd (Camus) and desperate (Sartre) but intended to end cyclic existence (*samsāra*), permeated with crampiness (*duḥkha*) and enchantments of ignorance (*avidyā*). Humans are exceptionally qualified to do so.

The Buddha is also “faithful to the Earth.” She is the witness of his awakening, his existential commitment to the process nature of and interdependence between all phenomena. Buddha’s wisdom ends substance-obsession by seizing a strict nominalist position, identifying the world not as an illusion (the mere Platonic shadow of reality) but as illusory (dreamlike reality) and avoiding adding fiction (non-existent reality) to this elusive grand play.

With *life following upon life*, i.e., with the removal of the demise of our physical body as the end of human existence, the Buddha took, compared to all Western existentialists – the theists included – a *radically different vantage point*.

With liberation, the ego’s substantiality is removed. The “I” is no longer a permanent, eternalized “self.” It does not “move” from life to life (as in the Hindu account of reincarnation) but informs a beginningless and endless mindstream keeping its traits as long as possible (building the “house of life” again and again). Free, the ego is functional, not reified. It is merely an adjunct for practical and linguistic purposes. This freedom cannot be complete if it does not include the *dereification of the other*.

With this last step, awakening is a fact. All are experienced as devoid of separate existence, which is the same as saying everything is interconnected and *other*-driven, not *self*-driven.

6. Afflictive and Non-Afflictive Emotions

The Buddha focused on emotions instead of “overall” moods. Still, he does, together with sensation, volition, thought, and sentience, integrate feeling in his account of human existence. To end the *status quo* fostered by disingenuous, suffering persons, he does not stage despair, sin, guilt, anxiety, tragedy, death, and absurdity to push them out of their comfort zone to get them into *frontier situations*. The only way to attain lasting happiness is by joyous effort and *working on ourselves*. First, we have to calm the mind and then, based on this, investigate reality to gain insight into existence’s relative and absolute properties. Halting afflictive emotions is the topmost to calm down. Hatred and craving, the root dialectic of suffering, fan out in six primary emotional disturbances : anger, greed, stupidity, craving, envy, and pride.

7. Integrated Rationality

Besides conceptual (*prajñā*) and non-conceptual thought (*jñāna*), the Buddha integrates sensation, volitions, feelings, and consciousness. Reason is not limited to an analytical, discursive, distant mode but seeks to join a calm mind fed by non-afflictive, sublime attitudes like joy, love, compassion, and equanimity (the *Brahmavihārās* or “Abodes of Brahmā”). Like Nietzsche, he deems the substantialization of existence by “mummifying” words detrimental to one’s move out of suffering. Hence, Buddha’s ways were happiness, joy, exaltation, jubilation, and saying Yes ! to life. He rejected austerities after having practiced them for six years. He does, however, not reject reason or replace it with something else. But in all cases, the Buddha castoffs a theoretical approach to enhance a way of thinking informed by a radical change of heart, *definitively* seeking a way out of suffering human existence. His existentialist line of thought is anti-authoritarian and fully informed by *direct experience*. It does not reject analytics but avoids distance, coldness, and dogma.

“So, as I said, Kālāmas : ‘Don’t go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, “This contemplative is our teacher.”

When you know for yourselves that “These qualities are unskillful ; these qualities are blameworthy ; these qualities are criticized by the wise ; these qualities, when adopted and carried out, *lead to harm and to suffering,*” — *then* you should abandon them.’ (...)

When you know for yourselves that “These qualities are skillful ; these qualities are blameless ; these qualities are praised by the wise ; these qualities, when adopted and carried out, *lead to welfare and to happiness,*” — *then* you should enter and remain in them.”¹⁹

8. Great Compassion

In the Lesser Vehicle (Hīnayāna), a “personal” kind of freedom is cherished, namely that of the “worthy one” (*Arhat*). The highest emotion is equanimity, the mind of sameness. In the Great Vehicle (Mahāyāna), awakening can only happen when the happiness of *all other sentient beings* is aimed at (*bodhicitta*), with compassion at the helm, i.e., the method to act in such a way that the others are, *in fact*, freed from cyclic existence. When this *Bodhisattva intent* is coupled with an insight into reality, *in casu* the fact no substantial existence can be found, the compassionate mind, the compassionate act, and the object of compassion are all experienced as lacking inherent existence – this is Great Compassion (*mahākaruṇā*). Here the *method* of effectively making others happy, namely *compassion*, merges with the right assessment of reality, i.e., the wisdom, conceptual (*prajñā*) and non-conceptual (*jñāna*), realizing *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*), the absolute property of all possible phenomena.

When both “baskets” of compassion and wisdom are “full,” the two wings of the “bird of awakening” having matured, it hatches and immediately flies off.

The themes developed by Western existentialists will inform Dharmic existentialism. Transcendence is the first challenge. In the West, theist existentialists belong to the Judeo-Christian fold. While the Buddha acknowledges the existence of Brahmā, he has no salvic need for Him or any of them. He is not an atheist but rather a *nontheist* and transtheist. To some atheists, he preached theism. To hardcore theists, he spoke of atheism. But in all cases, the end of suffering is not caused by the *devas*, the Deities.

Facticity is the second challenge. Recent radical changes in our knowledge regarding cognition, physical reality, and ontology need proper attention and inform a *different* scene vis-à-vis the nature of physical reality and our socio-historical conditioning.

The first issue is *genetic epistemology*.

Epistemology characteristically asks two main questions. How is valid conceptual knowledge possible? How can it be produced and expanded?²⁰ The *normative* theory of knowledge answers the first and the *pragmatic* practice of knowledge the second. Typically, epistemology considers formal reason as the pinnacle of cognition. Therefore, it describes how object-knowledge is acquired and why it is valid from the perspective of formal and critical cognition, i.e., reason. In the genetic approach, one does *not* start with some ideal standard. One asks how something evolved from its nascent stages (mythical, pre-rational, and proto-rational cognition) into maturity (formal and critical cognition) and possibly beyond (creative and nondual cognition). In other words, how did our human cognitive capacity *come about*? Are there evolutionary *stages* or different modalities of cognizance?

Does the “pre-conceptual” and “non-reflective way of being-in-the-world” spoken of by existentialists like Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger denote *the first three stages of our cognitive development*? These are the sensory-motoric (mythical), pre-operational (pre-rational), and concrete operational (proto-rational) modes of

cognition identified by Piaget based on his experimental work.²¹ Elsewhere, these earliest stages of cognition were linked to ego genesis, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and other aspects of our cognitive functioning.²² Together, these earliest three form "ant-rationality," i.e., the mythical, tribal, and imitative stages of ego genesis. Our existentialists knew little of this.

The second issue is *physics*.

What existentialists call "facticity" is primarily, if not exclusively, informed by Newtonianism, uniting, among other things, continuity, separate Euclidian absolute space and time, consistency, and absolute determinism.

The superb edifice built by Newton was based on the work of the "father of modern science," Galilei. In 1623, he declared that the universe "stands continually open to our gaze" but could not be understood unless one learned the "language of mathematics."²³ But how to capture sensory *qualities* like color, sound, smell, taste, and touch in the *quantitative* language of mathematics? One cannot. E.g., Galilei's quantitative outlook exhaustively defines a tomato by size, shape, location, and motion. The tomato is not in itself red. The *qualitative experience of red*, the redness of the tomato, only exists in the soul of the person perceiving the red. So Galilei's universe had only two kinds of entities. *Material objects* with quantities captured by equations and *immaterial souls* enjoying their five sensory consciousnesses in response to the world.

Both Galilei and Newton knew that their quantitative view was a *partial* description of reality: its physical, material side. The no-no to describing meaning and value by number did not make them eliminate quality or reduce it to quantity. Materialism and Newtonianism were not yet married or institutionalized.

At the end of the 19th-century, Newtonianism was so popular that his professor told Max Planck *not* to go into physics because almost "everything was already discovered." All that remained

was to “fill a few holes.” Nevertheless, on the 7th of April 1900, Lord Kelvin delivered his Friday Evening Lecture at the Royal Institution in London. He noted two “clouds.” The first was the Michelson-Morley experiment indicating (a) the absence of the ether, which was supposed to mediate Newton’s gravity, and (b) the constancy of the speed of light. The second dealt with the so-called “ultraviolet catastrophe,” the prediction that an ideal black body at thermal equilibrium will emit radiation in all frequency ranges and release more energy as the frequency increases, i.e., *continuity*. But in the cooling down, jumps were observed ! The first “cloud” would lead to Einstein’s theory of relativity. The second to Planck’s “quantum jump” and quantum mechanics.

The Newtonian picture of reality drastically changed. And although Newton’s equations are correct several decimal places after the comma, making them adequate to describe meso reality, things were in a jam. Instead of continuity, matter “jumped,” being *discontinuous* at the primary level.

In his special theory of relativity, Einstein replaced Newton’s division between absolute space and time with the unity of *relative spacetime*. In his general theory of relativity, covering all motion, mass correlated with the curvature of spacetime. Matter curves spacetime. This curvature determines how it moves.

Despite these radical changes, ending Newton’s view on absolute space and time, Einstein remains close to him in terms of determinism. He backed deterministic, eternal law and order, much in the line of Spinoza, who inspired him. He was a naive realist and representationalist. He believed the Moon was there even if nobody was watching or thinking about it.

However, a new, nondual “superimposed” state was put forward in quantum theory. Before observation, it contained all possible states of a quantum system, bringing this down to a single state particle when observed – the “collapse of the wave function”

mathematically described by von Neumann.²⁴ Determinism made way for *probabilism*. Quantum systems are “objective” probabilities. Moreover, the momentum and position of such a particle can never be *both* precisely known – the principle of indeterminacy of Heisenberg. These findings troubled Einstein. He rejected the idea of God playing dice.

His E.P.R. thought experiment, discussed later, backfired in highlighting the inconsistency of the quantum theory. In 1964, Bell’s theorem proved that quantum physics was *incompatible with local hidden-variable theories*,²⁵ and in 1972, Clauser and Freedman²⁶ tested Bell’s theorem. It showed that the statistical predictions of quantum theory were correct. In the early 1980s, Aspect verified *entanglement*. Physical reality was found to be *nonlocal*.²⁷ Supposing the existence of hidden variables is inconsistent with how physical systems behave. These were hypothesized to normalize entanglement, offering a return to local realism. But no, naive realism (Einstein-isolation) contradicts what happens down there. Our everyday, superficial understanding of how the physical world works conflicts with quantum theory. Consider the double-slit experiment. It showed that our expectations on the meso-level are not satisfied on the micro-level of physical reality. A subatomic phenomenon behaves as a wave or a particle depending on how we observe it. The “distant” and “objectifying” Newtonian scientist observing *without* interfering with what is detected does not exist.

Completeness was lost because Gödel showed that a set of axioms with no contradictions with which arithmetic can be done will *always* contain statements in that system that *cannot be proven using these axioms* – *incompleteness* replaced completeness.²⁸ In 1974, the mathematician Mandelbrot discovered the Mandelbrot set, or *M*-set, the most famous “fractal” derived by an easy iteration, or $f_c(z) = z^2 + c$.²⁹ A fractal is any geometrical structure with detail on

all scales of magnification, which goes to infinity. These mathematical shapes have been associated with chaos theory (Lorenz), the study of dynamic systems whose random states of disorder and irregularities are governed by underlying patterns exceedingly sensitive to initial conditions. It implies that a slight change in one state can result in significant differences in a later state (the Butterfly-effect). In complex, chaotic systems, ongoing feedback loops, interconnectedness, replication, self-similarity, fractals, and self-organization are at work.

Prigogine's theory on dissipative systems concurs.³⁰ These are thermodynamically open systems operating far from equilibrium, constantly exchanging energy, matter, and information with the environment. Complex, open systems become more intricate by increasing the exchange of energy and information with their milieu, thereby "reversing" entropy, not returning to randomness, and not losing organization. This ability of dissipative systems to avoid collapse by complexification is called "negentropy." The common thread is the *nonlinearity* of most dynamic systems, linearity being the exception rather than the rule. Are linear energy cycles found in nature ?

And then, in 2012, the discovery of the Higgs boson made it clear that fundamental particles like electrons and quarks *acquire mass through their interactions with the Higgs field*.³¹ This boson is an elementary particle in the Standard Model of particle physics formed by the *quantum excitation* of the Higgs field. It ends the notion that mass *inheres in particles*, as Newtonianism conjectured. And the "exotic" nature of the Higgs field should not surprise. As a "scalar" field, it encompasses the whole universe.

These and other novelties (like zero-point energy) could not have informed Western existentialism. Whitehead's *Process and Reality* (1929), mixing the mathematical, physical, and cosmological novelties of the day, did *not* capture their attention. Instead, their

views on facticity stayed in the Newtonian fold. It is not surprising. Physicists and cosmologists alike were, for many decades, conflicted about most central issues. Please think of how long it took before the Big Bang got accepted. At first, Einstein even rejected it. Why would existentialists alter their deterministic and dualizing views on facticity? Before 1990, most scientists and philosophers like Popper³² still believed in locality, events being “Einstein-isolated,” meaning that, in accord with special relativity, no signal can travel from one particle to the other faster than the speed of light. Perhaps, but what about entanglement? The consequences imply a drastic change in how physical reality is viewed. Not only is the observer always part of the experimental set-up and not distant from it, but all matter is interconnected, ending the notion of separate, isolated physical states existing from their own side. All of this impacts facticity.

The third issue is *cosmology*.

Before the 19th-century, only religion explained the universe’s origin. The universe equaled the visible *solar system*, with the Sun orbiting around the Earth as the diurnal arc suggested. Ptolemy poured geocentrism into a mathematical form that lasted until Copernicus, who (re)introduced Heliocentrism (cf. Aristarchus). Copernicus still retained circular orbits and epicycles, or small circles whose center moves around the circumference of larger ones. His theory yielded results that were *less precise* than Ptolemy’s. The epicycles disappeared with the elliptical orbits discovered by Kepler. Newton identified gravity as the instantaneous force F explaining these orbits, relating the attraction between bodies m_1 and m_2 to their distance r and the gravitational constant G , or $F = G \cdot m_1 \cdot m_2 / r^2$. At this point, higher precision was obtained. Still, Newton failed to explain how gravity could act over long distances and rejected *actio-in-distans* in favor of a light-bearing ether, his theorized medium for light propagation.

In the last centuries, the science of cosmology acquired the tools to answer the question of the universe's origin with a coherent answer based on theories, predictions, and observations. Using mathematics made it possible to invent theoretical frameworks and cast observations into precise, abstract relationships. Due to the power of numbers, crucial *predictions* became possible, corroborating or disproving the formal framework.

When Nietzsche and Kierkegaard wrote their chief works, they had no idea how big the universe was nor whether it was static. The same goes for Heidegger, Jaspers and Sartre. As all stars seen with the naked eye are part of “our” galaxy, the so-called “Milky Way,” cosmologists of the early 1920s identified the universe *as a whole* with this particular galaxy, deemed an “island universe,” with nothing observable beyond its boundaries.

One crucial observation changed that. In 1923, with his 100-inch (2.5m) Hooker telescope at Mount Wilson Observatory, Hubble discovered a *variable* star (one with *luminosity variance*), letting him work out its distance from us. This star resides in the outer regions of the *Andromeda* galaxy. Before, *Andromeda* had been cataloged as just one of many faint, cloudy patches of light called “spiral nebulae” and deemed *part* of “our” galaxy. As the star found brightened and faded in a *predictable* pattern, not unlike a lighthouse beacon, it could be used as a reliable *distance marker*. Behold, *Andromeda* lay *beyond* our Milky Way ! Other discoveries followed, showing the visible universe's immensity, energy, and order. Developing a “standard” model of elements, forces, and fields took decades. A unified theory has not arrived yet.

As a worldview explaining physical stuff, Newtonianism has been abandoned. But *for all practical purposes*, it still offers good results on the meso-level of reality, the world attended by our five senses. As a superficial estimation, solving everyday problems, used for practical purposes, equations like $F = m \cdot a$ work. But in terms of

our understanding of physical reality, the current view endorses relativity, probability, indeterminacy, and chaos. An altogether different framework is set afoot. It constitutes a *radical shift* in our grasp of all physical events in the universe.

Our existentialists were *not* informed. Their outlook on facticity remained Newtonian or, more precisely, Kantian. But can they be blamed? Even today, philosophy students are not taught the upshots of indeterminacy, probabilism, quantum logic, fractal geometry, etc., on the constitution of an adequate view of reality. At heart, the current academic outlook and organization are still Newtonian, sinking into nostalgia for a bygone era of absolute certainty, a *hubris* founded upon uncritical thinking and reductionism (mental to physical). It was Feyerabend who, at the end of the 1970s, identified the institutionalization of incompetence.³³

The fourth issue is *ontology*.

In *Process and Reality* (1929), Whitehead argued that traditional ontology, cast in mathematical form by Galileo and Newton, ought to be replaced given relativity, quantum, and recent advances in cosmology. Substance-based ontology, involving separate, isolated, self-existing existents, was swapped by a process-based view explaining what all existents share.

For Whitehead, the European philosophical tradition is a series of footnotes to Plato. For millennia the West has been obsessed with finding the *hypokeimenon* or “underlying thing” as the foundation of reality, subjective and objective. Besides identifying objects by naming and describing their functionalities, *inherent existence* is added. Objects have then accidents ascribed to a substantial, unchanging core existing separately and on top of their identity and function. We have to wait for Ockham, who, in the heat of the problem of universals, declared universals not to exist. With Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, tackling ontological illusions

resulting from reifying ideas becomes critical thought's hallmark. It became clear that adding "it exists" to a description of objects does not add anything to our knowledge.

Substance-obsession is the nihilistic streak of the mind to fixate on its objects, whether sensate or mental. Outer and inner realities are reified, implying that a separate, inherent existence is ascribed. Action cannot be ascribed without being (*operari sequitur esse*). Process thinking reverses this. Being is replaced by existence, and the latter cannot be secured without action (*esse sequitur operari*).

Can Western existentialism survive these radical changes in epistemology, physics, cosmology, and ontology? How does facticity appear in the light of these revolutions? Especially the deterministic and substance-based outlook on the physical world must be targeted. The facticity given by the New Physics also conditions our transcendence, i.e., our ability *to face necessity* (read: high probability) and give it new, liberating *meaning*.

Various approaches to existentialism have been tried.

The *anthological literary tactic*³⁵ provides a general introduction to the protagonists and a selection of their key texts. In this way, the reader is directly introduced to a fraction of their writings. The contradictions between them, the variety of binding terms, and the thematic ambiguities are left to the reader to understand and integrate. Is it possible to establish sample texts? Is this a lazy approach? Should one not better read everything available? The latter solution has the disadvantage of prompting years of reading, assimilating, comparing, and shifting out.

In the *thematic approach*,³⁶ central themes are identified and expounded using available texts. This way, a "general" viewpoint may dawn, clarifying what existentialists share. Here, the academic, referential take suggests Ariadne's tread can be traced and followed. Is this possible, given the existentialist's disdain for a pigeon-hole method?

Some academics have a *reconstructive* angle.³⁷ They identify common themes, undertake large-scale comparisons, and try to bring them together in a “reconstruction” of what an “ideal” existentialist would think about the issues. Does one not overstep the crucial insight that such a *distancing* intellect cannot tread into the living stream in which the existentialists bathe? But for sure, as works of reference, these efforts are exemplary.

I am no follower, disciple, or epigone of any “great” existentialists or their precursors. None of them could provide me with the answers needed. The task ahead is not another literary, thematic, or reconstructive effort, another attempt at defining, delineating, or rebuilding existentialism in the light of Buddha’s Dharma.

As a Buddhist, I was struck by the *existentialist stance* taken by the Buddha on many occasions. In many ways, he was an existentialist *avant la lettre*. Is dharmic existentialism just another “form” of existentialism?

Because some of the ideas already figure in our existentialists’ writings, it cannot be said to be a “new” kind of existentialism. Given that Dharma teachings will be assimilated, it cannot be said that dharmic existentialism is Western. But as most central themes of our Western existentialists will be touched upon and fit in, it is not solely Eastern.

The intent was to write about *existence* and the two main questions of existentialism :

Who am I? How to live?

Integrating the answers of both East and West offers a higher vantage point. The answers will lead away from some of the *dadas* of Western existentialism.

Integrating the Buddhadharmā will provide another, more integrated, and pansacral perspective on existence.

Existence and Choice has two main sections covering 22 chapters.

Who am I ?

Chapter 1

“Who am I ?” is at the forefront of investigations. If freedom is a fact, then who is this “self” or “ego” seemingly making the decisions ? Greek, Hebraic and Christian views are compared with Cartesian solutions leading up to the impossible self in the substantialist traditions. Existentialism’s temporal self makes the ego a “thrown” project. In Dharmic existentialism, the self is open, process-based, and able to decide to enter the inner life of the subtle and very subtle mind.

Chapter 2

An attempt is made to define consciousness without depending on matter or information. Consciousness is noetic light, luminous cognizance, or clarifying awareness, the arising and cognitive engagement with the contents of momentary experience. Consciousness is either intentional, directed towards objects, or non-intentional, directed towards itself. For Sartre, the latter always accompanies the former, while yoga contradicts this.

Chapter 3

Human cognitive activity is not static but genetic. It starts with the coordination of movement and travels through three stages (instinct, reason, intuition) and seven modes of operations (myth, pre-rational, proto-rational, formal, critical, creative, and nondual). Likewise, the ego emerges as the result of processes depending on others. A distancing reason, limiting cognition to formal thought, is rejected. Integral rationality is sought. It brings the stages and modes under unity.

Chapter 4

Knowledge of the external world is not what it seems. Our senses are crude ; they process the data gathered by applying reducing valves, drastically reducing the information projected on the *neocortex* by the *thalamus*. The difference between what is collected (perception) and what is consciously identified as an object (sensation) is pertinent. The world is how the mind represents it. It blocks the way for naive realism, for the observed is always co-determined by notions, ideas, concepts, theories, and paradigms.

Chapter 5

Nietzsche’s “the death of God” marks the end of Platonic metaphysics in the guise of the Christian God, a self-subsistent Creator fashioning the world *ex nihilo*. Enlarging this intent, it heralds the end of substantialism, of mummifying concepts into immutable, life-denying essences transcending the world.

Chapter 6

Existentialism's credo, "existence before essence," rejects essentialism. In its Platonic and Peripatetic variants, Greek concept-realism cannot be given body without internal contradictions undermining the attempt to ground conceptual knowledge in something outside it, in a sufficient ground (*hypokeimenon* or underlying support).

All reference to "being" and "beings" has to be eliminated and replaced by "existence" and "existents" or "entities." While as a copula, the word "is" may be used, it has lost all associations with the third (wrong) step in generating concepts, the additions of "beingness" to what is identified and functionally described.

Chapter 7

The Buddhadharmā identifies only two steps to objectify anything. Firstly, a logical identity has to be established. Secondly, functional operations are pinpointed. Nothing more is needed. Ignorance, or false ideation, adds a third step : substantialist superimposition, adding "beingness" to identity and function, attributing inherent existence to the objects discerned. All phenomena are empty of self-existence and, therefore, full of interconnectedness with others. All of existence is full-empty.

Chapter 8

The Greeks had no concept of will. Socratic determinism dictates that he who understands acts accordingly. Acting against reason was giving way to emotions and passions. Will enters with Augustine. Conversion is a serious thing. One has to be free to choose and decide for Christ. Freedom, inner and outer, are necessary. Inner freedom is the inalienable indeterminate power of choice. Outer freedom is being free from scarcity and oppression, curtailing creativity.

Chapter 9

Attempts to eliminate freedom either focus on our dependency on historical circumstances, our thrownness, and fallenness, causing our they-egos to be in charge, or on our physical embedding, turning us into the slaves of our biology. Both positions, inflating facticity, are delusional. The ego is rooted in the body and depends on its outer situation.

But this reliance does not eliminate transcendence or inner freedom.

Chapter 10

Creative thought totalizes the cognitive process. Creativity, not necessarily artistic, manifests the "great ideas" populating creative thought when analyzing human existence. They are "hyper-concepts" because they operate at a level of

complexity *above* reason. They are denotative, formal, linear, and local semantics beyond discursive thought. They operate with dense symbolical, synthetic, informal, imaginal, non-linear, and nonlocal visionary representations running trance states. Creativity, resting on critical thought, is the bridge between reason and nonduality.

Chapter 11

Nonduality is the ultimate mode of cognition. It is characterized by an absence of conceptuality and refers to a cognitive process wholly abiding in our existence here and now momentarily. Science and philosophy are no more. Direct yogic perception of what *just exists* prevails. Perceptions, thoughts, and actions are dual when overlaid or stalled by conceptuality and nondual when the tendency to box in everything is halted because its disastrous effect has become clear.

Chapter 12

Quantum theory has changed our view on matter, the core factor in materialism and physicalism, the dominating view of the world believed to be solely physical. Before observation, a quantum system exists in a nondual superposition of potential states collapsing when observed. Due to observation, eigenstates exist. Quantum systems that are entangled stay so even if Einstein-separated. Naive realism fails.

Physical reality is nonlocal.

Chapter 13

Authentic is the individual living in good faith, accepting facticity and transcendence with the frailty of the self. As the heart of human existence, it is given. Socialization pulls a veil over it and pushes us to identify with the herd, the public, the “they.” Restoring what is lost can only happen if the mind’s inner recesses are probed and all aspects of our mentality are integrated into a new, ever-changing, and adaptive whole.

Without this, seeking authenticity is trifling.

Chapter 14

The theist existentialists cherish their Judeo-Christian heritage. The vertical dimension is accepted. One makes room for the radical other (Marcel), enters a direct, personal relation (Buber), or answers the call of the face of the other (Levinas). The existential situation is countered by opening up to something uplifting despite the ambiguity of the ego of atheists like Sartre and C°.

How to Live ?

Chapter 15

The most apparent effect of afflictive emotions is how they fixate, solidify, reinforce the ego, and feed toxic eigenstates. They obscure the mind by taking its needed calm away. What are emotions physiologically and in terms of our will, thoughts, and self-awareness ? Pacifying these afflictions is the first task.

Chapter 16

In a monastic reflex, the world is kept out by a Pachomian wall whose cultural relevance today may have nothing to do with spiritual intent. The urban yogi knows worldly concerns but cherishes the right livelihood, avoiding harming. One cultivates a balanced attitude toward pleasure, praise, approval, gain, and their opposites pain, blame, disgrace, and loss.

Chapter 17

The operational core of dharmic existentialism, and its difference from the Western approach, is the full-empty layeredness of the mind discovered through meditations and yogas. The superficial mind addresses existential issues with a (too) limited intellect and an (ambiguous) ego. It is bound to fail. The subtle mind is unconscious and uninterrupted. It allows for unity and continuity of observation but also holds the suffering mind, the core factor causing suffering. This mental obscuration causes false ideation of the self to occur, (partly) covering the very subtle mind and darkening the mind.

Chapter 18

We are told by the Buddha that his teachings run against the stream and are (too) difficult and profound. Are they only meant for those with “little sand in their eyes” ? Four facts are the foundation of the whole Buddhadharmā. Life is suffering. Suffering is caused by craving. Craving can completely stop. Walk the Eightfold Path, and it will. The noble are superior to their former selves.

Chapter 19

Mindfulness is the foundational practice advocated. It consists of cultivating attentiveness to every possible appearance, whether sensate or mental (like volitions, affects, thoughts, and self-reflections). It trains not to react. Not adding to nor taking anything out of the picture. Eventually, after considerable time, the mind is still whatever appears.

Chapter 20

Concentration is holding the mind to a single spot. The opposite of the 360° field of mindfulness, concentration only keeps 1° in mind. Here calmness is enforced so the mind may investigate and analyze the object of placement held

tight (Emptiness Meditation). Because of the impact of this practice on the mind, it is best practiced in retreat and with the help of a teacher.

Chapter 21

The moment has five dimensions : time, space, matter, information, and consciousness. The temporal dimension of the moment, the “now,” can be grasped analytically and synthetically. In the former case, it is punctiform. In the latter, it is somehow extended. Distinguishing objective and subjective time, the “now” is also a “door” to timelessness, the “fourth” time, also known as the “black time” of selflessness and the very subtle mind.

Chapter 22

Dharmic existentialism is built on the lived momentariness of consciousness observable during meditation. The solution to our existential predicament is not found in the past or future. Neither is it related to the “punctiform” nowness of objective time of thermodynamics, interleaved between retention and protention. The totality of the moment is the only existence in which everything is given to everyone (the Net of Indra, the *maṇḍala* of the now). When the moment is embraced, the living present (Husserl) unveils.

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