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# **Do it Yourself: Existentialism as Punk Philosophy**

**By Stuart Hanscomb**

Existentialism is a difficult philosophy to explain; efforts typically ending up trivializing or obfuscating so much about it that's important, original and relevant. There are a number of peculiarities that can account for this, but an important one is that Existentialism is a frame of mind as much as it is a collection of ideas. As Kierkegaard's 'aesthetic' works, and the novels and plays of Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus and Unamuno demonstrate, the communication of this form of philosophy benefits from being indirect. To appreciate its significance you have to *be there*, in amongst the detailed stories, rolling critiques and inspirational prose; you have to *catch a dose of it* through its resonance with your often unarticulated fears and aspirations. Along these lines I am offering a new way in; a hook in the form of an analogy with a movement in pop and rock music. Existentialism, I want to claim, is the Punk rock of philosophy.

Punk rock I'm characterizing as nihilistic, extreme, passionate, liberating, inclusive, amateur and violent. It had precursors and it still exists, but Malcolm McLaren, the Sex Pistols and all that they catalysed in the mid-70s, are its original and most important moment of impact. Punk was a wake-up snarl to an atrophied establishment, a 'loud raucous 'No!'<sup>1</sup>. It sought to destroy, and in the ruins left behind it flexed its gnarly uneducated wings and expressed anger and frustration in a crude but deliberate subversion of what came before. In place of refinement and privilege it offered energy and inclusiveness. The distance between band and audience shrank and sometimes disappeared. In place of a rider of white wine, Evian and cocaine it offered spit, sweat and blood. In place of systems, plans, improvable pasts and functional futures, it offered an exhilarating and dangerous present like a hyperactive adolescent. It couldn't be stage managed. It wasn't a performance in any conventional sense of the word, but a happening.

## ***no future: Nihilism***

Dada was art that was anti-art. Punk was music that was anti-music. Existentialism was a philosophy that was anti-philosophy. How did it avoid the contradiction? It walked a tightrope, which is part of the point. Punk music is an 'outsider aesthetic',<sup>2</sup> but it's still an aesthetic. Since it's necessary to the medium, Existentialism must recognize a place for reflective rational discourse, but part of its agenda is to identify the limits of such discourse, and in doing so redirect us to what the perspective marginalizes and represses. It will rail against conceits like the possibility of absolute knowledge, universal moral codes, an ultimate meaning to life, a final harmony between individual and state, or between the self and its possibilities. It will, in short, point to the limits of rational enquiry, and accordingly the limits of the

rational mind's jurisdiction over emotion, desire and the body. Hegel was the Prog Rock of philosophy.

### **'Right Guard will not help you here': Extremes**

Just as The Clash and The Damned wrote tunes covered by non-Punks, so the ideas of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Sartre have influenced professional analytic philosophers like Bernard Williams, Robert Solomon, Charles Taylor and Stephen Mulhall. The most radical element of this 'anti' stance, however, inheres as much in the subversive nature of its metaphors and stories as in its philosophized model of the human situation (as valid as this is).

Punk was 'a politics of energy'<sup>3</sup> and also traded in extremes: short songs, aggressively delivered, Mohican haircuts, ripped PVC and the pogo dance. The medium, like the message, was intense and to the point. The Existential in Kafka is firmly linked to the surreal and grotesque worlds of dung beetles, hunger artists and burrow-dwellers; Camus presents murder, despotism, plagues and the punishment of Sisyphus; Sartre began with the neo-horror of *Nausea* and moved on to suicide squads, jealous assassins, and condemned prisoners; Kierkegaard used seducers and infanticide to illuminate the human condition, and Nietzsche styled himself the 'anti-Christ.' Since human existence is so vividly exposed by an exploration of its boundaries, extreme situations present the Existentialist with a perfect method.

### ***The Filth and the Fury: Passion***

'Punk broke out across the face of Britain like a disfiguring rash.'<sup>4</sup> The Sex Pistols were an 'attraction/repulsion machine'.<sup>5</sup> To be gobbled on by punks was a compliment. The emotions and moods at the epicentre of existentialism are anxiety and disgust. Anxiety recognizes instability and contingency, and disgust is often manifested as anger and cynicism towards a complacent bourgeoisie, insensitive to possibility and the fragility of their forms of life. In the grotesque or immoral lurks a strange beauty such that an unsettling ambivalence results from Existential aesthetics.

### ***Babylon's Burning: Inclusive***

We refer to authors as 'Existential' as much because of their anti-systematising intensity as for their distinctive ideas. This is not a trivial point. The style models both the epistemic primacy of affective states, and the desire to inspire its reader to wake up. It is inclusive. We can all live authentically. Anyone can start a band. Sid Vicious became the whole point of the Sex Pistols and couldn't even play his instrument. Kafka wanted to 'shake us awake', Kierkegaard described his life as an 'epigram calculated to make people aware', and Sartre stressed that existentialism is a philosophy of action, not quietism. We are all the philosophers of our own lives.

### ***Oh Bondage Up Yours: Liberation***

Nihilism – that ‘desperate stubborn refusal of the world’<sup>6</sup> - is not an end point but a rite of passage, a temporary descent into the underworld. Existentialism isn’t just a reaction to rational or academic excess, it also promotes passion, self-creation, and the value of spontaneity. Malcolm McLaren’s mantra was ‘get a life and do something with it’. His stepson recalls how ‘he made up the best bedtime stories, but they always stopped in the middle and you had to finish them yourself’.<sup>7</sup> Punk shouldn’t be listened to like other music, and even dancing isn’t enough. It’s about a mood that needs full commitment; not appreciation of grooves and tunes, but the total attunement of one’s rebellious, absurd self. To dwell too soberly on Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground* or Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* misses the point. They are designed to capture and create adrenalized moments with the escape velocity to inspire life-changing self awareness.

### ***Do it Yourself: Amateur***

A high proportion of philosophers classed as existentialist have had tenuous relationships with the university establishment. This doesn’t necessarily make their output amateur in the pejorative sense (though Camus was accused of this), but it does in the sense of placing them outside of peer-reviewed professionalism. The result can be a freedom and spontaneity in their ideas, and a perspective on life less tainted by the analytical gaze of an academic persona. Also, to be on the outside creates a kind of anxiety that focuses our thoughts on the concrete content of life as lived. They feel more in need of a home than those employed by an institution.<sup>8</sup>

Like the pulsating aesthetic of Punk cartoon *Roobarb and Custard* existence is ontologically shaky, and the unemployed are more aware of this than most. A career and the training or education it implies is a source of stability which can create a halo that falsifies existence as a whole. The Punk is granted no such luxury. Cult spoken word guru Henry Rollins wasn’t aiming at anything like a career in music, but he was dedicated to Punk and to the spirit of the band Black Flag. Nor did he aim to be a stand up comedian, but he turned his hand to something like it, and the result are his highly unusual spoken word performances. He’s an amateur and an auteur, himself inspired by Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche’s ‘pithy one liners’. (He imagines Nietzsche’s return as a stand up comic ‘*There’s the crazy crowd at the back - Whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger!*’ Csshhh (cymbal crash)).<sup>9</sup>

### ***White Riot: Violent***

There is good violence like violence against oppression, or violence serving as a metaphor for the ostensibly harmless expression of frustration. Most Punk is good violence. But of course there is bad violence, and Punk has a truly nasty neo-Nazi wing.

Nietzsche and Heidegger were violent philosophers; they challenged the entire canon of Western Philosophy and with it the infrastructure

of civilized values. But to apply a cultural enema is to run risks. You can't be sure of what will inhabit in the cleansed space. It might be 'will to power', but it might equally be powerful willies (never mind the bollocks). Moreover, how can you be sure it's cleansed? How can you be sure if cleansing's even possible? By philosophizing with a hammer Nietzsche courted misappropriation. Heidegger was for a while existentialism's Punk Front.

I have attempted here an indirect and partial illumination of the well-known-but-little-understood philosophy that is Existentialism. It's not the whole picture for sure; the Punk analogy can't encompass its gentler claims about the mysteries of the human condition and its more harmonious ties to the academic establishment via (for instance) hermeneutics, negative theology, psychotherapy, and virtue theory. Nevertheless, more than other Western philosophies it's one to be inhaled with keen personal awareness and exhaled in the living moment. For this reason its proper force must be communicated indirectly. Punk, says Jon Savage, was 'at its most powerful when impossible to define'.<sup>10</sup> There is something about vitality that precludes satisfying definitions or manifestos, and so all the time Existentialism defies clear categorization there's reason to believe it's alive and well.

## Glossary

**no future** Sex Pistols song from *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*

**'Right Guard will not help you here'** A line from US Punk outfit Dead Kennedys' song *Holiday in Cambodia*.

**The Filth and the Fury** The name of the film biopic of the Sex Pistols

**Oh Bondage Up Yours** A song by X-Ray Spex

**Babylon's Burning** A song by The Ruts.

**Do it Yourself** An album by Ian Dury and the Blockheads

**White Riot** A song by The Clash.

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<sup>1</sup> Garry Mulholland, *Fear of Music*, p.35

<sup>2</sup> Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming*, p. xiv

<sup>3</sup> Stewart Home, *The Assault on Culture*, p.81

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Maconie, *Cider With Roadies*, p. 110

<sup>5</sup> Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming*, p.xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 136

<sup>7</sup> Cited in *The Word* magazine, June 2010.

<sup>8</sup> 'Philosophy is authentic homesickness' Novalis (cited in Cooper, *Existentialism*)

<sup>9</sup> *Sweatbox*, Disc 2.

<sup>10</sup> *England's Dreaming*, xvii