On Being and Becoming

What’s in it for me? Live more authentically, and become attuned to the full range of possibilities that your life has to offer.

You strive to live a good and fulfilling life. You’re aware that you only have this life, and you don’t want to waste it. This awareness might even cause you anxiety. After all, you can’t be sure that the decisions you make now are going to benefit you later. This anxiety is the bread and butter of existentialism. Unlike most modern philosophies, rife with abstract theorizing, existentialism takes philosophy back to its roots as a practice of life. Its starting point is the human individual faced with the daunting prospect of choosing how to live.

These blinks explain how existentialism brings some clarity to this fundamental task by outlining what it means to live life with freedom, happiness, and authenticity. In these blinks, you’ll learn:

why existentialism doesn’t shy away from suffering, and even cultivates it; why it’s harder to be authentic in modern society; and what existentialism can contribute to solving the environmental crisis.

Existentialism was a diverse philosophical movement centered on the theme of human freedom.

Today, the word existentialism tends to evoke images of fashionable intellectuals smoking cigarettes in trendy Parisian cafés. This is likely because it was in the French context that existentialism first erupted into mainstream awareness. The movement's figureheads, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, were the first existentialist philosophers to enjoy celebrity-like status. And the couple’s famously open relationship and bohemian lifestyle would become synonymous with an existentialist way of life. But this perception of existentialism is far narrower than the movement really was. For one thing, its main ideas had already begun to develop in the nineteenth century with Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Both of these thinkers, in their own ways, sought to rescue authentic individuality from an increasingly homogenized mass culture. Other influences include the German phenomenologists Husserl and Heidegger, and also great works of literature, like the masterpieces of Dostoevsky and Kafka, all of which explore existentialist themes. Existentialism, then, isn’t a single, unified philosophy – it’s more a collection of works that focus on similar problems. That being said, all existentialist writers agree on a few basic principles. This is the key message: Existentialism was a diverse philosophical movement centered on the theme of human freedom. To begin with, all existentialists sought to reorient philosophy away from abstract theorizing and back to the real problems of life as people actually experience them. All existentialist philosophy begins from the position that a human being experiences the world from a first-person, subjective point of view. In fact, they remind us, it’s only from this point of

view that philosophy has any value at all.

The unique nature of our first-person perspective means that each person's experience of the world is profoundly personal, and can never be interchanged with anyone else's point of view. So, in the end, you, and you alone, are capable of making sense of your experiences and deciding how to act. For this same reason, existentialists tend to eschew traditional interpretations of the meaning of life – like the ones found in religious and philosophical doctrines. While it's fine to draw inspiration from anywhere, existentialists caution against blindly adopting prepackaged answers to the big questions in life. To existentialism's credit, it's not a philosophy that tells you how to live your life. Rather, it seeks to orient you to these big questions so that you can answer them for yourself. Lastly, all existentialists emphasize human freedom. While you can't control everything in life, much of it unfolds according to the choices and commitments you make. You may not like it, but you're responsible for creating the life you want, as well as the person you want to become.

Human beings should really be called human becomings.

OK – it's time to roll up your sleeves, because we need to get a bit of difficult philosophy out of the way. We need to understand the difference between being and becoming. Now, what on earth does that mean? To put this into context, this distinction is arguably the most fundamental in all of philosophy, and it harkens back to the very beginnings of the Western philosophical tradition. Put simply, being refers to that aspect of reality that stays permanent and unchanged over time. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato identified being with eternal forms, like the ideals of justice and beauty, which he believed were the only true reality. The concept of becoming, on the other hand, refers to those aspects of reality that are in a constant state of change. So, in Plato's philosophy, becoming refers to the changing world of human perception, which he dismissed as mere illusion. Plato's elevation of being over becoming would dominate philosophical thinking for the next two and a half thousand years. Eventually, however, the existentialists exposed a fundamental problem with this picture: it excludes human beings from reality. Here's the key message: Human beings should really be called human becomings. As science tells us, the human body is in a state of constant change and motion. Throughout our lives, the cells in our bodies grow, decay, and repair themselves continuously. And just as the physical body is ever-changing, so too is our experience. Human consciousness is a chaotic, endless flow of thoughts, feelings, and images crashing in like waves. Even our sense of self is forever being revised as we grow older. Pretty much everything about our existence is in a permanent state of transition from the moment we're born until the moment we die. Change is the only reality we know. For this reason, existentialism turned the Platonic ideal on its head. Its proponents declared that the true reality of human nature is "becoming." And the idea that humans have a fixed "being" was relegated to the realm of illusion. All existentialism rests on this one conceptual reversal. Because, if humans don't have a fixed nature, that means we're not limited to any particular identity. What it means is that we're free to be whoever we want to be.

Existential suffering is a necessary part of authentic freedom.

So we've just learned that humans are existentially free. But this freedom is, admittedly, a two-edged sword. Because with freedom comes responsibility – and, as anyone who has children knows, responsibility can be terrifying. Much existentialist literature and philosophy deals with the psychic repercussions of human freedom. For example, in Dostoyevsky's novel Crime and Punishment, the character Raskolnikov commits murder on the basis that, in a godless world, he must be free to do anything he pleases. Ironically, however, his sense of freedom makes him feel even more responsible for his actions, and he spends much of the novel tormented by guilt. Existential suffering doesn't just happen in extreme cases, though. In fact, suffering like this can happen to anyone at any time. Maybe you're just sitting on the train pondering life, for instance, and suddenly you're overwhelmed by a sense of despair at not having achieved your childhood dreams. Existentialism's preoccupation with suffering has no doubt contributed to its image as a gloomy philosophy. However, existentialists don't advocate wallowing in suffering. Instead, it should be seen as an important step toward a more affirmative mode of life. The key message here is: Existential suffering is a necessary part of authentic freedom. In comparison, the philosophy of stoicism differs wildly from existentialism in its treatment of suffering. Stoicism sees suffering as unnecessary, and advocates for self-control as a way to overcome emotional pain. By contrast, existentialists don't advise resisting, or suppressing, painful emotions like dread, anxiety, and despair – they even advocate cultivating them. Because, as uncomfortable as they may be, these emotions are an integral part of the human experience. Consider the emotion dread. If you stop and seriously reflect on your own death, that's likely to inspire some dread. Indeed, many people prefer not to think about it at all. But, as the philosopher Martin Heidegger argued, if you can find the strength to look your fate directly in the eye, you may feel greater urgency to make more of your life here in the present, encouraging you to make changes and take risks. So, while embracing existential emotions like dread is undoubtedly painful, it serves to promote a more free and authentic life.

Authentic individuality requires taking responsibility for the life you want to lead.

If you've ever commuted to work in a packed subway, then you know what it feels like to merge into the crowd. Being in a crowd is a unique way of being in its own right. In the midst of a crowd, we tend to start acting in unison with the people around us. Ask yourself: Have you ever been in an audience and just started clapping simply because the people around you were clapping? This is a trivial example perhaps, but it does make one wonder just how much of our behavior is a result of unthinking imitation of the people around us. The crowd is a mode of being that defines modern society, and it presents a real danger to anyone who wants to live an authentic life. Existentialist writers were deeply concerned about the loss of individuality caused by modern mass culture. Nietzsche, for example, complained that his contemporaries resembled the mass-produced products that sit on store shelves. For existentialist writers, then, authentic individuality is not something you're born with. Rather, individuality is something you have to win by learning to think for yourself, cultivating your unique personality, and creating a mode of life that suits you. The key message is this: Authentic individuality requires taking responsibility for the life you want to lead. If you only act out of habit, then you're living an inauthentic mode of being – inauthentic

because you’re living as though you’re unaware that you have freedom. When you act habitually, you’re not conscious of the true range of possibilities that actually exist for you. It’s true that your choices are restricted by your situation in life, but you always have options, even if those options aren’t always clear. You may pretend that you don’t have choices, but that’s just a way of avoiding responsibility for how your life has unfolded. Authenticity, then, means first and foremost accepting responsibility for your freedom to choose at every moment. It also helps to take time regularly to reflect on different possibilities for action and to experiment with ways of living that break from your daily norm. This definition of authenticity may seem abstract, but there are very real benefits at stake. Living authentically means enjoying greater self-determination, and more choice to live in ways that suit you. It also means greater freedom from negative experiences you’ve had in the past, and less need for validation from others.

Our freedom depends on the recognition of others.

All this talk of authentic individuality – a bit egocentric, no? And isn’t it insensitive to say that people are always free when so many people are oppressed? These are common criticisms of existentialism, but, in fact, many existentialist writers anticipated these criticisms and accounted for them in their philosophy. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, argued that in order for us to live fully fledged authentic lives, we have to recognize each other's freedom. Because, just as we depend on others for our physical survival, we also depend on them for the survival of our sense of self, through their recognition of us as people who have value and freedom. But, just as others have the power to recognize us as free subjects, they also have the power to deny us that freedom by treating us like objects. Here’s the key message: Our freedom depends on the recognition of others. In a famous passage, the philosopher René Descartes once described how he couldn’t be sure that the people walking by outside his window were even conscious. He insisted that, for all he knew, they could be mechanical automatons walking around in hats and coats. Several centuries later, Sartre incorporated this insight into his own thought. He argued that, just as it was possible for Descartes to see the people outside his window as potential objects, it’s also possible to treat people as objects, too. The most extreme case of this is slavery, in which one group of people treats another group as objects to be used and traded. But, Sartre argued, even in supposedly free and equal societies, people objectify each other all the time. For example, when you’re dealing with the clerk at the post office, it probably doesn’t cross your mind that this person has desires and aspirations and struggles just like you. From your perspective, this person is just a letter-stamper. For the most part, this kind of objectification is relatively harmless. It becomes problematic when people objectify you in ways that harm your self-esteem and limit your sense of freedom. A common example of this kind of objectification is shame. As Sartre argued, when someone shames you for something, he imposes a very one-sided and negative image of you onto your consciousness. Not only does this feel bad, but it limits the way you think about yourself, reducing your possibilities for living. Shaming someone, then, is not an authentic way of relating to others. Authentic relationships mean trying your best not to reduce others to mere objects, and instead recognizing others as free and dynamic subjects just like you.

The self and the world are two sides of

an integrated whole.

In his book The Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus describes a peculiar kind of experience that he calls the absurd. As he describes it, all of us are struck every now and then by the odd feeling that the world we live in is a strange and unbelievable place. In these moments, we look to the world for answers to the meaning of our existence, but the world responds with mute indifference. From this description, It's quite clear that existentialist accounts of the world differ radically from those found in scientific journals. Of course, existentialists don't reject the scientific method. But what interests them more is how the world appears to us from our human perspective. From this point of view, the distinction between "self" and "the world" is not as clear-cut as we've been led to believe. This is the key message: The self and the world are two sides of an integrated whole. When we think about the world, we often imagine it as being outside ourselves. At least, this has been the dominant way of thinking since Descartes. As Descartes described it, there's immaterial consciousness on the one hand, and the material world on the other. But existentialists argue that this absolute division between us and the world doesn't reflect our lived experience. The self doesn't exist in a box, completely cut off from the outside world. On the contrary, we experience ourselves in the midst of the world, actively engaging with worldly objects. From our point of view, self and world constitute an integrated whole. Consider this example. Imagine that, after a long, cold winter, you step out of your house for the very first warm day of spring. You experience the sun's light and warmth not just in your eyes and on your skin, but as a pleasure that spreads throughout your entire body. You might think of yourself as separate from the sunny world out there, but at this particular moment, it's hard to say exactly where the world ends and you begin. One option is to say that the sun's light belongs to the world, and emotions belong to the self. But, as existentialists point out, even our emotions can hardly be contained within us. Our emotions radiate out into the world and alter the way objects appear to us. An apple, for example, which looks mouth-wateringly delicious when we're starving, might look bland and dull when we're full. Our emotional orientation to the world transforms the way it appears to us. In the next blink, we'll see how our emotional orientation to the natural world has transformed it, too.

We urgently need to cultivate a more harmonious relationship with nature.

Over the last two centuries, since the rise of the industrial revolution, our relationship to the natural world has become dangerously imbalanced. By producing and consuming en masse, we've eviscerated natural ecosystems and polluted our planet. We've flattened mountains, cleared forests the size of nations, and choked our oceans with plastic. And, of course, through the mass burning of fossil fuels, we've precipitated a changing climate and put the planet on the road to catastrophe. It's a dire situation, indeed. But what does it have to do with existentialism? It may not seem like philosophy has much to contribute to solving the environmental crisis, particularly one that's occupied with human existence. But, in fact, existentialism is compatible with an ecologically oriented way of life. The key message here is: We urgently need to cultivate a more harmonious relationship with nature. Heidegger is the philosopher most associated with the deep ecology movement – a philosophy that promotes the intrinsic value of nature. Heidegger associated environmental exploitation with the rise of a

mathematical and scientific mode of thinking. He argued that, no matter how useful scientific thinking is for our society, it tends to promote an objectifying perspective. In other words, it presents what it studies as mere objects that can be known and made use of. He argued that since this scientific mode of thinking came to prominence, we've lost our original connection to the natural world, and have come to view it exclusively as a reserve of resources to be plundered and exploited. For this reason, Heidegger argued, we must move beyond purely scientific thinking and promote a more respectful and generous orientation to nature. He suggested that we might look to poetry as a model for such an orientation. When a person listens to poetry, her aim is not just to understand what she's hearing, but also to enjoy the beauty of the words. Heidegger thought that, by adopting the poetic stance toward nature, we might become more receptive to it as something beautiful and awe-inspiring in its own right. So we can conclude that what it means to live authentically from an ecological perspective is to live in a way that cultivates harmony and intimacy between us and the natural world that sustains us.

Final summary

The take-away message from these blinks is: Living authentically means relating to other beings in a way that doesn't reduce them to mere objects, but instead remains attuned to the profound possibilities inherent within them. Existentialists identify three fundamental types of being: the self, the other, and the world. To live authentically, you must attune yourself appropriately to each of them. Relate authentically to yourself by not identifying too closely with any image of yourself and remaining aware of your freedom to choose. Relate to others authentically by never treating them as objects, but with the same respect for their freedom that you would demand for yourself. And, finally, relate authentically to the natural world by not reducing it to a mere resource to be exploited. Promote harmony with nature by rekindling the sense of mystery and wonder it once inspired in us. Actionable advice: Try an authenticity thought experiment to identify areas in your life that you'd like to change. Nietzsche once developed a thought experiment that he called the eternal return. He envisioned this experiment as a kind of device that would help you to make more authentic decisions. For this experiment, ask yourself what changes you would make to your life were you to know that you would have to relive it, exactly as it is, again and again for all eternity. What do you think? Is there anything you would change, or can you honestly say that you'd be content to live your life over and over again, forever? Got feedback? We would love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with On Being and Becoming as the subject line, and share your thoughts!