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What This Book Is About

Was Socrates right when he said, "The unexamined life is not worth living"? In order to disagree with him, you still have to examine your life. Besides, even if he was right, it doesn't follow that the examined life is worth living.

Was Camus right when he said, "Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined"? There's only one way to find out.

Asking basic questions about yourself can be painful. Suppose the answers hurt or there aren't any. You may wish to return to the garden of ignorance and innocence, but by now it is too late. The trap of thought is sprung.

Fortunately, as Camus observed, "We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking." And for most of us, there are enough daily distractions to keep us going once we've acquired that habit. So to be realistic, we shouldn't overestimate the difference that thinking makes. Nevertheless, this book is based on the assumption that it does make some difference.

The thoughts in this book are reflective not only in the Socratic sense (of examining life) but also in the sense of being about thought itself (thinking about thinking). I use "reflexive" to mean the latter. The reflexive quality of consciousness is the basis of the quest for meaning and the idea of oneself. The process of examining reflexiveness is itself reflexive. As you get into it, you may find this labyrinth of echoes and mirrors to be teasing and dizzying. But don't give up too easily!

This book deals both in experiences and in concepts. Particularly experiential are the first three chapters, where an attempt is made to articulate by example and explanation a variety of feelings and experiences of meaninglessness and alienation that many of us have. Philosophers may be disquieted by the concreteness of this approach, and nonphilosophers may be skeptical of the attempt to put such feelings and experiences into words.

Despite the psychological observations and the sprinklings of anthropology and sociology, the book is essentially philosoph-
The Fringes of Freedom

You are a fluke of the universe. Nobody put you here. Nobody put it here (it's a fluke, too). But here you are.

By the time you realize you're here, you're mired in other people's illusions. You're told how you got here, what's been going on in your absence, and what you're supposed to do now that you've arrived. You've learned the rules and the ropes. Perhaps you've learned not to ask any questions—except those already answered.

Things are different now. You used to accept acceptability. Not any more, since, for one thing, you're reading this book. You're trying to break out of the straitjacket of society's sanity. Unmasked, the world appears fresh and frightful. However the world appears, the basic fact is simply that it's there. And here you are, not knowing why and not sure there is a why. The human ascriptions of rhyme and reason seem nothing more than wish and whimsy. Reflecting, you realize that there is no place to go. As for yourself, you are always more than what you've been, and that extra is up to you. In this there is a frightful freedom.

I want first to qualify this discussion of freedom with the proviso that it will have to ignore the political dimension of freedom. There would be far too much to cover: rights, obligations, law, authority, democracy, ideology. It's a bit embarrassing for me to have to ignore all these things, for the tone of this discussion would suggest that political freedom already exists in full. That is, I talk as if you were free to do with your life what you will, when, in fact, there are objective political limitations. I certainly do not mean to suggest that political factors are irrelevant to personal questions of meaning, identity, and freedom. The problem is that I know of no way to incorporate these vast political matters conveniently into this discussion. And, I am sure there are those who would reproach this discussion precisely because of its apparent political presuppositions. To them I can say only that the questions I'm dealing with can't wait, and that political action presupposes answers to them.

Not only do political factors limit a person's possibilities, they also limit his awareness of them. Prevalent ideologies and practices pervade one's education and upbringing and thereby affect one's idea of worthwhile and feasible ways of life. So, certain possibilities get automatically excluded from consideration, while others appear seductively appealing. This is not the place to examine the workings of these restrictive processes. All I can do is warn you to watch out for them.

Self-Liberation

If there is anything to be free from, it's your "self." The intellectual reasons for this were given in the previous chapter. What about the emotional implications? You have nothing to be proud of, and nothing to be ashamed of. The only thing you can be proud or ashamed of is yourself (otherwise, you fall into the alienation of misidentification), and your self is what you have been until now. It's the "ex-you." Pride and shame, then, are not directed at what you are now.

I used to have the occasional experience of recalling some embarrassing event and of feeling ashamed of myself for what had happened. Perhaps I had made a fool of myself or had failed dismally at something or had been seen with my pants unzipped. It didn't matter. The feeling I had in flashing back to such moments was one of utter disgust with myself. Eventually, however, I came to realize that (a) no one else cared except me, and (b) that was me then, not me now. Today, when I recall some awkward moment, I feel so detached from what happened then that I can only smile with amusement. One thing I can say for myself is that I'm consistent. My attitude about those things that most people would feel proud of or is that they are just things that happened. They may be pleasant to recall, but they have no bearing on my opinion of myself. They're just memories. I have good ones and bad ones, but memories are all they are.

If you're one of those guilt-ridden types, maybe you're wondering how I feel about those terrible things I must have done. Let's assume I have done such things. The question is, how do I feel about them? The answer is that I have no pangs of guilt whatsoever. I can't even remember the last pang I had. I don't lack such feelings because I'm incapable of recognizing the wrongness of certain deeds. Rather, I don't draw the conclusion that there is something wrong with me now because of what I have done in the past. At most, there was something wrong with me then and that doesn't justify feeling guilty now.
I'm not advocating a policy of irresponsibility, but as some unknown wise man once said, "Don't cry over spilt milk." Not only are such retrospective feelings useless, they refer to something that was, to the "ex-me." I see no reason why how I feel now should depend on what I think of what I was. I see no reason why what I am now or what I am worth now should automatically and irrevocably be stuck with the stamp of what I was. I bear no stigmas and wear no medals. Also, to be consistent, I hold no grudges.

The future is another thing. Unlike the past, it is something you can affect. Make of it what you will. But as for the past, it's come and gone. You don't have to forget about it, but don't limit what you are to what you've been. You're not the mere object that your self-image would have you be and that the feelings of pride, shame, and guilt are directed at. Thus, to have them is to be victim of the self-alienation of misidentification.

Probably the overwhelming obstacle to being free from your "self" is other people. Without them, you would have no image. You'd have nothing to live up to, no reputation to maintain, no face to save. You wouldn't need to manage the impressions you make. You'd have no mask and therefore no problem with its fitting. But there are other people. They pass judgment and have expectations. And they in turn are judged. Indeed, all human interactions seem to involve an implicit process of mutual judging and impressing. People impute selves to each other, so it's no wonder that they feel obliged to be stuck with their images. What would everybody think if I didn't continue to be the sort of person they know me to be or want me to be? As long as I ask that question, I'll continue to be precisely that sort of person.

The alternative is to realize that there is nothing for people to know you to be. You may still play roles and put on airs, but you won't identify with your image. You may even feel alienated in interaction, since you don't identify with what people take you to be. I've had this experience for some time now, and all I can do is try to explain how I feel if I think explaining is worth the trouble. If not, then I pay the price of feeling alone and separate from the situation. Escaping your image takes effort, practice, and patience, but it has the added merit of enabling you not to pass judgment on others.

Autonomy and identity

Freedom—from does not equal freedom—to. So you might wonder if freedom from your "self" precludes being able to do things for yourself. It might seem that not being wedded to an idea of what you are would render you confused about what to do for yourself and reduce you to passivity.

In fact, it is one thing to have an idea of what you are (were) and another to be able to act for yourself, to have autonomy. The two are related but different, and the difference is important.

Having a clear-cut self-image in no way guarantees autonomy. Take the case of the young woman who marries an ambitious fellow for security, the price being to serve him. (Or is it a price, if she prefers not having to make her own decisions?) Her lack of autonomy goes hand in hand with her alienated identity. She defines herself primarily as her husband's wife, and his achievements, as the result of this false identification, are derivatively hers. There is the different case of the woman who controls her husband, while yet identifying with his achievements. Playing a dominant role, not a kowtowing one, she acts autonomously, and yet her identity, too, is alienated.

The first woman illustrates the case of having a clear sense of identity and yet being unable to do things for oneself. In fact, one's ineffectuality may in part define one's identity. People who feel utterly helpless see themselves all too clearly as slaves or as mice.

On the other hand, it is also possible to feel fully competent, to be able to make decisions and be effective with others, and yet to have a very unclear self-image. Self-alienation is all it takes. A good example is the disenchanted business executive who feels that what is being expressed in his actions and respected by others isn't really himself. He may be successful by ordinary standards, but his dreams have come true only along with disillusionment. For him, the price of autonomy was a false self.

Although autonomy and identity are distinct, I don't mean to suggest that they are unrelated. As an extreme example, a person may feel utterly insignificant because nothing he does matters to anybody and no one ever notices him. He may lose his very sense of being and feel as if he is nothing at all. Feeling invisible, he may desperately do things that guarantee others' noticing him, such as being obnoxious or even violent. Another approach may be to moan about his problems to others, to become an object of sympathy. In some cases, paranoia is the only way to cope with this sense of insignificance. By fabricating an elaborate scheme of how the world is out to get you, there can be no doubt of your cosmic importance. The plot that everyone is party to insures the firmness of your existence precisely by threatening it.

Although autonomy and identity are related, what kind of autonomy does a clear-cut, positive self-image really provide? If you know what you are and you're glad to be that, you act with confidence and assurance. But is this the same thing as acting
autonomously? In fact, you’re riding the crest of the past. You’re acting not from within but from inertia. You’re doing what you’re doing because of what you are, and that is nothing more than what you’ve been and what, through lack of reflection, you’ll continue to be. To be this kind of autonomous is to be a prisoner of the past.

I’m not saying that you should make a continual conscious effort to change. That’s impossible and hypocritical—you would eventually realize that what you always are is someone always trying to change. What I mean, instead, is that you should avoid developing and maintaining a fixed, definite image of yourself, as if that’s what you have to be. The easiest way to keep your self-image fluid and the best way to avoid the fetish of always having to change is not to worry about it. Let yourself be. You don’t have to be anything in particular (at least within practical limits), and let others think what they may.

It is not easy to forge ahead without resting on the laurels of the past. Having a self-image that feels comfortable is better than being anxious about it, but not needing one is even better. Not having to be something means you can be anything, even what you’ve never been before; there is always room for choice, but having a fixed self-image takes up a lot of it.

Not having to be anything in particular keeps things wide open. I’m not saying you should be like a cork bouncing around in the ocean. True, the cork manages to stay afloat through it all. But unlike the cork, you’re not helplessly subject to stimuli; you can consciously react to them. What’s more, you can initiate action. Still, there’s merit to the corny cork analogy. Autonomy doesn’t mean blotting out the word around you. The cork, though anything but autonomous, teaches change. There’s no reason to hold off from the world by holding onto yourself. Holding onto yourself won’t prevent you from getting bounced around. And the irony is that there is nothing to hold onto anyway, except the mirage of past as present.

So far, I have tried to show that autonomy, doing things for yourself, does not require acting from your self-image. Only pseudo-autonomy lets your future be determined by your past. Autonomy does not exclude openness but invites it. Autonomy, as we’ll see next, does not equal control.

Out of Control

Do you really think you have things under control? Don’t count on it. No matter how confident you are, how free you feel, or how independent you think you are, you’re only kidding yourself if you think you have things under control. You may admit that you can’t take everything into consideration or anticipate everything that is about to happen. Things are much too complicated for that. Still, you say, most of the time you’re in charge of what’s happening. You’ve managed to rescue yourself from society’s pliers. You run your own life. Or so you think.

In fact, you don’t have even yourself under control. That would mean controlling every state of your consciousness. And that’s impossible. Each act of controlling your own consciousness would itself be a further state of consciousness. This further state would be either in or out of control. If in control, then there would have to be a still further state controlling it. This still further state would be either in or out of control depending on whether there’s a further state controlling it. Sooner or later, some state couldn’t be controlled.

In actual fact, there are far too many mental goings-on at any given moment for very much to be under control. So it is both theoretically and practically impossible to be fully in control of yourself, let alone of anything else. Far from it. Just try to contemplate yourself right now. Each introspective glimpse of the fleeting episodes of experience is itself a further episode. Thus, total control is out of the question.

If you think about it, you realize that very little of what happens in your life is your own doing. Some of it is the doing of others, the rest unintended altogether. These unintended happenings are sheer chance, relative to what you could have known. I mean they may not be chance in some ultimate sense, but in fact, you couldn’t have expected them. Think of how you met each of the people you know. Was it intended or happenstance? Think of the experiences you have had and the things you have learned. How many did you anticipate? Moreover, when I just asked you to think of these things, what determined the particular ones that you thought of?

There’s not much you can do about your life; it’s mostly outside your control (and outside anybody else’s as well). If you find this difficult to accept, perhaps you’re focusing your attention on your plans and schemes, on the things that you prepare for, deliberate on, and carry out. These purposeful phases of your life certainly get the most attention, but that doesn’t mean they count the most. Besides, think of all the unexpected intrusions on your intentions.

Try to recount what has happened to you in the last 24 hours. How much, really, was planned, either by you or by anybody else? Now, you may remember best those things that were planned, things that you were “going to do today.” But, just
because they were supposed to happen, don’t neglect everything else, all the inner and outer distractions, the people you saw, the sounds you heard, the traffic light that didn’t turn red when expected to, thereby enabling you to get where you were going a minute earlier than you otherwise would have. Everything must be taken into account for you to appreciate the chance-ness of things: the time you waste, the time you save, the delay here, the shortcut there. Maybe you hit a run of green lights, and you pass the spot where a hitchhiker who would have robbed you hadn’t yet appeared. He gets someone else instead. Meanwhile, you run out of gas two miles farther from town than you would have had you hit red lights instead of green. The driver who passes and ignores your plight has problems of his own, a man with a gun hidden from your view.

Relative to our limited knowledge, almost everything that happens is chance, from the most trivial to the most significant. Think of the thousands of accidents that have occurred today but didn’t happen to you. Think of the good things that do happen. Somebody recommends to you just the right book or introduces you to just the right person. You just happen to open the newspaper to the page on which a unique job opportunity is advertised. You miss the plane that is hijacked. You walk in the door just as that important phone call rings. You walk out the door, slam it, and realize you forgot your keys—but you also forgot to lock the door. Concentrate on the idea that so much is unexpectable. Pay attention to the things that happen in the next few minutes, and you’ll see what I mean.

Perhaps what is behind the ideal (a dubious one, as we’ll see) of total control is the image of the self or ego running the show. Whether the imagined model is of a little man inside, a telephone operator, or a movie director, the central idea is that what brings an experience to consciousness is a process of selection and that therefore there must be a selector. But to suppose that there is a selector is to think that each state existed somewhere else before being selectively brought to the fore of consciousness. I’d like to know where. Moreover, if there is this inner selector, then he (it) must have states of consciousness that make the selections on the mental jukebox. Surely, that’s absurd.

In addition to this model of the controlled mind, there is also the appeal of power. Some people feel that asserting power is equivalent to demonstrating their significance. Apparently, they think they have to prove something—that the world is no obstacle. Conning others, who are part of the world, is the means of confirming this. The trouble with power-hunger, apart from its ultimate frustration, is the faulty idea behind it. The world is no obstacle, and there is nothing opposed to it for it to be an obstacle to. You don’t have to combat it. To think that you do is to regard yourself primarily as an object that is validated in proportion to how much it affects everything else. The insecure logic involved seems to be this: “The more I control the world, the less it controls me. The less it controls me, the more secure I am. Therefore, the more I control it, the more secure I am.”

Total control is not only impossible but undesirable. Some things need to be controlled, like violence and disease, but only some. In most cases, control (like the so-called self-control demanded in schools) is self-repression, keeping things away or holding them down. This is the order of rigidity. Making things happen, instead of preventing them, requires creativity. The discipline associated with creativity is not the order of rigidity but the order of growth. In order to grow, any system must be so organized that it can benefit from integrating experiences accumulated from the past. The sort of order needed for such learning is flexible. Otherwise, nothing new could be accommodated in the present.

Speaking of creativity, I recall various psychological studies that have shown moments of creation to be spontaneous, not rehearsed. And what would you expect? If a person knew in advance what his forthcoming creation was going to be, it would hardly qualify as a creation. Nevertheless, these spontaneous moments are no mere matter of luck. The person who has such moments must be in a position to have them, and that requires patience, practice, and discipline. The only originality that occurs in a vacuum is randomness.

The reason some people seek repressive control is precisely what is wrong with too much control. Many people simply like to know what is going to happen. They want things to be predictable. This need may be based on a quest for power or be grounded in a fear of risk and danger. Whether control worshippers seek sovereignty or security, they’re paying the price of missing the boat. They refuse to let things happen, most of which are not dangerous and many of which are pleasant surprises. Among these surprises are those occasional moments of amazement or astonishment that seem to justify all the rest.

Being for Real

Autonomy (being free) does not equal control. Perhaps what it means is being willing and able to express yourself in action, to “be who you are.” But what does that mean? If you take “be who
you are" literally, then it's a rank triviality. Who else can you be? Interpreted, the least that it means is that you should be free to be who you want to be, that you shouldn't be forced into being what someone else wants you to be. It suggests, further, that what you want to be should be your authentic desire, not a concession to convention or convenience. I think we can agree that these are at least part of what is meant by "being who you are" and of what is involved in being autonomous. But there is more.

"To thine own self be true." Not a bad idea if you have a self to be true to. And yet the "self" you have is not you. It is only what you have self-image of, and there is nothing, we have decided, that corresponds to that. So, being true to yourself can only be being true to your self-image. That's nothing more than reinforcing your prejudices about yourself. What's being true to yourself about that? There is nothing to be true to. Therefore, being true to your "self" is in a sense being untrue to yourself. That is, being true to yourself requires refusing to be true to what you falsely think you have to be because you are. Appealing to "the way I am" when you don't have to be that way is to fall into the trap of identity. Being true to yourself, in the only legitimate sense, means recognizing that your options aren't automatically closed, based on what you've been. Being true to yourself means, therefore, realizing that there is nothing to be true to.

Naturally, you shouldn't exercise every option that you recognize. On the other hand, recognizing your options but never acting on them is worse than not recognizing them at all. Of course, nobody fully exercises even the options he wants to. We all operate to some extent on momentum and inertia, as framed by social and personal dictates. Whenever you realize that you're coasting, however, you've opened the door to doing otherwise or, for that matter, doing the same consciously. Awareness of what you're doing creates new options that further awareness can create still more of. Such awareness broadens your boundaries, and while boundaries can't be eliminated entirely, there is no limit to the broadening effect of self-awareness.

Although self-awareness opens options, it does create dangerous complications. There is more and more for you to think about and greater and greater responsibility as you try to take over the controls from your autopilot. This can be downright terrifying. You may yearn for the ability to take the old things for granted: the way you used to be, the certainty of society's norms, the rightness of what you thought right. What's more, the demand on your nervous system is greater, possibly producing information- and decision-overload.

Fortunately, some things do work automatically, such as your heart, your lungs, and your digestive system. Convenient, isn't it? Imagine what it would be like if you had to operate these systems consciously. It would be arduous, to say the least, keeping track of your innards and making sure everything was working properly. You'd soon wish you could delegate authority to your autonomic nervous system so that you wouldn't have to bother with all those details. Should a fear of being untrue to yourself deter you from wanting to do that?

That's a good question. For us, staying alive is more or less automatic. Suppose life had to be chosen constantly. Suicide would be much easier. As things are, it's much easier to die accidentally than on purpose. Perhaps the truly authentic person is one who takes his life into his own hands at all times. I'm glad I can't do that.

By the way, maybe you've been wondering what the point is of being authentic. Is the authentic person, the one who is true to his nonself, out to prove something? If to others, then he's not being authentic at all. He's only putting on a mask. If to himself, then being authentic is just a way of satisfying his self-image, in which case the effort would be self-defeating. If authenticity is something to be pursued, then the very pursuit of it is an inauthentic act of self-deception.

As I see it, authenticity isn't a value at all. That is, it isn't something you can shoot for. Rather, it is a characteristic of someone to the degree that he really does make choices instead of living inertially. It's a consequence of conscious awareness of one's own doings. And you can't really try to be conscious. You either are or you aren't. When you aren't, you can't try to be conscious unless you're already conscious enough to see the need to make the effort. On the other hand, if living choicefully rather than inertially becomes an obsession, authenticity turns into a mockery.

What, then, is the relation between authenticity and autonomy? Part of it is recognizing your possibilities. As we discussed in the previous section, you may realize that very little is or can be under your control. That doesn't mean that nothing is up to you. To recognize the illusion of being in control is not to acknowledge control by something else. Your choices are limited but you still have to make them.

Suppose you acknowledge the authority of something else, human or otherwise (divine, political). Still, it is you who acknowledges that authority. It is you who says "Yes" and you who says "No." And to what authority can you confidently say "Yes," considering all the competition among the contending authorities in
both the religious and the political spheres? However you may answer, you are the authority of authorities, so you really have no choice but to be your own god and to be your own sovereign. Maybe you’re not fully qualified for the job, but then who is?

Think of the extent to which you let others do your thinking for you and otherwise influence you. How long did it take you to realize that this had been going on all your life? Think of the extent to which you live by habit and inertia, doing the same old things in the same old way. Think of all the options that are available to you at any given moment. Even if you’re not aware of them, they’re still there.

Yours for Choice

Your freedom is no greater than the range of your possibilities. If they are genuine possibilities, then you must be aware of them so that you can choose from them. There is a traditional problem in philosophy about freedom of choice, usually labeled Free Will vs. Determinism. The seeming conflict is this: as conscious agents, we have the impression that what we do (some of it, anyway) is up to us—our action is a product of our will, a matter of choice. From a scientific viewpoint, however, everything seems to be determined, to follow laws (known or unknown), to be caused. That includes the physiological states of our brains. Since we have no reason to suppose our mental states to be anything but by-products of our brain’s states, we must conclude that they too are part of the vast causal nexus of the universe. Since these mental states include our desires, wishes, and choices, it follows that our mental states cannot be the initiators of our actions. Or so the argument goes.

I’m going to make no attempt to analyze this or other arguments for determinism and against free will. And I’m not going to deal with the counterarguments, either those that try to refute determinism or those purporting to show that free will is not precluded by determinism, that there’s really no conflict. Rather, I’d like to show that the whole problem is academic. It’s fascinating as a philosophical problem, but it has no practical consequences.

The main thing to understand about choosing is that you can’t choose to choose or choose not to choose. You’re stuck with having to choose, even if it’s only to choose not to. If you’re not able to choose, it is either because there’s nothing you can do in the situation or because you haven’t perceived any alternatives to what you’re doing. As soon as you realize that there are other possibilities, you have no choice but to choose from among them, even if that choice is to keep doing the same thing as before.

Suppose you hold the philosophical position that every event is physically caused (subject to physical laws, predictable in principle), and that choice or will is not the cause of conscious human action. Let’s suppose you believe that, and I know many philosophers who do. You would still act the same as anybody else, just as they do. You would still ponder your options, make decisions, and welcome or regret the consequences. So what practical difference does your philosophical conviction make? None, it seems.

When the power of the will is challenged, one immediately thinks it is being claimed that the will makes no difference, that a person’s choosing to do something has no bearing on its happening. But this is not the implication of that challenge at all. For one thing, even if acts of will are not causes of action but effects, most immediately, of brain states, still it is reasonable to suppose that those brain states, the ones producing acts of will, are different in kind from those that produce what we prescientifically describe as automatic or unconscious behavior. So, the presence of an act of will signals a difference, even if it does not itself make a difference. Thus, acts of will are not irrelevant to the occurrence of actions. They are causally connected, even if not causes, in that they are the inseparable effects of whatever causes those events (actions) that are naively taken to be the effects of the acts of will.

But there is a more important point. Roughly speaking, we have no choice in the matter. That is, we are in the position of facing the future, of being presented with a range of options, and of knowing that certain actions will have (with a certain degree of probability) certain consequences. In short, we find ourselves in situations in which we have no choice but to make choices. We cannot say to ourselves, “As a philosopher, I believe that the will does not causally produce actions. Therefore, I will hereby abandon the exercise of my will.” That, in itself, is a self-contradiction.

Instead, we must recognize that the use of the will is the exercise of the limited knowledge that we have—knowledge of ourselves, of the world, and of the relation of the present to the future. In particular, we know certain likely relationships between actions and outcomes. And, we know that making a choice does in fact lead to the performance of the action chosen (unless we are prevented or change our minds). So we have no choice but to choose.
In practice, there are many unknowns about human behavior and limits to how much we can know and think about at a given time. But, even without these practical limitations, in principle we could never know enough so that we wouldn’t have to choose and to act. You could never sit back, in seeming philosophical comfort, and pretend to be a mere witness to the cosmic spectacles, while saying that your will is wholly out of the causal picture. As argued earlier, even if it is not a cause, still it makes a difference.

If your will made no difference, it would not be due to the inexorable forces of physical nature. Rather, it would be because something was wrong with you and you couldn’t perform any actions. Suppose that for some unknown reason, all of a sudden you no longer did what you intended to do and your every project fell flat on its face. It wouldn’t be long before you gave up trying to do anything. In such circumstances, there would be no difference between willing and daydreaming. As things are, however, there is a difference. Unlike daydreaming or idle wishing, willing does matter to what happens and there is no way (nor reason) to alter that fact. However much you know about causes, you’re in a position to choose. You don’t have the choice not to.

The more you know, the more informed your choices. That doesn’t make them easier. Decisions can become difficult if there is too much to take clearly into account, especially if anxiety is mixed in. Also, becoming informed takes time. Sometimes you just have to act.

What Do You Want?

To act, it helps to know what you want. But knowing what you want is not as easy as it might seem. One reason for this was mentioned in the section on “Alien Values” in Chapter 2, that people often want things because everybody else wants them. So they think they want an extra TV set or fancier ski accessories. Or, they think they want to attend operas.

Knowing what you want seems simple. Either you want something or you don’t, and if you do know it. So how can you think you want something but not really want it? The case of alien values illustrates how. Besides, your wants aren’t sitting on pedestals waiting to be examined. They come and go, they are clear or diffuse, they conflict with one another. You can want something without thinking about it all the time. You can want something without doing anything about it. You can think you want something because the idea of it somehow appeals to you—maybe you fantasize about the situation that having it would put you in, or about the accolades you’d receive.

Another source of confusion is your self-image. You have a certain idea of yourself, and you assume that anyone of that sort (your sort) has certain desires. If you’re a businessman, you therefore want more money and a better position. If you’re a performer, you therefore want stardom. So you want, or think you want, whatever your sort of person is supposed to want.

A slightly different type of confusion is due to “attitude inertia.” You want something because you always have. Or, you don’t want something because you never have. Either way, you’re assuming you have to be the way you’ve been and you’re denying yourself the chance to be otherwise. For example, since early childhood, there were certain foods that I refused to eat. When I finally tried them, I liked them. Inhibition about something may keep you from doing it, even though, “deep down,” you wish to. It is easy to pretend that you don’t want to do what in fact you would want to do if you weren’t afraid of embarrassment or ridicule. These fears can be deepened by habit. The only way to break the habit and overcome the fear of doing something is to do it. I’m sure you’ve had the experience of doing just that and were amazed, after you did it, that you could have been so anxious about it.

Wanting something isn’t merely being in the habit of wanting it. You’re always in a position to change your mind or to decide of what mind you really are. Your wants aren’t things to be found. Finding out what your wants are is at the same time deciding to continue to have them or to change them. For it is you whose wants they are.

Part of the problem in knowing what you want is knowing how you are. Sometimes, when someone not meaning it asks me, “How are you?”, I realize that I don’t know how I am. Only if I feel really great or really rotten am I sure of how I feel. If I’m feeling in-between and if no one asks how I feel, I may not even be aware of how I feel. Paying attention to something else. Paying attention to how I am may change how I am, or even affect what I’m doing. When you’re not clear about how you feel, it seems important to find out. But if you don’t wonder, it doesn’t matter, does it? Even if how you are is important, it may not be good to think about. Thinking about it may only make you feel worse. But, of course, thinking about it is not something you can decide to do or not to do. Either you do or you don’t.

The main thing to realize is that you’re never quite what you think you are. When you realize what you’re feeling or what
you're wanting, what you are now is being in the state of realizing that. You can never quite catch yourself in the act, but only between acts (not counting the act of catching yourself in the act). Trying a little harder won't help any more here than running faster would help you catch your shadow. The reason you're never quite what you think you are is that you're never quite when you think you are. You're always a step ahead of yourself. Therefore, determining how you are and what you want is not just fact-finding but also decision-making.

The trouble with thought is its ability to wrest you away from the present. Direct experience requires the presence of the things experienced. Not so with thought. That's the virtue of thought, as well as the trouble with it. Things don't have to be here and now to be thought about. Thought enables you to transcend immediate experience. Abstractly, you can conceive of (or begin to conceive of) the vastness of the world and of time. You thereby realize the smallness of yourself and of your place in the scheme of things. More practically, thought is the basis for plans and the root of much fear, hope, pride, and regret. All human endeavors and emotions that take time or otherwise span time presuppose thought's power to escape the present. Without this power, you would have no worries, but you would also have nothing to look forward to. You would be incapable of anxiety or anticipation.

We can't give up our power of thought, but wouldn't it be nice to get back to the present? Notice that this very question alludes to an imagined future. Indeed, by writing or reading this we are both escaping the present, precisely by thinking about not escaping it. And by saying this, I am escaping from what I had intended to talk about, namely escaping the present, although by so doing I have illustrated the point I was going to make.

The point I was going to make is that the difficulty in trying not to escape the present is that the present itself is continually escaping. It is not something you can try to hold onto. Time marches on. The best you can do is to try to prolong whatever is happening right now. This is not holding onto the present but holding onto what's presently happening. And prolonging it must give way to remembering it, which is to be back in the past. The only way not to escape the present is not to latch onto anything else than what is here and now. Either way, latching on is escaping the ongoing present. Prolonging the present is not preserving it but only stretching it out. The taffy of time will stretch only so far.

It would be imprudent of me to say that the past and future should be ignored. Needless to say, there is much to be learned from the past, and moments yet in the future will become present. It's just a matter of emphasis: what counts ultimately is the present. Let me explain why. If the past matters now, then something must have mattered then. And if the future matters now, it can matter only because of what will matter later. So, it is in relation to past nows and future nows that the past and future matter. The moments at which experiences occur are the moments at which, ultimately, they matter.

I'm not saying, of course, that everything that happens in the present is good, desirable, or worth experiencing. I am saying that for anything to be intrinsically good or desirable, there must be some present in which it is worth experiencing. It can't be worthwhile merely as past or merely as future, except in the secondary sense of being a means to an end or of being something to learn from or to avoid. There is a lack in the life of someone who can only look back to the good old days or who can only look forward to the tomorrow that never comes.

The mixed blessing of thought enables you to escape the present. By so doing it can make you appreciate things comparatively rather than in themselves. That is, by remembering past experiences and anticipating future ones, you thereby implicitly put the present one on a scale. Is it better or worse than others of the same sort? Is this the most beautiful painting I've ever seen? Is that the finest person I've ever met? Is this a first-rate orgasm? Is that a second-class joke?

Comparisons can provide no ultimate basis for value: if something is better than something else, there must be something good about it (or something bad about the other). It must be better than the other in some respect. If it is really worthwhile, it can't be so merely because something else doesn't match up to it. Not only do comparisons fail to provide an ultimate basis for value, but the act of making comparisons wrenches you from the present. For the comparison you make of your present experience is with those of other times.

Escaping the present needn't be done alone. It is easily done as a joint effort, as illustrated by these conversational snippets:

Where are you from?
What do you do?
Nice weather today.
We met here last year.
Do you know ...?
I have a cousin from there.
See you next year.

Most conversations consist of small talk, if by that we mean talk used to fill time and to avoid the awkwardness of silence. It is directed not to the immediate concerns or feelings of the conversants but to things people pretend to be interested in, if only mildly. When small talk is the extent of conversation, expression of genuine emotion and serious thought is excluded. Triviality is the order of the day, indifference or feigned emotion its execution.

Generalities and trivialities keep feelings from being focused. Role playing is easier than being yourself and expressing yourself. Clichés are convenient. Revealing yourself is risky. If you feel hostile to the other, you’d rather hide how you feel than hurt his feelings or risk retaliation. If you are secretly fond of the other, perhaps you fear a lack of response or even contempt. Besides, if you keep your distance, it’s easy to get away if you have to. If the other person has the same fears and anxieties you do, then moments of intimacy will surely be rare, as the escapist charade continues instead.

Escaping the present—feelings and experiences, persons and things—is the product of thought and is done, it seems, in the name of security. It’s the policy of making sure that the wrong thing won’t happen, that the right thing will be taken care of, and that the whole process will run smoothly. The trouble with this passion for security is that it leaves out, all the passing moments.

This passion for security can be described differently. Suppose you ask yourself, “What is now?” This moment? This hour, day, week, year? This lifetime? If you think only in terms of weeks and years, you are motivated by such things as fear and ambition. You’re missing out on the moments that life is made of. When you think exclusively in longer terms, then it is difficult to feel that you’re moving. The units of the time scale are too large. Like faraway mountains, the past and future don’t recede or approach, even though you’re speeding along.

Sometimes it takes courage to face the present, or maybe it’s faith (faith is not one of my favorite words). Either way, you have to be confident not so much in yourself as in the world. Of course, there are dangers, and there is no reason to court them excessively. You don’t have to be a daredevil to enjoy life. On the other hand, worry and anxiety do more harm than good. Since most of what happens, good or bad, is beyond your control, there is no point in worrying about everything. Also, there is no point in worrying about whose doing these happenings are (yours, others’, or nature’s). What counts is not who does what but what happens.

The time is now. It just takes tuning in on. I can’t tell you how to do it. That’s for you to figure out in your own way. All I’ve tried to do is help you push aside certain roadblocks, which requires recognizing them for what they are.

The first roadblock was the demand for meaning. There is no way to make the moments of life add up to something, but there is no real need to. For it is at particular moments when this seeming need is felt. There is no possibility of a final endless moment when everything comes together and stays there. Ironically, seeking the meaning of life prevents a person from finding what ends that quest. What ends it is not an answer but the elimination of the question. That happens when you realize that what you’re looking for is nowhere to be found—it’s here already.

The second roadblock was actually a reappearance of the first. This was the need to identify with something, to get a sense of personal importance by annexing oneself to something of unquestioned importance. Apart from the questionability of the importance of things people identify with, there is the question of identifiability. Identification with something cannot succeed—you are you and it is it. And once you realize that mystical unities are not possible, no longer do you need to feel that anything is missing if you don’t identify with something. So, the alienation of nonidentification is based on the illusive hope of identification.

The third roadblock results from getting past the second. Once you realize that you have nothing to identify with but yourself, there arises the problem of defining that. The dilemma is that any definition is of what you are for others or merely of what you have been, while what you are for yourself escapes definition. That is, defining yourself is to render yourself into a mere object. Overidentifying with what you are for others precludes identifying with what you are for yourself. On the other hand, identifying only with what you are for yourself, with yourself merely as subject, cuts you off from the world. You’re a ghost of your former self. The third roadblock is a dilemma, and its clearance dissolves the dilemma. That is, you must see that the situation isn’t
either/or. You are both what you are for others and what you are for yourself.

The fourth and final roadblock is your "self." Even after you've recognized your inner and outer aspects, the quest goes on for a self-definition that explains both. No self-definition can be adequate, because there is no underlying "self" for it to be adequate to. Any self-definition, if taken as final, hides the fact that you are always ahead of yourself. Not only is there no "self" to be found, but the self-image that pretends to reflect it is always out of date.

Notice that each of these four obstacles is founded on reflection. Each time you're blocked by one of them, you may be inclined to think, Socrates notwithstanding, that the examined life is not worth living. The process of reflecting on life seems to impose unreasonable demands and to focus a person on himself, thereby creating anxieties not easily dispelled. You may yearn for the unrecoverable innocence of unreflectiveness, in which things were taken for granted and nasty questions weren't asked. I have tried to let the process of reflection run its course (not that it ever ends). Going part of the way, you feel a certain need for meaning and identity. Going further, you realize that these needs cannot be met, thanks to that reflexive nature of yours that created them. But continuing on, you realize that these needs don't have to be met. Reflection reveals that they are not genuine needs. So, while reflection initially demands something permanent (in the world and in yourself), and subsequent reflection recognizes the futility of such a demand, still further reflection reveals the fact that yielding to this demand is an attempt to evade the very process of reflection that imposed the demand in the first place. As a reflective being, you are always a step ahead of yourself, and therefore cannot expect a fixed, permanent, and absolute basis for living.

Being ahead of yourself means that there is nothing for you to be true to. What you are is not a foregone conclusion. Possibilities remain open, and it is up to you to be open to them. That doesn't mean you can't be selective. Quite the contrary, selecting is always yours to do. Just don't let the demands for meaning and identification, the dilemma of self-definition, and the image of self get in the way. Apart from the illusions that created them, these demands for meaning also wrest you from the present by demanding a justification of the past and/or an obsession with the future. Like mountains in the distance that seem stationary though you're speeding along, the past and the future, when abstracted from the present, seem to have permanence and importance in contrast to the fleeting present. And yet, whatever

meaning and importance they can rightly have is in relation to the present, fleeting though it be. There is no escaping the present, for we're moving with it. Always, now is the time.

If eternity is taken to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present.

Wittgenstein
Appendix: Thinking about Thinking

The following outline of some general features of consciousness did not seem appropriate to the body of this book, although recognizing these features should enhance appreciation of many points made in the text. Besides, the serious reader may find it intellectually entertaining to be aware of some of the general traits of thinking at the very moment that his own thinking can illustrate them.

**Reflexivity.** Beginning to think about thinking illustrates one of its pervasive features—reflexivity. Every time you catch yourself in the act, whether of thinking, feeling, seeing, wanting, or imagining, you are reflecting upon your own conscious state. You are aware of being aware (of whatever you’re aware of).

Reflection, in the sense I mean here, is not the peculiar province of philosophers. Everybody reflects much of the time but, unlike philosophers, not systematically. Animals and infants probably don’t reflect, but the rest of us do, whenever we realize what we’re doing. That’s what reflecting is.

If you’re clever and shrewd, it may have occurred to you that to reflect upon what you’re doing [thinking, feeling, or at this moment reading] is itself to do something. Thus, while reflecting makes you aware of what you’re doing, it may compete with what you’re doing. So, reflection is not to be confused with concentration. It can be a distraction.

Reflection upon reflection is also possible. In fact, that’s what we’re doing right now. To realize that you realize what you’re doing is to reflect at a second level. Then you are doubly removed from what you’re doing. That’s one of the occupational hazards of doing philosophy.

**Ongoingness.** Obviously, you are not conscious all the time. In calling consciousness ongoing, I mean that there are no stops in consciousness, even if there are stops of consciousness. Compare it with eating: when you are eating, you are not eating at every moment; but during any conscious duration, you are conscious at every moment. To say that consciousness is ongoing means that there are no stops in consciousness, even if there are different levels of consciousness. If it makes sense to speak of rates of consciousness, then we can speak of being conscious faster and faster or slower and slower. What this means, of course, is only that we can change the subject, what we are conscious of, rapidly or slowly. But to say that consciousness is ongoing is simply to say that even when you are blissfully focused on a single object of contemplation, still you are conscious. You may be totally relaxed and at peace, but your consciousness can never be still—unchanging, it goes on.

You may have noticed that in making these observations, reflecting was required. Therefore, at the time of reflection, consciousness is not only moving but changing, from unreflected to reflexive. You can never be conscious of being conscious of one thing without thereby being conscious of at least two things—the object of your awareness and your awareness itself.

**Continuity.** This is the feature implied on the phrase “stream of consciousness.” Consciousness is a series of mental events, but the events in the series cannot be clearly divided up into distinct bits. This characteristic of consciousness is not due to the fact that reality is continuous, if that is a fact. For even if everything we are aware of were separate from everything else, still our consciousness of them would not be similarly divisible. Except for certain abrupt changes, the transition from being conscious of one thing to being conscious of another is generally a gradual process.

As you might have noticed, being conscious of the continuity of consciousness confirms the continuity of reflexive consciousness. Reflecting seems to straddle the state it is a reflection upon and the next state.

**Horizontality.** Ordinarily we refer to the visual horizon as the extent to which we can see. Let’s extend the notion. Every visual experience has a limited scope. As I use the term, its limit or boundary is its horizon. The horizon is how far you do see at that moment. The boundaries change from moment to moment, as you move around and turn your head. Observe that you cannot see how far you can see. As soon as you peek out of the corner of your eye to see how far to the side you can see, you see
farther. You can see where the boundary was, but never where it is.

The reason for changing horizons seems to be that at any given moment, you focus on only part of what is there before your eyes. The rest is vague and in the background. This is what psychologists refer to as the figure/ground character of sight. You always focus on something, and you're only hazily aware of the rest. Naturally, then, you can never focus on the boundary of the whole experience.

Scientific observation of eye movements indicates that the change of focus is rapid and haphazard. Fortunately, we are able to put it all together into a coherent picture. I suspect that part of this ability to unify the parts is due to our limited capacity for reflection. Evidently we can be reflexively aware only of what we're focusing on, and then of but part of that. To see what I mean, take a look around and try to catch yourself seeing what you're seeing. You'll succeed some of the time, but normally your eye movements will keep a step ahead of you.

In describing consciousness as horizontal, I mean that vision is but a special case of a general phenomenon. What is true of seeing is true of other modes of perceiving, imagining, remembering, and feeling (emotions). In general, your consciousness has a limited scope and you can't focus on its limit without extending the limit. This phenomenon is something like chasing your shadow—you always come close, but you never succeed in catching it.

Moreover, the contents of consciousness near the boundaries (at a given moment) are not in focus. That means that to be aware of being conscious (to be reflexively aware) of what is near the boundaries requires putting it into focus. Thus, the boundaries are changed, and what was in focus is no longer so. It may even be out of the mental picture altogether.

To appreciate all this, simply reflect on your own awareness right now. Try to keep track of what you're aware of. Whenever you realize what it is, you'll realize that there is also something else. When you realize what that is, you will no longer be aware of what you were previously aware of. If you continue this reflexive process for a while, I'm sure you'll see what I've been trying to describe. You'll realize that there is a lot more going on in your consciousness than you realize. And you'll realize that no matter how hard you try, your consciousness will always stay at least a step ahead of your reflection.

Overlappingness. This characteristic of consciousness is connected with the previous ones. That is, a state of consciousness may, and usually does, include some of what the previous state included. This feature is particularly related to the continuity of consciousness. Not only do conscious states merge into one another, making it difficult to speak of successive states, but their contents overlap.

Almost every experience illustrates this feature. An easy example is when your eyes pan across a scene: at each moment you see something you didn't see a moment before, you don't see something you did see a moment before, but you do see much of what you saw a moment before. Another example is listening to a melody. You don't hear a sequence of disconnected notes. On the other hand, you don't hear two successive notes simultaneously. However, when you hear each note, you hear it in conscious relation to the previous notes. Presumably the same sort of overlappingness applies to hearing a description or following an argument.

Reflection involves a special kind of overlapping. Here, one conscious state includes another, although the other may be destroyed in the process. For example, if you are aware of your experience of reading this sentence, your reading is included in being aware of it. And, maybe you were so aware of reading that you could no longer, for that moment, read.

Spontaneity. From what has been said so far, it should be obvious that your consciousness is not something you can control very much. Some people have the illusion of determining what comes into their minds, but it is clear that this is an illusion. The reason is simple: if you were to determine the contents of your consciousness in advance, you would have to be conscious of them in order to make that determination. But then, of course, the determination wouldn't be necessary, since in making it, you would have done already the very thing that it was the determination to do—to be conscious of some particular thing.

Naturally, you can call some of the shots. You can open or close your eyes. You can change the subject or pay attention. But the specific details of what is going on necessarily elude predetermination. That's what I mean by calling consciousness spontaneous.

A Note on the Unconscious

In the course of this book, I avoided the notion of the unconscious. For example, in making the point that you don't have everything under control (Chapter 5), I avoided the use of psy-
choanalytic concepts that refer to the unconscious, such as unconscious symbols, unconscious wishes, unconscious motives. My reason was not to ignore the phenomena designated by these terms but to make my point without assuming any particular psychological model, for example, the model of the psyche as consisting of the conscious and the unconscious (or of the ego, id, and superego). There are many phenomena related to the notion of the unconscious, such as dreams, obsessions, fixations, and (ego) defenses. Though unmentioned, they may be relevant to many aspects of our discussion, which may have seemed to take on the naive appearance of assuming that all problems and conditions can be readily handled by straightforward reflection on one's own states and patterns of consciousness. For example, I seemed to suggest that once you realize that there is no "real self," you automatically give up the idea of having a self-image (or at least of taking it too seriously), and no longer have self-directed emotions such as pride and shame. But, of course, it is not so simple as that. I don't pretend that it is. I have not tried to produce a theory of human nature or an account of all psychological phenomena. I've tried only to point out certain things necessary to self-understanding.

I do have certain misgivings about the notion of the unconscious, at least as commonly conceived. It seems to be viewed as a vast storehouse of thoughts and feelings (mostly unpleasant ones, on some views) that the person is not conscious of. Occasionally, they come to the fore of consciousness, but mostly they just lurk in the depths of the unconscious while having their untold effects on the conscious.

All right, these ideas deserve more attention than I'm giving them here, but without doing them justice, let me express my basic misgiving about them. Now a thought or feeling is an event. It either happens or it doesn't. If it does, it happens at a certain time, for a certain duration. Similar states may occur at other times. But there is no state that exists but does not occur. On my view, all states are conscious states. But only some of them are reflected upon. The rest are not. Those that are not reflected upon occur without the person's being aware of their occurrence. These are presumably what exponents of the unconscious refer to as unconscious states. What I object to, then, is the idea that these states are lurking somewhere when they're not actually occurring (it is not enough, on this view, that the person be unaware of them when they do occur). Also, as you might have guessed, I object to the idea that there is some place where they are when they're lurking.

It seems to me that the phenomena supposed to be explained by the unconscious are perfectly real but that the explanation is gratuitous. There is no reason to think that unconscious states must be responsible for acts, thoughts, and feelings that a person cannot explain or justify to himself. For only states that occur can explain anything. Rather, what must be realized is that there are many things about one's mental life (and one's actions) that are not conscious. You don't know what's going on in your brain or how it works, but obviously it has much to do with your mental life. There are relationships between your thoughts and feelings that you may not be aware of. There are patterns in your behavior and in your moods that you may be unaware of or, if you are aware of them, that you are unable to explain. Your dreams, which are unconscious in the sense of not being reflected upon when they occur, may make little sense, although it is always possible to make (invent) sense of them that seems convincing. In short, all the why's you cannot figure out needn't be explained by a whole breed of hidden what's. This is not to say how they are to be explained, but only to rule out a certain type of appealing but gratuitous explanation.

To say that you don't know why you do the things you do is not to say that you have hidden reasons for them. There may, of course, be hidden causes.
For Further Reading

There follows a list of novels, plays, stories, and books and articles in philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and theology. They make up a diverse selection of readings on themes discussed in this book and on related themes as well. Needless to say, no endorsement is implied.

Part A is a brief list of texts and anthologies of general relevance. Part B is a more detailed list of works relating to topics discussed in particular chapters of this book. The necessarily brief descriptions are meant only to indicate how these writings are connected with themes in this book. As might be expected, items cited under one chapter are often relevant to others. Where possible, inexpensive paperback editions are cited.

Part A General References

An attempt to extract an ethical position from an existentialist viewpoint. Not only dealing with existential philosophers, it considers recent developments in politics, Eastern philosophy, and theology.

A valuable and popular introduction to those writers generally labeled existential philosophers.

A short anthology representing the so-called Third Force movement in psychology.

The classic existentialist treatise. This difficult, massive work analyzes the notion of "being in the world" and care as its basic mode, and provides an account of the existential-ontological structure of temporality. The style and the idiosyncratic terminology, not to mention the ideas themselves, render it nearly inaccessible.

A superb anthology of existentialist themes expressed in short literary form.

A popular selection of fictional and philosophical writings in the existentialist tradition. It contains a valuable introduction by the editor.

Sartre's informal account of what existentialism is and isn't. He explains the formula, "Existence precedes essence," and discusses freedom, subjectivism, and morality.

Sartre's famous treatise on the nature of consciousness (for itself). This long, rambling work contains insightful observations on human existence, but it lacks the style of Sartre's literary works. Translator Hazel E. Barnes's excellent introduction guides the reader to the landmarks of the labyrinth.

A compact survey of existentialist thinkers from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. While special attention is paid to the phenomenological methods of Husserl and their influence, the author's analytic perspective makes the book particularly interesting.
Chapter 1

A novelistic counterpart to Camus’s Myth of Sisyphus, dealing with a life of growing meaninglessness and with suicide as a possible solution.

Two classic absurdist plays. Godot is whom the characters are waiting for, not that he will show up, not that he exists, not that it matters. Endgame is a similarly bleak scene of empty lives playing out the comic game of existence, in which the trivial is as significant as anything else.

The definitive essay on the absurd. The absurdity of life is the premise. The question is, “Does suicide follow?” The suggested answer is, “No, suicide is only surrendering to the absurd.” Instead, Camus advocates a life of conscious, passionate defiance of the absurd. He illustrates his position with references to numerous literary figures.

An immensely popular story of a man living without purpose. His emotionless life leads to a pointless murder, and feeling stirs (one of rebirth) only on the day of execution.

The masterpiece of tender-hearted vs. hard-headed mentalities. The famous scene of the Grand Inquisitor (reprinted in The Existential Imagination, cited in Part A) deals with the value of blind faith and submission to external authority.

The tortured reflections of a hopelessly alienated man, for whom no reason for doing anything is every reason for doing nothing.

A fascinating view of the functions and structures of myths. The author is able to identify and integrate themes from an incredible range of human experiences.

The development of logotherapy, a type of existential psychoanalysis, out of the horror of Nazi concentration camps. Moving, indeed, is the story of those who could find meaning and hope in such circumstances—and of those who couldn’t.

A hilariously serious account of institutional insanity, illustrated by, but not limited to, the military. “Am I crazy?” is no easy question to answer in such a context.

The story illustrates how meaning can be found in the context of a person’s own choosing.

Two novels of the absurd. In each, the protagonist faces a world that, despite his tireless efforts, continually eludes his comprehension. His every act of will only underlines his helplessness. He is guilty only of being there.

An exhaustive critical examination of arguments for the existence of God.

An analytic philosopher’s attempt to unravel the idea and the experience of the absurd. He seems to conclude that the sense of the absurd is predicated on a demand for an unreasonable sort of meaning.

An account of a man succumbing to death in life. He is aware of the absurdity of his life and of the meaningless-ness of his relationship with a certain woman. Even when trying to live, he cannot exist without guilt.


An extraordinarily eloquent statement of the meaning of life in a “world of fact.” In a world stripped of illusion, there is still room for love of truth, appreciation of beauty, and the dignity of man.


The story of a historian whose life, professional and otherwise, is devoid of meaning. Triviality is the hallmark of his work, silent indifference the hallmark of his world.


A systematic account of faith taken as “ultimate concern.” Ultimate concern is held to be necessary for an integrated, “centered” personality. Be that as it may, the question remains, “Is ultimate concern justified?”


A benign version of Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor. The question is the same: “Are people best off with blind faith?”


A notoriously difficult book on the relation of words and things and on the nature and limits of language in general. Relevant to our purposes are the concluding passages on life and on what cannot be said, for example, “When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words.”

Chapter 2


Of a man whose alienation from the world of people and things is total. In his isolation, he can focus only on meaningless details.


This book is worth citing again (see Chapter 1). The Underground Man is isolated from others by virtue of his own morbid reflections. His recognition of the sham of society renders him both contemptuous and envious of humanity.


An illustration of the concept of alienation as misidentification. For Feuerbach, the essence of religion is the essence of man himself projected outside himself and reified or personified.


A psychological account of love not as romantic renunciation of oneself in another, but as the highest form of self-assertion.


The chapter on mysticism provides a good source of first person descriptions of mystical experiences.


Includes Marx’s account of the alienation of labor and other forms of alienation as well. Alienation is the projection of human powers onto outside objects, such as capital and the state, and the subsequent identification with those objects.


A political and sociological analysis of alienation and its causes. The author sees alienation as rooted in the social order. Hence, it can be overcome only by transforming that order.


A sociological account of alienation in American society, based on the now famous concepts of inner- and other-directedness.
Sartre’s most famous play, whose characters sustain themselves by torturing each other, thus hellishly building on their mutual alienation.

An extensive analysis of alienation in the lives and writings of famous writers and artists. On the freedom and frightfulness of seeing more deeply.

Chapter 3

Of a man who awakens to find himself bound in ropes. He becomes the Bound Man for others, as he does remarkable things (for a man bound in ropes), instead of choosing to be free and anonymous.

A sociological account of play-acting and role-playing in ordinary situations.

When a man awakens to find himself transformed into what looks like a giant insect, there is, needless to say, a definite conflict between what he is for himself and what he is for others.

Among other things (including one version of what the absurd is), an account of different types of defining relations, which, like Tillich’s concept of ultimate concern, illustrates what I pejoratively call overidentification.

A sensitive and profound analysis of schizoid and schizophrenic conditions. The concepts of ontological insecurity and of the false self make these conditions intelligible. Gives many examples of self-alienation.


A novel (Lawrence’s favorite) of alienation from society and from self. It deals, in part, with finding oneself and being oneself with others.

Of an aged actor who has identified only with the characters he has played. Devoid of feelings of his own, he makes a desperate attempt to generate some anyway.

A drama of the totally other-directed man. When he outlives his acceptability to others, he finds that he has nothing left.

The story of a man embedded in both sorts of self-alienation. There are parts of himself that he cannot identify with, and parts of his past that he cannot disidentify with.

Chapter 4

If the Self is but one’s history, then what remains is the “I-process,” as the author calls it. Recognizing the latter is the key to transcending the former.

A psychoanalytic view of the human life-cycle, with emphasis on the late adolescent stage, by the coiner of the phrase “identity crisis.”

The immensely popular story of a man with at least two sides, and possibly a thousand. The key to his self-realization is his recognition that there is no one thing that he has to be.

The Western equivalent of the Buddhist doctrine of no-self. Hume finds himself unable to find himself and con-
A fascinating account of the Yaqui sorcerer's teachings and practices. It is interesting to observe the author's growing appreciation of his teacher's idea of "seeing" beyond the ordinary world of categories and expectations. A remarkable idea of freedom is implied.

A psychosocial examination of modern man's tendency to submit to authority rather than to assert his own.

The sage's thoughts on many things, including the concept of attention as opposed to concentration, as the way of finding the present.

An impassioned outcry against the repression of experience, and a plea for the freedom of experience in a variety of contexts.

The mystical, but practical, philosophy of Taoism, emphasizing freedom through experiencing and harmonizing oneself with one's surroundings.

A poetic statement of the much misunderstood philosophy of hedonism, which is more serene than sensational.

The aphorisms of stoicism, a philosophy that is not as fatalistic or as passive as it seems.

Freedom through transcendence of the "herd morality." Contrary to popular opinion, Nietzsche is a humanist, not a nihilist.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, "Bad Faith." Being and Nothingness, 1, 2, pp. 86-116.

Sartre's account of this well-known notion is illustrated in a story of an insane man, his wife, and his in-laws. The question is, "Who is guilty of bad faith and who is true to himself?"

A sociologist's proposal for building happenstance and randomness into city planning.

Showing that events are determined largely not by human decision but by chance. Hence, it is folly to think that one is in control of his destiny, or that mankind is in control of its.

A delightful story of how to run your luck on the assumption that this is the best of all possible worlds (whether it is a good one is another question).

How to go beyond anxiety, not by eliminating its conditions (danger, uncertainty, purposelessness), but by making something positive out of them. The basic idea is to return to the present.

Appendix

A fascinating but difficult examination of the many temporal aspects of consciousness.

A philosophical examination of this commonly used psychological concept.