

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Nausea is the Only Truly Philosophical Novel

### Journal Item

How to cite:

Shand, John (2016). Nausea is the Only Truly Philosophical Novel. *Philosophers' Magazine*(75) pp. 26–27.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.5840/tpm201675122>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

## Sartre, *Nausea*: the only philosophical novel

by John Shand  
The Open University

---

Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* is undoubtedly a work of genius. By genius is meant something that combines startling originality and magnificent execution. But it is even more than that. It is the only truly philosophical novel. This might seem an outrageous claim. Surely other novels have philosophical content and implications. Quite a few novels at the very least touch on philosophical matters such as ethics or politics. Some novels indeed have people in them explicitly discussing philosophy. But only *Nausea* has the core of philosophy, matters of epistemology and metaphysics, and the full range of its other key concerns, embedded in and expressed through what *happens*. Philosophical ideas are explicated in the very content and narrative of the novel itself. No other novel could stand as a good introduction to the subject of philosophy. What in a work of philosophy is expressed as ideas in sentences and arguments, are, in *Nausea*, exemplified in things that are described and occur. Philosophy itself is *shown*, not said. It is philosophy reified.

Through the device of the fictitious diary of Antoine Roquentin, what happens to him, what he experiences, with some judicious reflections, Sartre lays out a philosophical view, and shows how other classic proposed philosophical views fall apart or founder. The world is absolutely contingent. Each thing is superfluous. There is in the end nothing to keep it in any recognisable governed order. There is nothing either that we can look to to decide for us how we should live our lives. The 'nausea' the title alludes to this giddy, head-spinning, sickening sense of lack of order, like a room suddenly starting to spin around you. The order we think the world has, the way it divides itself up into different sorts of things that then change in predictable ways, is an illusion. Similarly, the way in which we may think that we are constrained in the things that we choose, so that we can pass on responsibility for our choices to something other than ourselves, is a chimera. To live as if we do not have in fact complete freedom of will, by which we alone choose what and who we are, is to live in 'bad faith', or 'inauthentically' – it is to live a lie – it is to lie to ourselves that who and what we are is not something we are responsible for.

Sartre does not argue these points in the course of *Nausea*; rather, they are simply shown as literal truths. While Roquentin is sitting on a tram, the way we neatly conceptualise the world breaks down. The seat in front of him becomes the upturned belly of a rotting donkey. When he picks up a stone, his senses become conflated – it does not feel hard, rather he senses sweetness. In the park, finally, climactically and catastrophically, all conceptual identity whereby things are certain sorts, which order them to behave in certain ways, evaporates totally, and we are left with pure existence; so that before, what were the roots of a tree become an ineffable, disgusting, indigestible lump of contingent unclassified being. This is the Humean nightmare, where our lack of sureness from one second to the next of what is going to happen, that a hammer for all we know might transmogrify into a butterfly, becomes a reality. Kant's categories, paraded as transcendental, as necessary, and there to dispel the Humean nightmare by imposing order on appearances, are revealed to be just contingent psychological concepts that have no ability to order reality itself as pure brute existence. Plato's forms are no use either, as even though they are necessary and eternal, and forever ordered, they are transcendent, beyond and outside the world of things that exist and can impose no order on their gross being. In the café, a jazz record is smashed – the music itself exists in a world of pure Platonic forms – the record is lost, but not the music. But such

a world for all its necessity has no power to impose any order, let alone any necessity, on brute contingent existence.

We are in fact not only free, but forced to be free. Why do one thing rather than another then? Why live one life rather than another? Does one life make more sense than another? For Sartre, as for Roquentin, on one level the answer is no. However, the worst one can be is be like the waiter in the café. He's lazily minded, and because it is easy, removes all the fear of choosing what to be, what kind of life to have, by identifying himself as a waiter – thus he does what a waiter does, he *is* a waiter – few choices then need be made, the burden is lifted as to how to live your life. But in fact he could choose to live a different life, but tells himself, lies to himself, that he must by some kind of necessity be a waiter and thus act as one. This makes him a coward who is unwilling to face up to his own freedom, that we are the absolute formers of ourselves, what we do and what we are – we always have a choice whatever the facticity circumstances. Even when we face the firing squad we can choose to die bravely or as a coward. The best one can do is at least face up to the truth of the absolutely contingency of one's own life and take full responsibility for what one chooses.

Roquentin himself looks at his own life; but not only looks; he acts out what he thinks, and thus shows what he thinks. We tell ourselves stories about our life – we form it into a narrative in our minds so as to give it shape. But really it has no shape, or point, or order in a sense external to ourselves. Existence precedes essence. Things are; they have brute indeterminate existence. Things only become what they are through our engagement with them in the world. In our own case is up to us alone to determine what we are through what we do.

---