



THE EPISSSEDEMOLOGIST

by

JOHN-PAUL TARSER

Synopsis

We've all done it! Why am I here? What is the meaning of life? Let's have another drink!

This is the diary of a philosophy student at university in search of answers, in search of girls, in search of a purpose. He calls upon the wisdom of tramps, professors, scientists and philosophers to help him understand his life but he becomes more and more confused and approaches a crisis that he has to pass through or perish...

"..original, very readable, funny and full of insight..."

"...It is easily the best crafted novel I have seen in over a year..."

-Chris Sawyer of Authors' Aid

Chapter One

Some Time in October

I've got to write everything down, everything that happens from now on, and right now I'm looking at that suitcase in front of me, sitting on the bed like a fat unwanted orphan in this tatty, crappy room.

A familiar feeling of pointlessness descends upon me. How beginnings always seem like endings! I never was any good with holidays, birthdays and the rare 'date'. There's something oddly sad about happiness. On the other hand, I've always found funerals to be uplifting! Like everyone on a collision course for thirty, I've often wondered if I'm a bit bonkers. If I am, I don't think I'm dangerous to anyone - not really. I'm no trouble to society and haven't broken any major laws yet.

Like many a sexually unsuccessful adolescent, I became a deep thinker- a face-saving

strategy used to convince myself that I was better than my bonking contemporaries. Trouble is, the deeper I thought, the more depressed I became as my increasing self-knowledge did not tell a pretty story. I became a gardener of my own mind, salting the slugs and pulling out the weeds, hoping to find something like tranquillity eventually; but the weeds and slugs just grew back all the stronger. I flirted with religion but never even got a snog, it was all such obvious crap. I still think that Buddhism is cool though, but keep a safe distance in case it lets me down like all the others.

And now this, my first day as a philosophy student, feeling such a fraud! How did I get here? I'm so determined not to have a career that I'm willing to spend three years proving it to myself. But why should I want a career? Ambition is a word that sticks in my throat - it's like an obscenity! A word used by happy, half dead robots that never feel anything negative, that feel the world of commerce and industry offers excitement and a 'challenge'. I've tried all that stuff. It's crap.

The orphan remains on the bed. I'm just stuck in this chair, looking at the walls around me. Bits of *Blue Tack* still cling to the walls. They held up the last student's ideas and tastes but now they've all been torn down to leave this bareness, a reflection of my life and mind at the moment. These walls won't get a poster out of me!

Okay! Shall we get it over with good and quickly! I'm 25 years old, a refugee from the world of work. I've got untidy black hair, neither too long nor too short to be mistaken for a fashion statement. My nostrils, earlobes, eyebrows and belly button are defiantly free from gold rings or studs and my face does not sport a silly little pencil beard. This is probably one reason why I'm considered a bit of a weirdo. I'm a non-conformist by not conforming to the trends of the non-conformists. I am what they are not and I find my identity in negativity and negation. Not the perfect topic of discussion on dates with young ladies, hence a notable lack of love and sex in my life. Not that I'm a virgin! Believe me! I met this crazy woman some years ago who dumped me, but I don't want to go into that just yet. All in good time. The priority is to unpack.

I can hear confident laughter and shrill female voices. I can hear, just by their voices, that they've got beautiful big breasts and perfect arses. The thought of meeting them fills me with both excitement and dread. It's like I've got a label on my forehead declaring to the world that I'm a wanker. And I know that as soon as I see them, they will all get a part in my sexual fantasies and I'll wonder if somehow they will be able to read my mind and know what goes on in there. If I don't introduce myself soon, though, I'll be labelled, categorised and avoided. In a minute, I'll have to open the door and act all casual, as if I was just going to the toilet or something.

"Hello there. I'm Nicola. I'm opposite you," said a smiling voice when I eventually made my move into the awkward world of social interaction. My brain automatically ran a film in fast motion, a sort of dimly lit soft porn film. It always happens! She radiated 'niceness' and it was almost certain that she had liked ponies when she was just a few years younger. I liked her.

"I'm Antoine," I said, shaking her small hand, "Don't laugh!"

Now, at this point you are probably wondering why such a run-of-the-mill bloke from the South East of England has got such a daft name. It was my mum, you see. She told me that when she was pregnant with me she'd been engrossed in a romantic novel where the hero was called Antoine and she made the decision to name me after him. That was tempting fate, of course! Predictably, the hero and I didn't turn out to share too many characteristics. The Antoine of the novel wasn't in need of *Alexander technique* lessons, didn't wash with *Biactol* every morning because ordinary soap aggravated his acne, and was certainly not embarrassed by his blocked sinuses.

Whereas the heroic Antoine had women falling at his feet every other chapter, the only

woman that ever fell at this Antoine's feet was unconscious with drink. This was a swoon brought about by too much vodka at a friend's birthday party I attended. It seems like a million years ago now! Anyway, I'll tell you about it, if you like...

I had been chatting her up for a good half an hour and thinking that just maybe that mysterious force that operates between males and females might make itself known and carry us off in an uncontrollable passion of copulation. It was not to be! All of a sudden she slid down the wall and crumpled elegantly to the floor. When I saw her two weeks later, not only did she not recall any of our conversation, she didn't even recognise me. It was then when I began to feel how futile a lot of our efforts are in life. Some of us are dealt a shit hand and are not destined to become heroes, it appears.

This introduction thing continued for a while. I soon found out who was studying what, what 'A' levels had been done and what part of Britain they had all come from. John, for example, wore dark glasses even though the lighting was fine throughout the building. I thought for a moment that he might have been blind, but soon realised that he was just being 'cool' and enigmatic. (Designer or 'off the peg' enigma is available in most good stores). His hair was somewhat unusual too. Being a mature student puts you out of touch a bit! I thought he must have fallen over in a paint factory, but again his hair was intentionally as it was - all spiky and shimmering with various alarming hues. Like with my acne, I have always thought that if something invites staring, you were supposed to do the opposite and pretend you hadn't noticed. But I'm not sure that the same applies in this situation. Perhaps I should have said " 'Like the hair !" or something like that. Short hair, long hair, spiky hair, colourful hair, very little hair, no hair, ponytails... I know there's some sort of vocabulary here but I'm damned if I can understand the bloody lingo!

I met several others on my corridor and found them fairly harmless. I liked them, so I'm not always a miserable sod! Perhaps I'll make a go of this, become a great philosopher, write impressive books that will make me attractive to women, perhaps my future will be more than building society repayments. Perhaps! Wonderful things do happen sometimes, don't they?

Eventually, I did manage to put all my stuff away. It was an interesting experience, believe it or not. I watched my hands moving around, twisting about, grasping and moulding themselves around shoes, socks, *Sony Walkman*, pencil cases and so on. I thought about all those tiny muscles expanding and contracting, creating an infinite amount of shapes and pressures that enabled me to grasp anything I wanted. I am the end result of millions of years of evolution - millions of years to pick up socks and put them away! I owe the process so much more, or is it me that is owed? It makes no difference I suppose. Happiness is what's important, isn't it? It doesn't matter what the truth is, as long as you're happy. That's right isn't it? I just don't know. That's what I want to find out, I think.

What's important at the moment is that you form a good mental impression of me, since in any diary, the central character is always its writer. But I find it really embarrassing to talk about myself in any great depth, I'm afraid. You see, I'm one of those people who can't stand having his photo taken, especially in a group. I hate all those cheesy grins and mine always looks the most false. I'm paranoid that the others think that my mug has spoilt the picture. I tend to avoid looking at and describing myself, but I don't want you to think that I'm a bloody monster! I'm not. It's just this 'self consciousness' thing that I have. I have 'self consciousness' in the sense of being 'conscious of a self' and how odd it is to have one. My existence has always felt strange to me and other people don't seem to know what the hell I'm talking about.

I've always felt it odd, for example, that I can raise my arm. When I was at school, I said to my friend,
"Isn't it funny that you can raise your arm ?" You should have seen the look he gave me!

I've seen that look on children when they are absorbed in some gleeful act of sadism - like pulling the wings off flies. He told the whole class and they were soon all laughing at me. I remember being close to tears and shouting back at them.

"All right then! If you're so clever! How do your thoughts get into your muscles?"

They laughed all the more and made me cry, but I also knew at that moment that they didn't understand the question and they they were so shallow that they needed to hurt someone to make them feel big. I didn't make friends easily at school, but as I was no trouble, my teachers allowed me to sink into the background and disappear. School successfully stopped me asking interesting questions and I shut my mouth until I was belched out the other side. Just before this exciting and fearful event, I had a careers interview and was asked about my plans. I had none. Nothing appealed or fitted. I didn't have 'determination to succeed' nor understood what that was supposed to mean. I was intelligent enough to realise that I wasn't intelligent enough to be an astronaut, even if I had the bravery. I asked about being a best selling novelist or concert musician but was asked to 'lower my sights a little'. I sensed that some sort of enthusiasm was expected of me, but I couldn't make any sense of it all. Regret, condolences, maybe, but enthusiasm...?

It's easier to talk about the past. In the past, I was someone else, someone I don't really know anymore, an old acquaintance that's easier to describe. But who I am now is always in a state of 'becoming' and I can't grasp anything with certainty that might help you picture me. Camus felt the same apparently. Let me quote you something he said: *"..If I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers..."* Camus won some great literary prizes, so I must be intelligent like him, eh?

This is my first night alone in London. I don't know what I'm doing here but I couldn't stand the silence of my room. I had to get out and go down to the student bar. I bought a pint and sat down in a dark corner, surrounded by breasts and bums, laughter, noise, music, the sharp confident clack of pool balls thudding into pockets. It made me want to start my life again, this time with a purpose. These students know what they are doing here. They are starting a future for themselves. I'm here to escape the future and to prove that I'm clever. I'd like to make friends but I don't want to talk about sexism and racism, don't at this moment give a shit about Northern Ireland or South Africa. If I'm honest, I don't much care about the exploited and downtrodden in various parts of the world either at the moment. I know this makes me sound like a bastard, and perhaps I am, but I've got to understand my own existence first. When I try to think and act like a 'good' person, there's a voice in my head that takes the piss and holds up my insincerity like a soiled pair of underpants.

I downed my beer and bought another. When I was a kid, I'd always close my eyes and wonder about my future. What will I do? What will I be? Is my future wife walking around at this moment, wondering about the same things? Is there a tree growing somewhere in the world that my coffin will be made out of?

A big cheer goes up and the balls on the table are rearranged. I must leave now, before I get too drunk. I have to believe in wonderful things. Wonderful things! I repeat it in my head until I get back into my room. Wonderful things! They happen! I fall asleep with these words on my brain.

November 18th

It's been more than a month since I've written anything - been too busy reading, having tutorials and recovering from hangovers, but I have to tell you about a friend of mine. I met him in the union bar. He came up to me, all sociable and grinning:

"You're doing philosophy aren't you? Saw you in the library fighting off some huge tome," he said. I grinned and told him that I hadn't understood a word of what I was reading and how my essay about 'free will' remained stubbornly unwritten.

"Steve," he announced, extending a formal hand, and sat down opposite me clutching a full pint as if it was part of his hand, "Psychology, 'Northerner'".

Here we go again with characterisation! This isn't my strong point, apparently, having received numerous rejection slips from editors of short story magazines. I've tried my hand at writing and never got anywhere with it. Just one of a thousand things that others do so much better than me! But some years ago though, I naively sent a stupid sci-fi story to a stupid sci-fi magazine. One character had green hair, a plastic face, skinny as a rake. The other was fat, bald and partly alien. The editor still said that my characters were all the same! So please bear with me when I say that Steve has a northern accent (not surprising since he's a northerner), a monkey-like grin that gives off both humour and a sort of wisdom; he's extrovert, a bit younger than me etc. There's a definite suggestion of biceps created by dumbbells and thick black hair that he ties back, making him look like some sort of minor royal from Georgian times. Sorry I can't tell you much more, but that's basically it. He hasn't got very thin lips, thinning hair, a squashed face, a huge domed head; he doesn't wear any remarkable clothes (Marks & Spencer shirt- green), doesn't sport a monocle - (that's reserved for a much later and much more unlikely character!) He doesn't carry a stick that he taps emphatically on the floor when making a point, but yes, he wears a small silver ring in his right earlobe for no apparent reason. I'll have to forgive him for that. No-one's perfect. I find all this description and characterisation stuff so boring, but if you want Steve to be like some of the above, go ahead and visualise him in that way, it makes no difference to me.

Steve and I got talking. It was a Friday night and we were really getting the beers in, I can tell you! I asked him what the girls were like in Psychology, pointing out the general dearth of fanciable females in the Philosophy department. It was then that I noticed the wisdom in the grin. Steve went on to explain that in talking about women, what we were really doing was establishing that we are both heterosexuals and that under no circumstances would we be fondling each other's knobs and bottoms later on in the evening. I'm glad that we got this out into the open! But it was hardly necessary as we were both gazing at the females that dripped steadily into the bar, both apparently devoid of the necessary mating rituals that would bring the desired quarry to us. We were like two sad baboons at the bottom of the hierarchy, oppressed by the dominant males. Well, that's how I thought of it, anyway. As it happens, Steve reckons himself to be a bit of a ladies man, when it suits him, when the mood takes him. I see no reason to disbelieve him.

We talked for most of the night, but our talking soon staggered towards incoherence and began to take some surreal detours, like a mini-bus full of clowns on a day trip to Hiroshima. (No, I don't know what I mean either!) - the Epistemology of breasts, legs and greenhouse gases, a Marxist analysis of lager, whether B F Skinner was a dickhead or not, the concept of the absurd in existentialist writings (we spoke loudly on this, hoping to impress eavesdroppers, especially female ones - needn't have bothered!), and more. Steve gave away a disturbing signal that he was going to do some work and take Psychology seriously. It would have been a bit impolite to give him my view that the very idea of a 'scientific understanding of human behaviour' was such a load of crap, so I kept my mouth shut. I didn't want to lose a friend so soon. The beer kept flowing, the girls came and went, the music got louder and I was beginning to feel a bit choked by all the smoke. These variables correlated with us getting more and more pissed! Steve asked me, eventually, why I was staring foolishly at my empty glass of beer.

"I'm looking...at it's purpose," I slurred through numbed lips and brain.

I could hear Steve's jolly laugh echoing outside the cocoon that started enfolding itself around me. I watched him expertly roll a cigarette - solid, sure of his existence, like my empty glass.

"We've all got one of those," he said, licking and lighting his cigarette.

"I haven't found a purpose yet," I said, as if making a bold confession.

"The 'yet' means you're an optimist," Steve said. His white teeth gleamed through designer stubble. I pondered for a moment.

"An optimist's glass is half full; a pessimist's glass is half empty, right? But mine's got sweet FA in it. Does that mean I'm a nihilist?" I said.

"No, it means that it's your round," said Steve, deflecting my simile or metaphor or whatever it was.

"Then my glass would be full, not empty..."

"You've got it..."

"But... But..."

The imagery was breaking up like a spaceship speeding through my drunk, burning atmosphere. I back peddled.

"If we're just a load of meat created by genes and instincts, and stuff like that, how can we have a purpose? Aren't I just a slave to impersonal outside forces? I mean, if everything is *caused*, I can't do anything about it, can I? My life's not my own." I slurred and spluttered.

Steve doesn't really attach much importance to this 'free will' thing. He thinks that we can be seen as both lumps of matter and imaginative beings in control of our lives. He doesn't think that it's a contradiction to see our behaviour as both free and determined. He's got it all sussed, but I'm not convinced. I'm never convinced by anyone who has 'certainty', that's why I can't be a theist or an atheist. When people ask me what I believe in, I tell them I don't believe in believing. I think Steve should write the essay for me; I can't get my head around this free will business. Sometimes it makes sense, sometimes it doesn't - that's why it's interesting I suppose. It's a puzzle I'd like to solve - the nearest to an ambition that I've come to.

"Steve," I mumbled, fumbling about my pockets for some cash, "If I could pull my brains out and put it on the table, would that be everything of what I am? I mean...would that pink, convoluted stuff really be 'me'?"

My hands mimed the said delicate operation (which could have been mistaken for the removal of an invisible hat). I placed my brain next to the empty glass. Steve grinned and shrugged his shoulders, flicking ash nonchalantly into a plastic ashtray.

"Ultimately, I suppose so, but brains create minds and minds are what we are."

Suddenly the music was turned up again and I had to speak louder.

"But surely you'd have to conclude that a mind is just an *illusion* if I'm nothing but a brain," I said, making gestures that parodied my stuporous attempts to talk like a philosopher. "Isn't the very thing that I think of as me, an illusion?"

"Are you going to get those drinks in?" Steve smiled. I looked with some bewilderment at my feet below the table.

"I seem to have forgotten how to stand up," I said with both amusement and concern.

"God! A man could die of thirst here!" he laughed. He had two hands behind his head and one leg crossed over the other. A man at peace with the world. He looked as though he had good, positive things on his mind.

I found my money and piled it up on the table, next to my invisible brain.

"But Steve," I continued, fingering cold circular pieces of gold and silver metal, "You're the expert on the mind. Can you tell me why my brain or my mind, or whatever I am, lets me think ridiculous thoughts and do ridiculous things? Let me give you a 'for instance'..."

I pushed back my chair and hopped five steps backwards, both hands held in imitation

of a rabbit, teeth jutting forward. Heads turned in the smoke, away from private conversations, for a brief naked moment there was shock in the air as normal behaviour was disrupted. Steve slapped the table enthusiastically and I watched his face break up into broken shards of laughter and embarrassment, as if dragged away from rationality by a monster of stupidity.

"Millions of years of evolution and the end result is absurdity," I said. "Doesn't that show I've got free will? Doesn't that prove that I'm more than just a physical brain?"

Steve eventually calmed down and the faces turned back to their worlds.

"Humour has a purpose," he spluttered. "It's a part of human nature."

This is why I'm confused, you see! Imitating a rabbit jumping backwards doesn't seem explicable in terms of cause and effect to me. Nor does a mind. I can understand 'determinism' when it comes to birds building a nest or a lion attacking its prey or a chimp fishing out termites with a stick, but no animal ever jumped backwards, making pointless gestures and movements. It's just not biologically feasible. Absurdity, to me seems to be stronger than logic, and absurdity is what I see and experience. Absurdity laughs at all the laws that we try to dig out of nature. I was trying to tell Steve this as I staggered back to my room, but he had a calm and confident look in his eye, and I knew he thought I was wrong.

"Dogs chase their tails don't they?" he said. It seemed deeply significant, like he was warning me not to go round and round in search of what couldn't be caught or found. I'm going to listen to what everybody says and learn from them from now on. Anybody who'll talk to me!



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