



The Search for Self-Identity in Andy Weir's *Project Hail Mary*

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Abstract:

This study investigates the protagonist's search for identity in Andy Weir's novel "*Project Hail Mary*" and how Ryland Grace's confrontation with isolation, purpose, and moral responsibility reflects existential philosophies such as those of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir. This study identifies key moments in self-discovery and decision-making that serve as representations of existential freedom and authenticity. Grace's journey from despair to the creation of meaning in the vastness of space reflects humanity's struggle to define existence amid uncertainty. The results show that the protagonist's identity is reconstructed through choice, sacrifice, and acceptance of absurdity. Ryland Grace's journey mirrors the human condition described by Sartre and Camus: he awakens in a meaningless universe, constructs identity through deliberate choice, and transcends despair through compassion and moral action. This represents how humans face meaninglessness with courage and logic. This study contributes to the literary conversation about the intersection of science fiction and existential humanism by emphasizing how speculative narratives continue to explore philosophical questions about the nature of existence, purpose, and identity.

Keywords: existentialism; absurdism; self discovery

Abstrak:

Studi ini menyelidiki pencarian identitas diri protagonis dalam novel Andy Weir "*Project Hail Mary*" dan bagaimana konfrontasi Ryland Grace dengan isolasi, tujuan, dan tanggung jawab moral mencerminkan filsafat eksistensial seperti Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, dan Simone de Beauvoir. Studi ini menemukan momen-momen penting dalam penemuan diri dan pengambilan keputusan yang berfungsi sebagai representasi kebebasan eksistensial dan keaslian. Perjalanan Grace dari keputusan menuju penciptaan makna di ruang angkasa yang luas mencerminkan perjuangan manusia untuk mendefinisikan keberadaan di tengah ketidakpastian. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa identitas protagonis direkonstruksi melalui pilihan, pengorbanan, dan penerimaan absurditas. Perjalanan Ryland Grace mencerminkan kondisi manusia yang digambarkan oleh Sartre dan Camus: ia terbangun di alam semesta yang tidak bermakna, membangun identitas melalui pilihan yang disengaja, dan melampaui keputusan melalui kasih sayang dan tindakan moral. Ini mewakili cara manusia menghadapi ketidakbermaknaan dengan keberanian dan logika. Studi ini membantu percakapan sastra tentang persimpangan antara fiksi ilmiah dan humanisme eksistensial dengan menekankan bagaimana narasi spekulatif masih menyelidiki pertanyaan filosofis tentang sifat keberadaan, tujuan, dan identitas.

Kata kunci: eksistensialisme; absurdisme; penemuan jati diri



INTRODUCTION

Existentialism, which emerged in literature and philosophy in the 20th century, focuses on the idea that each person must be able to determine their own essence through free will and conscious decisions. Existential themes such as alienation, absurdity, and moral responsibility are often discussed in literature through characters who experience a loss of identity and meaning. Traditionally, these ideas have been associated with writers such as Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, and Jean-Paul Sartre. However, the understanding of existentialism has found new expression in 21st-century science fiction, which combines scientific imagination with philosophical inquiry.

Project Hail Mary (Weir, 2021) is an example of this combination. The novel follows Ryland Grace, a lone astronaut who wakes up on a spaceship with no memory, gradually discovering his mission to save humanity. Beneath its layers of scientific realism and technical ingenuity, the story explores fundamental existential questions: Who am I? Why do I exist? What gives life meaning when everything familiar is lost? These concerns align with the main existentialist motifs of self-determination, freedom, and the creation of meaning in an absurd and indifferent universe.

Although it received critical acclaim, *Project Hail Mary* is rarely explored from a philosophical or literary perspective. Most discussions focus on its scientific accuracy, problem-solving narrative, and the dynamics of cooperation in interspecies communication (Johnson, 2022; Liu, 2023). The main research problem in this study is the lack of academic research on the existential aspects of the novel's characters. This study specifically investigates how Ryland Grace's journey in isolation, moral decision-making, and self-discovery reflect existential concepts of identity formation, moral responsibility, and freedom in absurd situations.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the fields of literature and philosophy. By analyzing *Project Hail Mary* through an existentialist framework, this study expands the research on existentialism in contemporary science fiction literature—a genre often considered more scientific than philosophical. It highlights how science fiction can serve as a modern platform for exploring existential issues, particularly in an era marked by technological advancement, space exploration, and increasing human alienation (Berger, 2020). Furthermore, this analysis emphasizes the continuing relevance of existential thought in addressing human resilience, moral agency, and the search for meaning in conditions of extreme loneliness and uncertainty.



Existing studies have predominantly emphasized Project Hail Mary's scientific realism and cooperative ethos (Johnson, 2022; Liu, 2023), leaving an interpretive void in the examination of its philosophical depth. This gap calls for a deeper investigation into how Weir's portrayal of isolation, friendship, and sacrifice resonates with existentialist ideals. By drawing upon the theories of Sartre and Camus, this study responds to that gap by interpreting Ryland Grace's transformation as a process of existential self-realization. Ultimately, this research argues that Project Hail Mary represents a distinctly humanistic vision of existential freedom—asserting that meaning and moral value can be constructed even in the face of cosmic absurdity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The philosophical basis for this research comes from the existentialist thinking of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir. Sartre (1943) argued that “existence precedes essence,” meaning that individuals first exist and only later define themselves through their actions. For Sartre, freedom is absolute; every choice shapes identity and moral responsibility. Meanwhile, Camus (1942) explored the concept of “absurdity”—the conflict between humanity's search for meaning and the indifference of the universe. His concept of the “absurd hero,” who accepts the futility of life but continues to act, aligns with Grace's perseverance in Project Hail Mary.

De Beauvoir (1947) developed existentialism into ethics, asserting that authentic existence requires recognition of the freedom of others. This intersubjective ethics forms the friendship between Grace and Rocky, alien beings who understand each other beyond species differences. The application of existentialism in literature has long explored human alienation and self-awareness in modernist and postmodernist texts—from Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Recent studies (Eames, 2022; Flynn, 2021) highlight an “existential shift” in contemporary science fiction, where isolation and survival are used to explore philosophical meaning. In this context, *Project Hail Mary* stands as a reworking of contemporary existential motifs, combining scientific rationalism with humanistic introspection.

Other previous study includes Collaborative Learning and Andy Weir's *Project Hail Mary* by MacKenzie (2024) discuss how the novel's narrative can be used in a collaborative learning context—showing that the inter-character relationships and cooperation aspects of the fictional world of the Wikipedia novel can be applied as a



pedagogical model. This study is relevant to your research because it highlights the collaboration aspect that also appears in the novel between human and alien characters, albeit from the perspective of educational literature, not existential philosophy. Furthermore, Resource-Rendezvous: *Project Hail Mary* by Amerman (2022) explores the resource, rendezvous, and mission aspects in the novel—a technical/narrative focus that highlights the tensions between entities and scientific challenges. While not explicitly addressing identity or existentialism, this study offers important context for how the extreme situations and isolation of a space mission can open up space for reflection on identity—which can then be transferred to an existential reading of the novel. Lastly, Friend-of-Foe: The Development of Human-Alien Based Interaction in *Project Hail Mary* by Kalawantawanich (2022) investigates the dynamics of human–alien relationships in the novel as aspects of “friend or foe.” This study explores the representation of otherness and interspecies communication in the narrative, which is highly relevant to the aspects of intersubjectivity and recognition within the existential De Beauvoir (1947) framework.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method, focusing on an in-depth textual analysis of *Project Hail Mary* (Weir, 2021). This analysis uses existentialist theory—specifically Sartre's concept of freedom, Camus's absurdism, and Beauvoir's ethics of reciprocity—as an interpretive framework. The data consists of selected text that describe Ryland Grace's psychological development and his existential problems. The quotations were identified based on three criteria: (1) moments of self-reflection or questions of identity; (2) decision-making in uncertainty; and (3) moral choices involving oneself or others. The data were analyzed interpretively, linking textual evidence to existentialist concepts.

FINDINGS

The analysis identifies four interrelated existential dimensions of Ryland Grace's journey: (A) the awakening of self-consciousness and the existential blank slate; (B) the assertion of freedom and moral agency; (C) intersubjective recognition through friendship; and (D) acceptance of absurdity and the reconstruction of meaning through sacrifice.

Awakening and the Existential Blank Slate

Grace's first moments in the novel establish a state of radical existential uncertainty. He awakens without memory, context, or identity—what Sartre might describe as the

absence of essence prior to action. His first act of cognition—struggling to identify himself—marks the beginning of self-creation.

“I wake up. Nothing’s wrong. I’m fine. I’m alive. I don’t know who I am.” (Weir, 2021, p. 3)

The repetition of “I” juxtaposed with “I don’t know who I am” articulates an ontological crisis: existence precedes essence. Grace’s amnesia becomes a narrative metaphor for existential birth, where he must define himself not by inherited meaning but by conscious choice and discovery.

The sterile environment and mechanical voice around him intensify his alienation:

“What’s your name?” said the computer.
“I still don’t know that.” (Weir, 2021, p. 10)

This moment encapsulates Sartrean nausea—the confrontation with nothingness as the starting point of being. Grace’s first act of agency (answering “Four” to the computer’s arithmetic test) marks a symbolic emergence of self-awareness, mirroring the awakening of consciousness in an absurd world.

Assertion of Freedom and Moral Agency

Once self-awareness emerges, Grace’s next step is the assertion of freedom. His gradual acceptance of responsibility transforms him from a passive survivor into an autonomous moral agent.

“Science is about finding the truth, not about being right.” (Weir, 2021, p. 58)

This line signifies his philosophical shift from self-preservation toward authenticity—a key existential virtue. He rejects ego-driven correctness in favor of intellectual honesty, embodying Sartre’s call to live authentically through action.

When Grace states “I have to do something. Sitting here and crying isn’t going to help.” (Weir, 2021, p. 41) he demonstrates the existential leap from despair to action. This transition aligns with Kierkegaard’s act of faith and Sartre’s engagement: meaning is created through choice, not contemplation. His repeated decisions to act—conducting experiments, solving mechanical crises, or risking failure—constitute the practical expression of freedom. Each choice defines his essence and simultaneously rejects nihilism.

Intersubjective Recognition and the Ethics of Relation

Existential authenticity deepens through intersubjectivity—the recognition of the self in the Other. Grace’s friendship with Rocky, the alien engineer, redefines his previously



solitary struggle for meaning into a shared, ethical existence. Their relationship transcends species and language barriers, functioning as an existential dialogue.

“You are good, Grace. You save my people.” (Weir, 2021, p. 454)

“We are friends. You and me. Friends.” (Weir, 2021, p. 455)

Here, the Other—embodied in Rocky—validates Grace’s moral identity. The alien’s recognition provides the mirror through which Grace’s humanity is affirmed. This echoes Simone de Beauvoir’s extension of existentialism into ethics: authentic existence involves recognizing and affirming the freedom of others. In contrast to Sartre’s notion of the “look” as conflictual, Weir’s portrayal turns intersubjectivity into cooperation. Grace’s relationship with Rocky transforms his isolation into connection, demonstrating that meaning is not an individual construct but a co-created ethical reality. Through their collaboration, Grace transcends biological and existential isolation, embodying a post-humanist form of existentialism grounded in empathy and shared purpose.

Acceptance of Absurdity and Self-Definition Through Sacrifice

The final phase of Grace’s existential development is his conscious acceptance of absurdity and his redefinition of meaning through sacrifice. When he chooses to remain behind to save Rocky’s planet, he fully embraces Camus’s ideal of revolt—the act of defying meaninglessness by creating personal purpose.

“This is how I die. I’ll die doing something that matters.” (Weir, 2021, p. 473)

This is the moment of existential victory. Grace accepts death, not as defeat but as affirmation: he chooses how to die, asserting freedom in the face of absurdity. His choice reflects Camus’s Sisyphus, who, aware of the futility of his task, finds meaning in the act itself. The culmination of his moral and existential growth appears in his reflection:

“Maybe I didn’t save Earth, but I saved a world.” (Weir, 2021, p. 478)

This statement redefines meaning beyond anthropocentrism and success. Grace achieves authenticity not by saving humanity, but by living truthfully to his moral choice. His existence becomes meaningful precisely because it was chosen and enacted in defiance of absurdity.

Table 1. Summary of Existential Stages

Stage	Existential Meaning	Illustrative Quote	Conceptual Alignment
Blank Slate (Amnesia)	Confrontation with nothingness and absence of identity	“I don’t know who I am.” (p. 3)	Sartre: <i>existence precedes essence</i>
Agency and Freedom	Action and moral decision define the self	“Sitting here and crying isn’t going to help.” (p. 41)	Sartre: <i>being-for-itself</i>
Intersubjectivity	Recognition of self through the Other	“We are friends. You and me.” (p. 455)	Beauvoir: <i>ethics of reciprocity</i>
Acceptance of Absurdity	Creation of meaning through choice and sacrifice	“I’ll die doing something that matters.” (p. 473)	Camus: <i>revolt and acceptance</i>

Synthesis

Taken together, these findings illustrate that *Project Hail Mary* is more than a tale of scientific problem-solving; it is an existential journey. Ryland Grace’s journey mirrors the human condition described by Sartre and Camus: he awakens in a meaningless universe, constructs identity through deliberate choice, and transcends despair through compassion and moral action. By situating meaning within human (and interspecies) connection, Weir expands existentialism beyond individualism—suggesting that even in cosmic solitude, *to be is to act ethically with others*.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented above demonstrate that *Project Hail Mary* encapsulates central tenets of existentialist philosophy—freedom, authenticity, absurdity, and self-definition—through the lived experiences of its protagonist, Ryland Grace. This section interprets these findings in light of major existential theorists—Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir—and situates Andy Weir’s narrative within the tradition of existential humanism in modern science fiction.

Sartre’s Concept of Existence and Freedom

Jean-Paul Sartre’s dictum “*existence precedes essence*” (1943) asserts that human beings are not born with a predetermined nature; instead, they must define themselves through conscious action. Grace’s awakening scene, beginning with the line “*I don’t know who I am*” (p. 3), perfectly dramatizes this ontological condition. His amnesia strips him of biography and identity, leaving only his capacity for choice.

In Sartrean terms, Grace embodies *être-pour-soi*—the being-for-itself—who must continually project himself into the future through decisions. His statement, “*I have to do something. Sitting here and crying isn’t going to help*” (p. 41), signifies this transition from



passive existence to active being. By choosing to act, Grace affirms his freedom, taking full responsibility for his existence in an indifferent universe.

Sartre also argues that authenticity arises when individuals acknowledge their radical freedom without appealing to excuses or external authorities. Grace's pragmatic statement, "*Science is about finding the truth, not about being right*" (p. 58), illustrates such authenticity: he rejects pride and dogma to pursue objective understanding. Through these acts, Grace constructs meaning through commitment, mirroring Sartre's notion that "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself."

Camus's Absurd Hero and the Creation of Meaning

Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), defines the absurd as the tension between humanity's desire for meaning and the universe's silence. Grace's isolation in interstellar space is a literal manifestation of this absurd condition. However, like Camus's Sisyphus, he transforms despair into purpose through conscious defiance. His declaration, "*This is how I die. I'll die doing something that matters*" (p. 473), encapsulates Camus's idea of revolt—the refusal to submit to meaninglessness. Grace accepts his mortality and absurd fate, yet he acts with intention and love, creating his own moral order amid cosmic indifference.

Furthermore, his concluding reflection, "*Maybe I didn't save Earth, but I saved a world*" (p. 478), reframes Camus's absurd hero in a modern context: heroism lies not in universal triumph but in the courage to find meaning in one's chosen acts. Grace's calm acceptance of his isolation echoes Camus's vision of Sisyphus finding happiness in perpetual struggle. His sacrifice is both rational and emotional, merging reason and empathy in defiance of the void.

Beauvoir and the Ethics of Intersubjectivity

While Sartre's existentialism focuses on individual freedom, Simone de Beauvoir extends the framework into an ethical dimension. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), she argues that authentic existence requires the recognition of others' freedom. Grace's friendship with Rocky exemplifies this concept: rather than imposing his will, he collaborates and learns, affirming the alien's autonomy and dignity.

Rocky's words—"You are good, Grace. You save my people" (p. 454)—and Grace's response—"We are friends. You and me. Friends." (p. 455)—highlight a mutual recognition that transcends species boundaries. Their relationship redefines existential authenticity as fundamentally relational: identity is co-constructed through empathy and



cooperation. In Beauvoir's terms, Grace achieves *moral freedom*: he acts not merely for himself but for another being's existence. This ethical partnership transforms his solitude into solidarity, suggesting that the existential project achieves fullness only when shared with others.

Existential Humanism in Modern Science Fiction

Weir's *Project Hail Mary* revitalizes existentialism within a scientific and posthuman context. While traditional existential works—such as Sartre's *Nausea* or Camus's *The Stranger*—center on alienation within social reality, Weir situates alienation in outer space, replacing societal absurdity with cosmic indifference. Yet the philosophical stakes remain identical: how to live meaningfully in an uncaring universe.

Grace's rationalism and optimism signal a synthesis between existential despair and humanistic resilience. His reliance on science parallels Camus's "lucid reason"—a disciplined confrontation with the absurd without resorting to faith or nihilism. Science becomes both a survival tool and an existential act of rebellion: by understanding the universe, Grace asserts human agency against meaninglessness.

This blend of existentialism and scientific realism aligns with what Flynn (2021) calls "*the existential turn in modern science fiction*", where survival narratives become philosophical meditations on human purpose. Weir's portrayal thus extends existentialism beyond its 20th-century European roots into a global, post-anthropocentric humanism that values cooperation, empathy, and rational courage.

Contribution and Limitations

This study contributes to literary existentialism by revealing how *Project Hail Mary* reinterprets the philosophical concerns of Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir through the lens of contemporary science fiction. It demonstrates that existentialism remains adaptable to modern anxieties about isolation, technology, and identity.

However, the focus on a single protagonist limits the scope of comparative analysis. Future research could explore how Weir's other works—such as *The Martian*—extend or contrast these existential motifs, or how interstellar settings reshape existential freedom into collective humanism.

Synthesis

In sum, *Project Hail Mary* presents an existential narrative where the search for identity evolves from self-recognition to moral responsibility. Grace represents the essence of the existential hero: isolated yet self-aware, rational yet compassionate, and



ultimately free through his choices. Through Weir's combination of scientific elements and philosophical meanings, the novel concludes that meaning, though fragile and subjective, can be consciously created—even in the cold silence of the cosmos.

CONCLUSION(S)

This study demonstrates that Andy Weir's novel *Project Hail Mary* utilizes its scientific framework to address existential themes of identity, freedom, and meaning. Through Ryland Grace's journey from amnesia to self-discovery, the novel depicts the human struggle to create meaning amidst isolation and absurdity. The protagonist's actions—his quest for knowledge, moral decisions, and ultimate sacrifice—represent Sartre's concept of authentic freedom and Camus's acceptance of absurdity. His friendship with Rocky extends existential thinking into Beauvoir's ethics of reciprocity, suggesting that meaning is not simply self-defined but co-created through empathy and mutual recognition.

By combining hard science fiction with existential humanism, *Project Hail Mary* revitalizes philosophical reflection in modern speculative literature. It asserts that even amidst the vast indifference of space, purpose emerges through conscious choice and compassion. Future research might expand this discussion by comparing Weir's work with other contemporary science fiction writers—such as Cixin Liu or Neal Stephenson—to explore how scientific narratives continue to negotiate human existential concerns in an age of interstellar technology and imagination.

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