EXISTENTIALISM

Authored by

mohammad looti

October 11, 2025

EXISTENTIALISM

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy, Literature, Psychology

1. Core Definition

Existentialism is a broad philosophical and literary movement, primarily originating in Europe between the World Wars and achieving its peak dominance throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Due to the diverse nature of its foundational thinkers and subsequent proponents, ranging from religious figures to staunch atheists, **Existentialism** remains notoriously difficult to define precisely. However, at its core, Existentialism is defined by its focus on the individual and the belief that philosophical thinking begins with the human subject--not merely the thinking subject, but the acting, feeling, and living individual. It places profound emphasis on the subjective experience of being, exploring themes such as freedom, responsibility, anxiety, authenticity, and the confrontation with **The Absurd**.

The central concern of Existentialism is the question of human existence itself. Unlike earlier Western philosophical traditions that often sought universal, objective truths or essences, Existentialism argues that there is no predefined nature or purpose (essence) assigned to humanity before birth. Instead, the individual must define this essence through their choices and actions during their life. This radical assertion means that human beings are fundamentally free, but this freedom carries the crushing weight of total responsibility, leading inevitably to **existential dread** (Angst). The movement provided a crucial intellectual framework for understanding the profound disorientation and moral ambiguity felt in post-war Europe, challenging established religious and rationalist certainties.

While often associated with mid-20th-century figures like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, the movement draws deeply from a lineage of thinkers who prioritized subjective truth and the concrete reality of human suffering. The resulting philosophy is not a unified system but a collection of related inquiries into the meaning of life, the nature of selfhood, and the inherent contingency of being in a seemingly meaningless universe. The fundamental belief is that the individual is responsible for giving meaning to life through passion and commitment, irrespective of the lack of meaning found in the external world.

2. Philosophical Precursors and Historical Development

The formal movement of Existentialism emerged in the 20th century, but its roots stretch back centuries. The 17th-century philosopher and mathematician **Blaise Pascal** is often cited as a proto-existentialist due to his focus on the human condition's anguish and the famous 'Pascal's Wager,' which addresses the uncertainty and risk inherent in faith. However, the true intellectual

foundation was laid in the 19th century by thinkers reacting against the rationalist systems of philosophers like G.W.F. Hegel.

The Danish theologian **Søren Kierkegaard** (1813-1855) is widely regarded as the "Father of Existentialism." Kierkegaard vehemently opposed the prevailing Hegelian system, which sought to encompass all reality into a comprehensive logical structure. Instead, Kierkegaard championed the primacy of subjective truth and the importance of individual commitment in the face of uncertainty, particularly concerning faith. His works, such as *Fear and Trembling*, explore the anguish of making choices that cannot be rationally justified, introducing the concept of the "leap of faith" and the stages of existence (aesthetic, ethical, religious).

The German philosopher **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900) also played a critical role, albeit from a secular standpoint. Nietzsche's declaration of the "death of God" signaled the collapse of traditional religious and metaphysical foundations for morality and meaning. This event leaves modern humanity adrift, requiring the creation of new values. His concept of the **Übermensch** (Overman) suggests that individuals must overcome nihilism and affirm life fully, embracing fate and becoming self-creators of meaning. This emphasis on self-creation and the burden of living without divine guidance became a cornerstone for 20th-century secular existentialists. The Russian novelist **Fyodor Dostoevsky** further explored these themes through literature, particularly in *Notes from Underground* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, demonstrating the psychological consequences of irrationality, freedom, and the rejection of objective morality.

3. Fundamental Tenets: Existence Precedes Essence

The defining axiom of 20th-century Existentialism, most explicitly articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre, is the claim that **existence precedes essence**. This principle distinguishes the human being from manufactured objects. An artifact, such as a paper cutter, is created according to a predetermined blueprint or concept (its essence) before it exists. Its function defines it. Conversely, the human being first exists--appears, throws itself into the world--and only afterward defines itself through its life choices and actions.

Sartre argued that man is initially nothing; he will only be what he makes of himself. There is no divine architect or universal human nature that dictates what a person should be. This absolute freedom means the individual is entirely responsible for constructing their own essence. This idea radically shifts the burden of definition from external forces (God, nature, society) onto the individual's shoulders. To deny this freedom, or to attribute one's choices to external necessity, is what Sartre termed **Bad Faith** (mauvaise foi). Bad faith is the self-deception employed to escape the anguish of freedom and responsibility.

This radical contingency of existence leads to the realization that all choices are made without recourse to absolute ethical guidelines or predetermined purpose. If essence is not given, then

there is no objective measure of a "good" life or a "correct" decision, only the self-imposed commitment to the chosen path. This affirmation of subjectivity elevates individual experience and moral conviction above generalized rational systems, making the individual the sole source of value in their world.

4. Key Concepts: Freedom, Responsibility, and Anxiety

The philosophical weight of Existentialism is carried by three intertwined concepts: freedom, responsibility, and the resulting anxiety. **Freedom** in the existential sense is not merely political liberty but a metaphysical state; humans are "condemned to be free." Every decision, from the mundane to the monumental, is an act of creation that shapes not only the individual self but also contributes to defining the image of humanity that one believes ought to be. This absolute freedom is terrifying because it is absolute.

The corollary to freedom is total **responsibility**. Because the individual chooses their actions in a world devoid of external justification, they are fully accountable for those choices. Sartre emphasized that when a person chooses, they are choosing not just for themselves, but "for all mankind." The individual must ask: "What if everyone acted as I am acting now?" This universal dimension of responsibility magnifies the stakes of every choice, preventing the individual from taking solace in relativism or justifying their behavior by claiming they were merely following orders or natural inclination.

This burden of freedom and responsibility produces **Angst** (anxiety or dread). Unlike ordinary fear, which has a specific object (fear of a dog, fear of failure), existential angst is the generalized, profound awareness of one's own freedom and the ultimate nullity (nothingness) upon which all choices are founded. Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, explored this phenomenon, arguing that angst reveals the individual's relationship to their own potentiality and finitude. It is the feeling experienced when one confronts the pure possibility of one's own future, unconstrained by past definitions or societal roles.

5. Major Figures and Schools

Existentialism is often split into two primary schools based on their approach to the concept of God: **Atheistic Existentialism** and **Theistic Existentialism**. Atheistic Existentialists, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, firmly assert that since God does not exist, there are no predetermined values or human nature. Man must face the consequences of this cosmic loneliness and create his own meaning entirely. Sartre's famous lecture, "Existentialism is a Humanism," defended this secular stance against critics who accused the movement of nihilism.

Theistic Existentialists, most notably Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel, believe in God but

argue that the relationship with the divine is inherently subjective, irrational, and requires a passionate, personal commitment rather than a rational, systematic belief. Marcel focused on **mystery** and **participation**, contrasting them with problems that can be objectively solved. For these thinkers, the anguish and struggle of existence are necessary steps toward genuine faith, emphasizing the individual's isolated stand before God.

A pivotal figure, **Martin Heidegger**, while influencing the movement significantly, often rejected the label "existentialist." His analysis of "Dasein" (Being-there) focuses on the structures of human existence, emphasizing concepts like **thrownness** (the fact that we are simply thrown into a world we did not choose) and **Being-towards-death** (the recognition of our finitude as the ultimate horizon of existence). Heidegger provided the deep phenomenological framework that Sartre later adapted for his own atheistic conclusions in *Being and Nothingness*.

6. Influence on Arts, Literature, and Psychology

The influence of Existentialism permeated 20th-century culture, particularly in literature and drama. Authors like **Albert Camus**, known for works such as *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, explored **The Absurd**--the irreconcilable conflict between humanity's innate need for meaning and the universe's indifference. Camus proposed that authentic living involves acknowledging the absurd and rebelling against it through conscious action and solidarity. Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir's foundational text of modern feminism, *The Second Sex*, applied existential principles to analyze the societal construction of gender, arguing that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," demonstrating how social constraints limit freedom and induce bad faith.

In the field of psychology, Existentialism heavily informed the development of **Existential Therapy** and Humanistic Psychology. Therapists like Viktor Frankl, founder of **Logotherapy**, focused on helping patients find personal meaning (logos) even in suffering. Logotherapy is based on the premise that the primary motivational force in life is the search for meaning. Existential psychology generally seeks to understand human behavior through the lenses of ultimate concerns, such as death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness, asserting that psychological health requires confronting these anxieties authentically rather than avoiding them.

7. Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its profound cultural impact, Existentialism has faced rigorous criticism from various philosophical camps. One of the most common critiques is its perceived **pessimism** or bleakness. Critics argue that by eliminating objective values and stressing suffering, anxiety, and ultimate meaninglessness, Existentialism promotes despair and nihilism. Sartre countered this by arguing that his philosophy was optimistic in that it placed the power of definition squarely in the hands of the individual, but the focus on anguish often overshadows this claim.

Analytical philosophers and moral theorists often criticize Existentialism for its purported lack of a robust, actionable **ethical framework**. If all values are chosen subjectively, critics ask, how can one morally condemn the actions of another, such as a tyrant? While Sartre argued that the choice for self implies a choice for humanity, the guidelines for deriving universal moral duties from individual subjectivity remain vague and highly debated. Critics like Theodor Adorno also argued that Existentialism's intense focus on the isolated, authentic individual often ignores the determining influence of social, economic, and historical forces on human freedom, making it an overly individualistic philosophy.

Further Reading

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Existentialism
Wikipedia: Existence precedes essence
Wikipedia: Being and Nothingness (Sartre)
Wikipedia: The Second Sex (de Beauvoir)
Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Martin Heidegger