

Existentialism

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Existentialism

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

1. Core Definition

Existentialism is a 20th-century philosophical movement that emerged as a profound response to perceived crises in traditional Western thought, particularly regarding human nature, meaning, and values. At its essence, existentialism posits that **existence precedes essence**, a foundational principle articulated most famously by Jean-Paul Sartre. This means that individuals are born into the world without inherent purpose or predetermined nature; instead, they are condemned to be free and must forge their own meaning and identity through their choices and actions. The philosophy profoundly emphasizes the radical freedom and responsibility that come with this lack of inherent essence, placing the burden of self-definition squarely on the individual.

The central focus of existentialist thought revolves around the concrete, individual human existence, rather than abstract philosophical categories or universal human nature. It explores the subjective experience of being in the world, grappling with the complexities of human freedom, choice, and the search for **authentic existence** amidst the often-meaningless backdrop of the universe. This search for authenticity involves confronting the fundamental anxieties, dread, and responsibility that arise from the realization of one's absolute freedom and the absence of external guidance or preordained destiny. The philosophy invites individuals to confront their own finitude and the arbitrary nature of existence, compelling them to create value in a world devoid of intrinsic value.

A cornerstone of existentialist philosophy, as highlighted by its proponents, is the unwavering belief in human beings' inherent **free will** and the inescapable **freedom of choice** in navigating daily life. Every decision, no matter how trivial, is seen as an act of self-creation and a reflection of one's being-in-the-world. This freedom is not merely political or social, but an ontological condition of human existence, meaning that even in the most constrained circumstances, an individual retains the freedom to choose their attitude and response. This radical freedom, however, is invariably coupled with an equally radical responsibility for one's choices and their consequences, both for oneself and, implicitly, for all of humanity.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "existentialism" itself was not widely used until the mid-20th century, though its conceptual roots extend much further back into the 19th century. The Danish philosopher **Søren Kierkegaard** is often considered the "father of existentialism," despite never explicitly using the term. His work, particularly "Fear and Trembling" and "Sickness Unto Death," explored the

individual's subjective experience, the anguish of choice, and the necessity of a "leap of faith" in the face of existential dread, contrasting sharply with the systematic philosophy of Hegel dominant in his time. Similarly, **Friedrich Nietzsche's** critiques of traditional morality, his declaration of the "death of God," and his emphasis on the will to power and self-overcoming laid crucial groundwork for later existentialist themes of meaning-making in a godless universe and the creation of one's own values.

The formal emergence and popularization of existentialism as a distinct philosophical movement occurred primarily in post-World War II Europe, particularly in France. The devastating impacts of the two world wars, the Holocaust, and the widespread disillusionment with traditional values and institutions created fertile ground for a philosophy that grappled with human suffering, moral vacuum, and the individual's role in a seemingly absurd world. Philosophers such as **Martin Heidegger**, whose seminal work "Being and Time" (1927) profoundly influenced subsequent thinkers, explored the nature of 'Dasein' (human being) and its authentic existence, focusing on temporality, anxiety, and being-towards-death.

Jean-Paul Sartre, **Simone de Beauvoir**, and **Albert Camus** became the most prominent figures associated with French Existentialism. Sartre's "Being and Nothingness" (1943) provided a comprehensive ontology of existentialism, asserting radical human freedom and responsibility. Simone de Beauvoir, in works like "The Second Sex," extended existentialist principles to feminist theory, analyzing how societal structures limit women's freedom and authenticity. Albert Camus, though he preferred the label "absurdist" rather than "existentialist," explored similar themes of meaninglessness and rebellion in the face of an indifferent universe, most notably in "The Myth of Sisyphus" and "The Stranger." These thinkers, often meeting in Parisian cafes, debated and developed the core tenets that would define the movement for generations.

3. Fundamental Tenets: Existence Precedes Essence

The dictum "existence precedes essence" serves as the foundational pillar of existentialist thought, distinguishing it sharply from many prior philosophical traditions. Historically, philosophy often posited that things, including humans, possessed an inherent essence or nature that determined their characteristics and purpose before they came into being. For example, a chair has an essence (to be sat upon) that precedes its existence as a physical object. Existentialism radically reverses this, asserting that for human beings, there is no pre-existing blueprint, no divine plan, and no inherent nature that defines who they are. Instead, humans simply exist first, and only through their actions, choices, and projects do they define their own essence.

This tenet implies that individuals are born into a state of **absolute freedom**, unburdened by any fixed identity or predetermined destiny. They are, in Sartre's famous phrase, "condemned to be free." This freedom is not merely a political or social liberty but an ontological condition - a

fundamental aspect of human being. Every choice an individual makes contributes to the construction of their self. There are no external moral codes, no inherent values in the world, and no universal human nature to which one can appeal for guidance. This radical self-creation places an immense weight of responsibility on each person, as they are not only responsible for what they make of themselves but, through their choices, they also project an image of what humanity ought to be.

The absence of a pre-given essence or purpose leads directly to the concept of the **absurd**, particularly in the philosophy of Albert Camus. The absurd arises from the confrontation between humanity's innate desire for meaning, order, and clarity, and the cold, indifferent silence of the universe, which offers no inherent meaning. This realization can lead to various existential feelings such as **anguish**, **forlornness**, and **despair**. Anguish stems from the awareness of one's radical freedom and the total responsibility that comes with it; forlornness from the recognition that "God is dead" and there are no ultimate guides; and despair from the understanding that many factors are beyond one's control, yet one remains responsible for how one responds to them.

4. Key Themes and Concepts

Freedom and Responsibility: At the core of existentialism is the belief in radical human freedom, meaning individuals are entirely free to choose their paths, values, and identities. This freedom, however, comes with an equally profound and often terrifying responsibility for every choice made, not only for oneself but, by implication, for all humanity. There is no escaping this responsibility, as even choosing not to choose is a choice.

Authenticity and Bad Faith: Authenticity refers to living in accordance with one's freedom and responsibility, making choices that truly reflect one's self-created values, even in the face of external pressures or societal norms. Conversely, "bad faith" (*mauvaise foi*) is the act of deceiving oneself about one's freedom, attempting to escape responsibility by pretending to be a thing (e.g., merely a waiter, a student, a wife) rather than a dynamic, self-defining being. This often involves adopting ready-made roles or values without critical reflection.

Anguish, Forlornness, and Despair: These are fundamental emotional states arising from the human condition as described by existentialists, particularly Sartre. **Anguish** is the dizziness of freedom, the awareness of total responsibility for one's choices. **Forlornness** (or abandonment) is the realization that God does not exist, and humans are therefore left alone, without pre-ordained moral guidelines. **Despair** comes from understanding that many factors are beyond one's control, yet one must continue to act and choose within those limitations.

The Absurd: Coined primarily by Albert Camus, the absurd describes the fundamental human condition wherein individuals perpetually seek meaning, order, and purpose in a universe that is inherently chaotic, meaningless, and indifferent to such desires. The absurd is not found in humanity alone, nor in the world alone, but in the irreconcilable conflict between humanity's need for meaning and the universe's silent refusal to provide it.

Being-in-the-World (Dasein): Martin Heidegger's central concept, *Dasein*, refers specifically to the human way of being, emphasizing that human existence is inherently relational and contextual. We are not just subjects observing an objective world, but actively engaged participants embedded within it. This concept highlights the interconnectedness of self, others, and the environment, challenging the traditional subject-object dichotomy.

5. Major Proponents and Schools of Thought

While diverse in their specific doctrines, several key figures and their associated philosophical strains define the landscape of existentialism. The precursors, **Søren Kierkegaard** (1813-1855) and **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900), laid much of the groundwork. Kierkegaard, a Christian existentialist, emphasized the individual's subjective experience, faith, and the ethical responsibility of choice in the face of universal norms. Nietzsche, an atheist existentialist, challenged traditional morality and religion, advocating for the creation of one's own values and the concept of the *Übermensch* (Overman) who overcomes conventional morality to define himself.

The 20th century saw the rise of its most recognized proponents. **Martin Heidegger** (1889-1976), whose monumental work "Being and Time" explored the fundamental questions of existence and the nature of human being (Dasein), deeply influenced subsequent existentialists. Although his later association with Nazism complicates his legacy, his ontological investigations into authenticity, temporality, and being-towards-death remain central to existentialist discourse. **Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905-1980) became the most prominent figure of French Existentialism, articulating the principle "existence precedes essence" and expanding on themes of radical freedom, responsibility, and bad faith in works like "Being and Nothingness."

Alongside Sartre, **Simone de Beauvoir** (1908-1986) was a crucial existentialist philosopher and feminist theorist. Her groundbreaking work "The Second Sex" applied existentialist concepts of freedom, choice, and responsibility to analyze the oppression of women, arguing that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." **Albert Camus** (1913-1960), though often resisting the label "existentialist," explored the concept of the absurd and the human revolt against meaninglessness in works such as "The Myth of Sisyphus" and "The Stranger." Other important figures include **Karl Jaspers**, who focused on "boundary situations" that reveal the limits of human existence, and **Maurice Merleau-Ponty**, who contributed significantly to the phenomenology of the body and perception.

6. Applications Across Disciplines

Existentialism's profound insights into the human condition have extended its influence far beyond academic philosophy, permeating various other disciplines and cultural domains. In **psychology** and **psychotherapy**, existential therapy draws directly from these principles, focusing on the

individual's freedom, responsibility, and search for meaning. Therapists help clients confront existential anxieties (death, isolation, meaninglessness, freedom) and take responsibility for their choices, aiming for greater authenticity and self-awareness. Figures like Rollo May and Viktor Frankl (who developed logotherapy after his experiences in concentration camps) were instrumental in integrating existential insights into clinical practice.

The impact of existentialism on **literature**, **art**, and **theater** has been immense. Writers like Fyodor Dostoevsky (in works like "Notes from Underground"), Franz Kafka ("The Metamorphosis," "The Trial"), and Samuel Beckett (whose "Waiting for Godot" epitomizes absurdist theater) explored themes of alienation, anxiety, the search for meaning, and the absurdity of existence long before or concurrent with the formal existentialist movement. Post-war literature, film, and art frequently depicted characters grappling with moral dilemmas, the weight of freedom, and the struggle to find purpose in a world devoid of inherent meaning, reflecting the widespread cultural resonance of existentialist ideas.

Furthermore, existentialist thought has found application in **ethics**, challenging traditional deontological or utilitarian frameworks by emphasizing the individual's subjective responsibility for creating values rather than discovering them. In **political thought**, it has informed critiques of oppressive systems that deny individual freedom and promote "bad faith." Even in contemporary discussions on identity, personal development, and the challenges of modern life, the core tenets of existentialism--self-creation, responsibility, and the quest for authenticity--continue to offer valuable perspectives, empowering individuals to confront the complexities of their existence with courage and purpose.

7. Criticisms and Enduring Debates

Despite its widespread influence, existentialism has faced substantial criticism from various philosophical perspectives. One common critique revolves around its perceived **pessimism and nihilism**. Critics argue that by declaring the universe devoid of inherent meaning and by emphasizing anguish and despair, existentialism offers a bleak and depressing view of human existence, potentially leading to a sense of futility rather than empowerment. While existentialists often counter that confronting the absurd is a first step towards creating meaning, the initial confrontation can be overwhelming and discouraging for some.

Another significant area of debate concerns its **subjectivism and the perceived lack of ethical guidance**. If individuals are solely responsible for creating their own values and there are no objective moral truths, critics question how an existentialist framework can prevent moral relativism or even justify potentially harmful actions. Sartre's assertion that in choosing for oneself, one chooses for all humanity, has been challenged as insufficient for establishing universal ethical principles, particularly in a diverse and interconnected world where individual choices have far-

reaching societal implications. The emphasis on individual freedom, some argue, can also lead to an excessive individualism that neglects communal responsibility and social structures.

Furthermore, existentialism has been critiqued for its **vagueness and philosophical rigor**. Analytical philosophers, in particular, have often found existentialist writings to be overly abstract, lacking precise definitions, and prone to rhetorical flourishes rather than systematic logical argumentation. The focus on subjective experience and phenomenology has also been seen as difficult to verify or falsify, leading to concerns about its scientific or empirical validity. Despite these criticisms, existentialism continues to provoke thought and inspire individuals to critically examine their lives, choices, and the profound implications of being human in a world without pre-given answers.

Further Reading

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