



Existentialism:

Think in Existence!

Dr. Paul R. Shockley

Existentialism: A Brief

Existentialism is a historical, literary movement that gained attention in Europe, particularly France, immediately following World War II. Existentialism focuses on the uniqueness of each person as distinguished from abstract universal human qualities (e.g., rational metaphysics).

Existentialism is concerned about existence, human existence, and the conditions and qualities of the existing person. Why this concern? Individuals have been pushed into the background by philosophical systems of thought, historical events, and technological forces.

In particular, the individual has been neglected, marginalized, and overlooked. Existentialists complain that historical events, philosophy, and technology have ignored the intimate concerns of people. For example:

Philosophy has been too abstract, technical, and disconnected from what is truly relevant to our humanity (e.g., aspirations, concerns, and needs). Historical events, particularly wars, neglect our humanity, our personhood. Technology, which was supposed to aid humanity, has gained so much power that it has forced people to fit their lives into the "rhythm of machines." In sum, we are losing our peculiar human qualities. Our identities have translated from persons into numbers, subjects into objects, from an "I" to an "it."

Consequently, existentialism is an outlook, a mindset, and a philosophy that revolves around what it means to be human. It is concerned about the meaning of life, the formation of our personhood, personal quality of our existence, accountability, destiny, freedom, fulfillment, meaning, and interpersonal relationships.

- While the roots of existential philosophy are discovered in the writings of thinkers like Jewish King Solomon (10th Century BC), St. Augustine (354–430 AD) and Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), as a modern movement it found its most poignant expression in the Christian writings of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and later atheist Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900). Other key figures

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986), Albert Camus (1913–1960), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Karl Jasper (1883–1969), Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980). In particular, existentialists like Camus and Sartre were affected by the catastrophic world wars.

20 Existential Longings:

Existential themes are deep-seated needs that are part and parcel of our universal human condition. They are not felt-needs like how to improve your speech, tips to improve your handling of money, or five ways to reduce body fat. No, they are pervasive needs within that transcend cultures, location, and time. They include the following longings:

1. Authentic Love: To Love & be loved in return
2. Beauty: To experience that which is beautiful
3. Contentment
4. Destiny/adventure worthwhile
5. Identity: To know who we are? Where did we come from? Where are we going?
6. Genuine, lasting fulfillment
7. Goodness
8. Happiness
9. Immortality
10. Hope
11. Meaning and purpose of our lives
12. Peace
13. Redemption: Long for forgiveness in view of wrong doings we have committed against others and even ourselves
14. Relevance
15. Restoration; wholeness
16. Significance and lasting value
17. Something/someone to believe in
18. Sublime experiences
19. True & lasting pleasures

20. Ultimate intelligibility (understanding)

Existential Questions:

1. Are you content, satisfied?
2. Are you looking for hope?
3. Do you hunger for happiness?
4. Are you looking for change you can really believe in?
5. Do you long to be loved?
6. Are you lonely?
7. Do you know who you are?
8. Do you compare yourself to others? Why?
9. Why do you seek to be an object of physical desire?
10. Do you believe you have significance & worth?
11. Are you lost, just wandering along with no vision or life-purpose?
12. Are you disappointed that your achievements/success did not generate the fulfillment you were looking for?
13. Do you struggle with jealousy?
14. Do you seek power? Why?

Possible Attitudes When Existential Needs are Not Met?

1. Alienation
2. Anger
3. Anything Goes
4. Apathy
5. Chronic Disappointment
6. Consumerism
7. Cynicism
8. Despair
9. Disbelief
10. Diversion
11. Divisiveness
12. Despondency
13. Emptiness
14. Envy

15. Experimentation
16. Hatred
17. Hedonism: Live for pleasure
18. Nihilism
19. Pain
20. Power
21. Rebellion (life)
22. Resentment
23. Resignation
24. Tragedy
25. Unhealthy doubt
26. Violence

When we discover:

1. Our existential longings are not fulfilled
2. Our existential needs are not met
3. Disappointments or emptiness accompany the long-term goals we have actually achieved
4. Physical pleasures are vaporous
5. Material goods, jobs, physical beauty, popularity, power, recognition, relationships, sensuality, did not fill the "void" within, ease the "angst," or bring forth lasting fulfillment, meaning, purpose, and significance...

We are faced with at least two major conclusions:

Choice 1: Atheistic Existentialism (e.g., Jean-Paul Sartre; Albert Camus; Simone de Beauvoir): Our existential needs cannot ever be met; nothing will ultimately satisfy us. We are left exhausted or resigned to choose to forge our own identities, construct our meaning, purpose, and significance, to make our own destiny. We are free to make our own future. But whatever we do is ultimately meaning-less, we can experience punctuated moments of happiness against the backdrop of ultimate cosmic meaninglessness (e.g., caring for those who are hurting; forest conservation; creating art that enriches a community). For Nietzsche, since there is no God, the fundamental, overriding problem in philosophy and life is how you will live your life, especially given the fact that

are no ontological foundations (God) to evaluate to your choices. See, without God there are is no absolute criteria of right and wrong, good and bad. For Albert Camus, there is no ultimate explanation for the way things actually are. Thus the world is absurd. Everything we do is absurd. Values are absurd for all values are baseless. In that context of absurdity you still have to make choices. Decision-making in an absurd reality with baseless values is our "existential predicament." Moreover, Camus likens the existential predicament of our meaningless and futile lives to the Greek tragedy of Sisyphus. Sisyphus was eternally condemned by the gods by the burden to roll up a large stone up a hill only to see it come back down. Since we are accidental byproducts of evolution, an accidental convergence of time, energy, and chance, we have gone from the "goo" to the "zoo," there is no fate, no story line, no ultimate destiny. Thus, in this absurd universe, we too are absurd with no ultimate destiny, hope, meaning, purpose, or significance. Camus claimed, "You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life." Jean-Paul Sartre suggested that there was no purpose to the "accident" of human existence.

Choice 2: Theistic Existentialism (e.g., King Solomon; St. Augustine; Blaise Pascal; C. S. Lewis): Instead of looking at meeting those existential needs on a horizontal level (e.g., accomplishments personal beauty; pleasure; popularity; power; relationships; vocation), pursue an intimate relationship the infinite and personal God who is the only One who can satisfy our deepest existential longings, needs, and expectations. We were designed to be intimacy with God. But because Adam and Eve's abuse of their own free will, whereby evil and sin now corrupted all their offspring, all humans are separated from God. Since we are separated from God, we experience this "angst," this void, this incompleteness. Broken, corrupted, and ruin, we live in an existential paradox of life. First, we are separated from God but we have Godward longings for Him. Second, we have a propensity to live for ourselves and choose what will contribute to our corruption believing this object, person, pleasure, position, power, etc will give us fulfillment, joy, meaning, and purpose. Yet, we experience intimations that point us to God as the One who can meet our deepest longings. Dissatisfied with what experienced, we keep looking for that which will fill this void, ease our anxieties, and offer us ultimate hope, meaning, and significance.

Third, we choose to live for what is vaporous though within we know that God exists. Thus, Solomon, St. Augustine, Pascal, and C. S. Lewis, would say that only a personal love relationship with God could bring about the fulfillment of your existential issues in both time and eternity. Live for God while enjoying but not living for that which is vaporous (e.g., material goods; hobbies; work; vacation; true pleasures). You will be "surprised by joy" when you turn to God. This joy on earth is only a foretaste of what you will experience when you are with Him for all eternity. C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) puts it this way: "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

- Premise 1: Every natural, innate desire in us corresponds to some real object that can satisfy that desire.
- Premise 2: But there exists in us a desire which nothing in time, nothing on earth, no creature can satisfy.
- Conclusion: Therefore there must exist something more than time, earth and creatures, which can satisfy this desire.

Early Existentialism:

Jewish King Solomon (10th century BC):

The first writings of existential themes find its roots in *Ecclesiastes*, a Jewish work by King Solomon, found in the Hebrew Scriptures. He reigned from 971 to 931 BC. Here he strikingly claims, "All is vanity." To be sure, the Hebrew word for "vanity" does not mean "meaningless," but vaporous (See Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:14). Thus, he writes:

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:

¹ The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

² "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Everything is meaningless!"

We could translate the Hebrew word for "vanity" to mean, "Vaporous! Vaporous!" says the Teacher. "Everything is vaporous." While Solomon contends that we should

eat, drink, and be merry while we can (Ecclesiastes 8:15), the best way to enjoy our lives is to fear God and keep His commandments (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). While many have interpreted this book with negative connotations, namely, life under the sun is meaningless, a careful reading offers the opposite view: Since life is vaporous, live life to the fullest by fearing God and keep His commandments.

St. Augustine (354–430 AD), one of the most pivotal thinkers in Western thought, and who integrated Platonic philosophy with Christian theology, is perhaps the first to write an autobiographical account rich with existential concerns. For example, St. Augustine contends that our human predicament is one of anxiety and despair because we are totally depraved, fallen creatures, due to the impact of the fall. Separated from intimacy with God, we have no ultimate hope, meaning, and peace. At the same time we have this eternal restlessness, a longing for completeness, for something we cannot obtain in awards, honor, pleasure, power, prestige, and wealth. In fact, St Augustine's struggles for fulfillment as revealed in his autobiography *Confessions* (397–400 AD) inspires T.S. Eliot's depiction of the contemporary life in his famous work, "The Wasteland."¹ St. Augustine who claimed to be "inwardly consumed and confounded," tells how he finally found the answers to his existential needs in God.² In *Confessions* he exclaims, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you."³

Blaise Pascal (1623–1662): In his famous work, *Pensées* (meaning "Thoughts"), this genius, inventor, mathematician, philosopher, and defender of the 17th century Jansenist movement, writes some of the most thought-provoking existential works:

"When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in an eternity before and after, the little space I fill engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces whereof I know nothing, and which know nothing of me, I am terrified. The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me."

¹ Gordon R. Lewis, "Augustine and Existentialism" (*JETS*: 13-22): 14.

² *Idem*.

³ In *An Existential Theology*, John Macquarie suggests that this statement by Augustine:

...might be interpreted as meaning that, confronted with the disclosure of that anxiety which relates to nothing in the world but arises from his own being, man has an alternative to that flight into an inauthentic existence of surrender to the world—namely recourse to God, who is the ground of being, Creator of both man and the world.

"All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone."

"Let each of us examine his thoughts; he will find them wholly concerned with the past or the future. We almost never think of the present, and if we do think of it, it is only to see what light it throws on our plans for the future. The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means, the future alone our end. Thus we never actually live, but hope to live, and since we are always planning how to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so."

"Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapor, a drop of water is enough to kill him. But even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this."

"Anyone who does not see the vanity of the world is very vain himself. So who does not see it, apart from young people whose lives are all noise, diversions, and thoughts for the future?"

"But take away their diversion and you will see them bored to extinction. Then they feel their nullity without recognizing it, for nothing could be more wretched than to be intolerably depressed as soon as one is reduced to introspection with no means of diversion."

"Knowing God without knowing our wretchedness leads to pride. Knowing our wretchedness without knowing God leads to despair. Knowing Jesus Christ is the middle course, because in him we find both God and our wretchedness."

"Man's grandeur is that he knows himself to be miserable."

"Men seek rest in a struggle against difficulties; and when they have conquered these, rest becomes insufferable."

"What a chimaera then is man, what a novelty, what a monster, what chaos, what a subject of contradiction, what a prodigy! Judge of all things, yet an imbecile earthworm; depository of truth, yet a sewer of uncertainty and error; pride and refuse of the universe. Who shall resolve this tangle?"

"Man's sensitivity to little things and insensitivity to the greatest things are marks of a strange disorder."

"Just as I do not know where I came from, so I do not know where I am going. All I know is that when I leave this world I shall fall forever into oblivion, or into the hands of an angry God, without knowing which of the two will be my lot for eternity. Such is my state of mind, full of weakness and uncertainty. The only conclusion I can draw from all this is that I must pass my days without a thought of trying to find out what is going to happen to me."

"We run carelessly over the precipice after having put something in front of us to prevent us seeing it."

"Each man is everything to himself, for with his death everything is dead for him. That is why each of us thinks he is everything to everyone. We must not judge nature by ourselves, but by its own standards."

"It is dangerous to explain too clearly to man how like he is to the animals without pointing out his greatness. It is also dangerous to make too much of his greatness without his vileness. It is still more dangerous to leave him in ignorance of both, but it is most valuable to represent both to him. Man must not be allowed to believe that he is equal either to animals or to angels, nor to be unaware of either, but he must know both."

"Jesus is a God whom we can approach without pride and before whom we can humble ourselves without despair."

"Between us and heaven or hell there is only life half-way- the most fragile thing in the world."

"Imagine a number of men in chains, all under sentence of death, some of whom are each day butchered in the sight of the others; those remaining see their own condition in that of their fellows, and looking at each other with grief and despair await their turn. This is an image of the human condition."⁴

Three Themes:

1. **Angst, Anxiety, Dread and Death:**

Anxiety, Dread, and Death: We have moments whereby we experience a "generalized dread." Of what? Of nothing in particular. But what is this nothing, this void we confront?

For Kierkegaard, our angst is related to original sin. In fact, our earthly existence leads us to despair. As an individual, we are faced with ethical and moral dilemmas that have lasting significance. Consequently, the decisions are so great, what can save us from this despair? Nothing earthly for here there is only brokenness, deprivation, suffering, and death; life on earth is irrational. Therefore, relief from this angst can be relieved by our personal commitment to our infinite and personal God. This commitment is not something we cognitively assent to as a truth but a subjective commitment.

For Martin Heidegger, our angst is an aspect of the universe. We have an awareness of our approaching death. He thinks that we have been thrown into this world whereby we experience the forces of fear and dread. Since we

⁴ Philosopher Peter Kreeft offers a good illustration of this quote by Pascal:

We are locked in a car (our body), rushing furiously down a hill (time), through fog (ignorance), unable to see ahead, over rocks and pits (wretchedness). The doors are welded shut, the steering works only a little, and the brakes are non-existent. Our only certainty is that all the cars sooner or later fall over the edge of the cliff (death). b. So what do we do? We erect billboards at the edge of the cliff, so that we do not have to look at the abyss. The billboards are called 'civilization.' [Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensees: Edited, Outlined, and Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1966), 142].

poorly understand our perceptions, ourselves, and our relationships, we live inauthentic lives. We don't know who we are or understand our place in this world. Consequently, we suffer in our intelligence, choices, communication, and potentiality. But if we can face the brutal fact that we are mortal, literally, "beings-unto-death," we can frame our mortal existence and live for what it matters most.

For Karl Jaspers, it is the generalized stress on a range of situations in which the fragility of our existence is brought home to us.

For Jean-Paul Sartre it is a confrontation with the fact of our human freedom, of our unmade future. Since there is no ultimate explanation of why things are they are and are not otherwise. We are free. In other words, we are free to "make ourselves." This is quite sobering because we are responsible for the persons we become. We become the persons we become by the choices we make. With this freedom to act or not act comes personal responsibility.

2. Freedom of Choice: Existence Precedes Essence! You are what *you* make of yourself:

Whether atheistic or theistic, the possibility of choice is the central feature of our human nature. We do not have a fixed nature that limits or determines our choices. It is our choices that bring whatever nature (essence) we have into being. In other words, we are what we do.

Karl Jaspers:

"Man is always something more than what he knows of himself. He is not what he is simply once and for all, but is a process; he is not merely an extant life, but is, within that life, endowed with possibilities through the freedom he possesses to make of himself what he will by the activities on which he decides."

Jean-Paul Sartre:

"I choose myself perpetually." This means that we are continually in process, our personhood, our becoming, our values."

"Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. It is up to you to give [life] a meaning."

"Man is fully responsible for his nature and his choices."

3. Think in existence:

For Kierkegaard, to "think in existence" means to recognize that we are faced with personal choices... we are constantly in an "existential situation." Thus, our thinking ought to deal with your own personal situation with a view to come to terms with the problems of alternative choices. Abstract systems of philosophy "falsify" people's understanding of reality because it moves attention away from the "concrete person" to "abstract universals," asking us to "think" instead of "to be." He makes a distinction between the "spectator" and the "actor," arguing that only the actor is involved in existence. While the spectator can be said to exist, the term "existence" does not properly belong to inactive or inert objects, whether they are spectators or rocks.

Consider this illustration by Kierkegaard: Two kinds of people in a wagon, one holding the reins while asleep and the other fully awake. In the first case, the horse goes along the familiar road without any direction from the sleeping person, whereas in the other case the person is truly a driver. Surely, in one sense it can be said that both people exist, but "existence" must refer to quality in the individual, namely, his conscious participation in an act.

Sartre puts it this way:

"Life begins on the other side of despair."

We do not know what we want and yet we are responsible for what we are - that is the fact."

"It is only in our decisions that we are important."

Top 10 Existential Novels:

10. *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk (1996):

"You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you're satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug. Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you."

But perhaps my favorite line is, "I flipped through the catalogs and wondered: What kind of dining set defines me as a person."

9. *Journey to the End of the Earth* by Louis-Ferdinand Celine (1932)

8. *Man's Fate* by Andre Malraux (1932)

7. *Steppenwolf* by Hermann Hesse (1928)

6. *The Woman in the Dunes* by Kobo Abe (1962)

5. *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre (1938)

4. *Trial* by Franz Kafka (1925)

3. *The Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison (1952)

2. *Notes from the Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky (1863)

1. *The Stranger* by Albert Camus (1942)

Karl Jaspers:

“The limits of science have always been the source of bitter disappointment when people expected something from science that it was not able to provide. Take the following examples: a man without faith seeking to find in science a substitute for his faith on which to build his life; a man unsatisfied by philosophy seeking an all-embracing universal truth in science; a spiritually shallow person growing aware of his own futility in the course of engaging in the endless reflections imposed by science. In every one of these cases, science begins as an object of blind idolatry and ends up as an object of hatred and contempt. Disenchantment inevitably follows upon these and similar misconceptions. One question remains: What value can science possibly have when its limitations have become so painfully clear?”