EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism is the term given to an interdisciplinary school of thought that focuses on the lived experience of human beings. Existentialism was especially popular in Western Europe and the United States in the decades immediately before and after World War II, where it was seen to reflect the popular mood of the time. Although precursors to existentialism can be found in the earliest philosophical and religious texts of classical antiquity—the work of St. Augustine is of particular relevance in this regard—the modern incarnation of existentialism can be traced to mid-nineteenth-century Europe. While there is considerable controversy regarding the genesis of existentialism, a plausible beginning can be found in the series of lectures delivered by the German philosopher and theologian F. W. J. Schelling in Berlin in 1841. Among other prominent nineteenth-century intellectuals in attendance was the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard, whose 1843 works *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* formalized many of Schelling’s key themes, above all an emphasis on the radical dimensions of human freedom. In this regard, existentialism can be understood as a rejection of the metaphysical system building of German idealism. Kierkegaard’s philosophy was especially directed against the work of G. W. F. Hegel, who held that human actions must be understood as an expression of the historical unfolding of Spirit (*Geist*) in the pursuit of freedom. In response, Kierkegaard argued that the everyday practices and lived experiences of individuals ought to form the basis of philosophical inquiry, rather than metaphysical abstractions.

Many of the central themes and characteristic tropes of existentialism outlined by Kierkegaard—including the emphasis on freedom, as well as psychological states such as anxiety, ennui, and nausea—were further developed by the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky, especially in his 1866 novel *Crime and Punishment*. But it was the late nineteenth-century German philosopher and philologist Friedrich Nietzsche who brought existentialism to the attention of a new generation of European intellectuals. Nietzsche’s thought, along with the rediscovery of Kierkegaard’s work after a half-century absence, inspired German philosophers such as Karl Jaspers, Max Scheler, and Martin Heidegger, all of whom combined existentialist themes with phenomenological inquiry. In the mid-1930s, existential thought migrated to France, galvanizing a group of philosophers and authors, including Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, who prioritized the analysis of “existence” over abstract categories of “essence.” The novels of Camus and Sartre played a decisive role in popularizing existential themes, particularly in the wake of the horror and destruction of World War II. English language translations of Camus and Sartre, as well as the works of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, began to appear in the mid-1940s, propelling existentialism into Anglo-American popular consciousness. Beyond its considerable role in the development of modern literature and philosophy, existentialism also influenced Jewish and Christian theologians such as Martin Buber and Paul Tillich. Existential themes were incorporated into medicine by psychiatrists including Karl Jaspers, Ludwig Binswanger, and Rollo May.

Bibliography: Robert C. Solomon, *Existentialism*, Second Edition (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004).

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