

Existentialism, Bounded in a Nutshell: The Basic Philosophical Concepts

Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. Sartre, Being And Nothingness (1943)

A fairly relevant "summary" can be found in this animated description of "Humanist" views: <https://humanism.org.uk/thatshumanism/>

Class: Thinking

Order: Philosophy

Family: Rational Empiricism

Genus: Post Modernism

Species: Existentialism

1) Existentialism defined: Existence precedes essence.

A strictly material, scientific, rational (perhaps we could say "Darwinian") view of existence, of life on this planet, carries the following implications:

We exist, period, without any more meaning or purpose than any other organism, like an amoeba or a bacteria. We are born, or we have evolved as a species, or both, with a completely tabula rasa. We exist as organisms, the product of random bio-physical chance. There is no inherent, larger essential meaning to life (or at least there is no evidence of such a meaning): there is just random existence itself. All "essence" or meaning follows after this fact, the fact of our existence (thus: existence precedes essence). There is no innate "human nature"; that is to say there is no innate human "essence".

Thus, there is no innate, ultimate set of truths. Thus, there is no innate, universal morality: truths and morality are simply "ideology" or useful fictions (note influence of Marx and Nietzsche here).

Thus, life itself is totally, inherently meaningless when measured against the vastness of the universe and space and time. We live, we struggle and we die, with the same "meaning" as an ant or a single cell organism.

BUT it also seems equally clear that mankind -- as an individual or as a culture, a nation, a planet etc. -- cannot survive in a meaningless world. We, as both individuals and as communities, cannot exist as nihilists (people who believe in nothing); that is, without belief, humans and humanity cannot function.

Existentialism is, then, a philosophical and literary movement attempting to confront the nihilist implications of Modernism or "The Modern Condition", and by confronting it, rise above it.

2) The Basic Premises and Principles of Existential Philosophy:

A) The Absurd

Because modern man cannot locate an overarching meaning to human existence (the way religions and mythologies once did), life is therefore inherently absurd: It makes no sense. It defies Reason. In the end, regardless of our heroism, love, efforts etc. we all die. All meaning is essentially meaningless; the greatest work of art today will be utterly forgotten one thousand years from now. For example, how many people can you name from the 14th century? Good things happen to bad people. Bad things happen to good people, and so on, so life really makes no sense at all; it is absurd.

The grimmest example of the absurdity of human existence would be the Holocaust: certainly no god or God would will this type of suffering, and such immense suffering seems to serve no purpose. But try as we might, the murder of 6,000,000 Jews has no metaphysical meaning: it simply happened and it makes no sense outside of simple explanations of cause and effect: I can explain how it happened in terms of human events, but not how it was meaningful: how it was justified or how even a God could rationally justify such atrocity.

Note that the key Existential philosophers, then, arise directly after the Holocaust.

B) Despair, Anxiety, Angst

Grasping all of the above normally leads to (at least initially) "existential despair" or "angst", or "anxiety". Our lives appear both meaningless and we are entirely responsible for our lives. Understanding this can be a big ol' bummer, and it often scares the sh!t out of people to realize they alone are responsible for the course of human events. It is relatively easy to say "Well, God has a plan, so those 10,000,000 people the Nazis killed or those 3,500 who died on 9/11 must have died for a reason." But it is terrifying to say "All those deaths truly occurred simply because we let them...because we chose to let them occur. Thus, we are to blame, and only we can stop this from occurring."

And the more we realize that humans are selfish idiots, the more anxiety we are likely to experience. For the Existentialist, this is a fact we cannot escape but must grapple with; like realizing that you will someday die, it's not a fact that will ever make you happy, but it's a fact none-the-less, and, for the Existentialist, and cannot overcome this fact unless you accept or even embrace it (most all great, Classical literature involves the epic or tragic hero overcoming his despair and rising to meet his fate in a meaningful way).

For Camus, the purpose of philosophy, or even of simply living, is to confront the inherent absurdity (meaninglessness) of existence and to overcome it; to create meaning where none otherwise exists. This is an act of rebellion, courage and strength; it is rebellion because it

is to go against – to rebel against – what is in fact true or what is the natural, actual meaningless/absurdity of existence; it requires courage because nothing is more frightening than admitting that life is absurd (what is harder than admitting that death is the ultimate end and that we all die?); and it requires strength because one must constantly struggle to not be beaten down by life.

Sisyphus represents these qualities and thus is, for Camus, the ultimate Existential “absurd” hero. For these reasons, for Camus, suicide is the ultimate act of defeat; it is allowing life to overcome one’s own “absurd heroism”.

C) Freedom

The flip side of all this meaninglessness -- this lack of a god or gods controlling destiny -- is that we are entirely free: Man alone can determine the course of mankind. No “higher source” will ever be found to determine right vs. wrong, the Truth etc. Man alone can create meaning.

So/But, if there is any room in this harsh human reality for any meaning at all, it exists strictly and only at a human level, rather than at a cosmic or metaphysical one. And it must be created. But the existentialist realizes that even our greatest, most beautiful, most heroic creations live and die with us as individuals, as cultures: if my love for my spouse or child has any meaning at all, it is because I make it so -- I will such meaning into existence -- but that meaning dies with us; if a moral or ethical life or society has any meaning, that meaning dies off with that life or society.

Thus, any meaning in our lives, our world will be:

- Created through our own free will

- Fleeting, transitory, individual/subjective

- Still ultimately meaningless in terms of some ultimate “big picture”...because there is no bigger picture.

Existential philosophy asks whether or not it really matters to human beings that there is no “ultimate ‘big picture’”. Does the fact that you and your loved ones only exist for 100 years, tops, really negate the value of that life, while it is lived? The Existentialist says “no, of course not; if this is all the meaning there is, it logically follows it is the only value there is -- thus it is of the utmost value and importance. Life is rendered more valuable, not less.”

This is perhaps the most common theme to all “existential” literature, including that written many thousands of years ago: it is only when we realize that life is brief and fleeting and transitory that it takes on its sweetest meaning and beauty, its value. This theme drives much classical Greek and Renaissance literature (as opposed to Christian and Platonic philosophy, that generally posits there is a better (or worse), more important eternity following this temporary life).

D) Total Responsibility

But lack of inherent or ultimate meaning, and access to pure freedom is not a lack of consequence; we live in a world of cause and effect, and the choices you make will dictate what happens not only to you, but to many around you. With freedom comes responsibility, and with great freedom comes great responsibility. So if man is entirely free, then we are also entirely responsible: Man alone must determine what is right vs. wrong, and we only have ourselves -- both at an individual or societal level -- to blame for our problems. Failing to create meaning, morality, laws etc. will still result in social injustice, suffering, starvation, wars, genocide etc.

We may (or may not -- we are free to choose) return to the institutions that have traditionally given mankind meaning: Art, Love and Family, even Hope, Faith and Religion, but we do so thru Free Will and Choice. We will meaning into existence through choice, action and creativity.

To will something into meaning and yet to accept that it is meaningless is, of course, absurd. It makes no logical sense. But that's ok; life itself doesn't make sense. Existential heroes -- be they Sisyphus, Achilles, Beowulf, Guido etc. -- all embrace the absurdity of existence and move on to create the only meaning we will ever know: that which we create ourselves.

3) Existentialism is not nihilism:

"Nihilism" is the belief that nothing matters. Existentialism is the attempt to confront and deal with meaninglessness...to not succumb to nihilism or despair: to not give up or avoid responsibility.

For Camus, the entire purpose of Existential philosophy is to overcome absurdity, or, more accurately, for man to triumph over the absurdity of existence.

So Existentialism is the opposite of nihilism: the nihilist says "There is no god, no heaven or hell, so screw it: there can be no right or wrong. Let's party!" The Existentialist says "There is no god, no heaven or hell, so you and I alone must figure out to make life meaningful and good -- we must, in fact, work without cosmic aid to figure out what 'good' itself is."

(Or the Christian or other theistic Existentialist says something essentially identical; more on that later)

The great, early "Existentialist Authors" like Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy argued that the only means to battle modernist Nihilism is to return to tradition and faith (in their case, Christianity; Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment is essentially built around this argument). TS Eliot argues the same (in his case, the Anglican Church). French Existentialists such as Camus and Sartre, however, explicitly set out to directly refute Dostoyevsky (especially) and Tolstoy. In simple terms, Camus wanted to disprove Dostoyevsky's Crime And Punishment.

This is vital to note: Existentialists are looking for a way out of man's inhumanity to man. Our suffering may not have any "higher" or ultimate cosmological value, but it is suffering none-the-less. The Existentialist says, even if there is no higher meaning, even if existence is ultimately absurd, we are still "forced" by existence (the fact that we are alive) and chance to live out our days. We cannot blame God for the Holocaust; thus, we must blame ourselves when horror (or "the horror, the horror...") occurs, and we must look to ourselves to ensure such horror happens rarely.

More on: Christian And Theological Existentialism

Existentialism In Art:

Consider Percy Shelley's Poem:

"Ozymandias"

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
`My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

-- The artist/sculpture's creative vision outlasts the now, long forgotten King. The king mistook his life for meaning; the artist created meaning whole cloth.

Consider also that democracy is essentially existential: we choose our kings and create our society from whole cloth: we accept that our kings are not really "anointed by god" and that the course of events will be determined by free will and human folly, not some grand, spiritual scheme; we accept that the Constitution was written by men, not gods.