

# Principles and persons - an ethical interpretation of existentialism

Johns Hopkins Press - Is an Existentialist Ethics Possible?

## MAIN TENETS OF EXISTENTIALISM

### ⌘ MORAL INDIVIDUALISM

⌘ A. Choose your own way w/o the help of universal/objective standards

⌘ B. personal experience and acting on one's own convictions lead to the truth

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His state of existence precedes his state of becoming. Furthermore, as Sartre argues in *Existentialism and Humanism*, this realisation of the need to value freedom extends not only to our own freedom, but also to the freedom of others. This is where choice and action come in.

**Frederick A. Olafson, Principles and Persons: An Ethical Interpretation of Existentialism**

Our awareness of the value of freedom arises from our practical experience of ethical choice. In this article, I want to explore two of the main reasons for this scepticism and suggest that there is a way around them.

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Commitment to one's writing, he argued, was as vital as commitment to all other actions in one's life. Sartre, generally acknowledged as the central figure of the existentialist tradition, made his best-known attempt to outline an existentialist ethics in *Existentialism and Humanism*, first published in 1946.

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This goes some way to explaining why one cannot consider ethical questions without receiving practical reinforcement of the moral value of freedom. What does this mean, that existence precedes essence? Most philosophers now accept that one cannot validly reach conclusions about what ought to be the case based solely on descriptions of how things are.

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It declares that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before being defined by any concept, and this being is man — or, in the words of Heidegger, human reality. It is true that disputes about self-evident values have an unfortunate tendency to disintegrate into mere exchanges of claim and counter-claim, with each disputant baldly asserting the obviousness of the values upon which she or he relies.

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Death is the ultimate absurdity: It undoes everything that life has been building up to. The main thrust of existentialist philosophy has always been ontology — that is, existentialist philosophers have sought to describe and categorise the elements of the world as it appears to them.

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This picture of our moral potential is liberating, as it emphasises the need for each person to adopt her or his own set of moral priorities. That's why we say that, for the paper cutter, essence. The idea of freedom has played an important role in many influential modern moral theories, including those of Kant and G.

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