

I. Introduction to Existentialism

A. Sartre: responsible for the name "existentialism", central cultural force in some sense

B. Sartre was inspired by Heidegger, who was in turn inspired (at least in method) by Edmund Husserl, as well as by Kierkegaard & Nietzsche. Heidegger refused to be called an existentialist, while the others were dead before the term was coined.

Other important figures related to existentialism: Russian authors Dostevsky and Tolstoy, French author and Sartre's partner Simone de Beauvoir. This is primarily a European phenomenon, with no American figures involved in it (although William James would be considered the closest).

C. Background

1. The decline of religion - (this is not to say that existentialism is anti-religion, some are and some are not)

a. No longer the cultural, political, social center.

b. Replacement of religion with reason during the Enlightenment

2. Disenchantment & despiritualization of nature and society by Science and Capitalism

a. Galileo - moon like the earth. Science is drastically altering the view of the cosmos, especially man's place in it.

b. The universe as collection of brute, meaningless objects, lacking any inherent value, pushed around by thoughtless, mechanical forces

c. Feeling of homelessness due to depersonalization of society

d. Existentialism begins here though criticizes scientific outlook

3. German Idealism (Kant, Hegel) - systematic, rationalistic, universal, absolute, and out of touch. It aspires to "the view from nowhere," a completely objective viewpoint with no trace of "the self." This is what Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are reacting against.

C. A deeply personal, inward philosophy: "The Single Individual"

1. Not in the sense of personal preference; it is not the philosophy of "do

what I feel."

2. The most concrete, individual parts of my inward self as proper object of philosophical reflection - contra traditional philosophical focus on generality

3. A burning attempt to understand the meaning of one's own existence.

What it means for me *to be*.

D. Human Existence

1. The problem: understanding *human* existence. The approach: deeply personal and heavily emotionally invested.

2. What is unique about human existence is that it is at *issue* or *in question*.

3. Tension between facticity and transcendence/freedom (See Subsections E and F)

4. Our nature is not *given*. We must *take a stand* on who we will be. You should "become what you are." This is what is meant by Sartre's famous quote of "existence precedes essence." Individual selves cannot be treated like objects or substances that are defined by essential features

5. Future-oriented, self-creating: life is aimed at some goal, becomes a process of self-creation.

E. Facticity

1. We begin in a fully concrete world from an insider's perspective, from the point of view of life. There are concrete "givens": one has to eat and sleep, one speaks a certain language, etc. This facticity refers to both fixed conditions (people cannot fly) as well as material objects people can use and opportunities of which they can take advantage.

2. There is no way of achieving a view of the world "from nowhere," from anything but a perspective or interpretation.

3. The significance of phenomenology - started by Husserl, it makes a philosophical object out of everyday experience as we live it. Philosophy must have a basis in lived experience.

4. "Being-in-the-world" (Heidegger) = primacy of the practical over

theoretical. There is a crucial distinction between this and "being-in-the-mind." A person begins as a unified whole of activity in the world, and is not conscious of the theoretical distinctions and abstractions of philosophers.

5. Scientific objectivity - not necessarily a "truer" interpretation, leaves out many of the important things in our world of experience: care, practical concern, meaning, value (see Nietzsche quote at the bottom of page xxiii in the Existentialism reader).

6. Anti-dualism of being-in-the-world

a. Mind-matter

b. Subject-object

-These distinctions are ignored when activity is going smoothly. Ex: A tool is not thought of as a separate object for the worker in Heidegger's workshop as long as its use goes smoothly

7. Our life-world is thoroughly social, and is so acknowledged by the existentialists. Although focused on the individual, the social aspect of lives is not uniformly disregarded by the existentialist philosophers.

F. Freedom

1. Our natural and cultural facticity provides the materials, conditions, or opportunities for interpretation, decision, action

2. You are always choosing (even when not aware of it) to be a certain kind of person. As William James said, even not choosing is a choice.

3. Open range of possible actions, nothing compels a person to choose a possible action. This is a crucial claim, that no social or ethical norms, nor some type of internal necessity, dictates that route of action that is chosen.

4. Kantian insight - freedom not just to decide our own lives, but how the world appears to us. Although by choosing a worldview and assigning values, some possibilities of action are already ruled out prior to conscious reflection. The social role assumed by student may rule out some types of action when interacting with a teacher.

5. Unlike Kant, our contribution to the world as we experience it is not

fixed and automatic, but part of the stand we take in our lives, the projects we pursue.

6. No threat from determinism: scientific outlook one among many, determinism is self-deception. It is just another stand or perspective that can be picked out from many choices (See Subsection E,5)

G. Authenticity

1. Most people most of the time fail to see their self-creating nature, avoid responsibility for their lives. Their actions cannot be pinned on biology, physics, or anything else.

2. Take for granted "normal" ways of acting. Ex: the quickness with which mispronunciation of words are corrected by others

3. Fit in with the crowd

4. Distracted and dispersed by expected roles: son, father, student, teacher, consumer. These are all "inauthentic" modes of living. They give social norms, when the only existentialist norm is authenticity.

5. Not necessarily anti-social, but against everyday social existence

6. Escape via transformative emotional, "affective," experience - dread, despair, anxiety, nausea

7. Authentic existence calls us out of our inauthentic, unreflective falling in to roles that distracts and disperses us.

8. Authentic existence is more aware, focused, and intense

9. Focused on fundamental project, ultimate concern.

10. Normative, but Not necessarily ethical/political

II. Kierkegaard

A. Background

1. Denmark & German Philosophy: Denmark is not an intellectual center, and discussions are dominated by German ideas, both in philosophy and religion.

2. Hegel - largest figure in philosophical discussion in Kierkegaard's time, and who K. is reacting against [Lutheranism also a large force in K.'s thought]

3. Personal life - fairly tragic, he had a poor constitution, his father felt cursed, suffered accidents, broke off an engagement

B. Basic themes

1. *The importance of Abraham* - universal ethics vs. God's individual command.

2. *Subjectivity of truth* - especially as concerns one's relationship with God. One should not be concerned with the objective truth of whether God as such exists, but rather on the subjective truth of whether one is in the right relationship with God. Subjective truth is passionate, inward, and based on *commitment* rather than *evidence*.

3. *Faith and the absurd*. The fact that faith is absurd helps distinguish it from normal, objective beliefs. One can only have faith in the face of *objective uncertainty*, and the absurdity of the doctrines of Christianity make it impossible to hold with rational certainty. Only commitment to such a belief with absolute passion counts as faith and hopes to achieve truth in the *subjective* sense.

4. *The three categories* - Aesthetic (satisfaction of desires and passions), Ethical (essentially Kantian picture of universal conduct based on reason), Religious (highest category where desires and ethical demands are suspended and one takes a leap of faith, like Abraham)