

Existentialism

By Stella Crouch

Existentialism is the philosophy and theory that there is no greater meaning in life and to believe there is, is to live in the absurd. Existentialism emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of their own will. A primary virtue in existentialist thought is authenticity, the opposite of absurdity. Authenticity is the degree to which a person's actions are congruent with their beliefs and desires, despite external pressures to conform to societal expectations. Existentialism is generally considered to have formed as its own philosophy in the mid 19th century with Soren Kierkegaard being considered the first existentialist philosopher, though he himself rejected the label.



The Many Philosophies of Existentialism:

As is with nearly every philosophy existentialism has many sub philosophies, movements and cultures. The most well known of this sub philosophies being:

-The Exi (pronounced "Exies) was a German youth movement originating in Hamburg in the late 1940's following the war and the rise of existential philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus.

-Existential Feminism

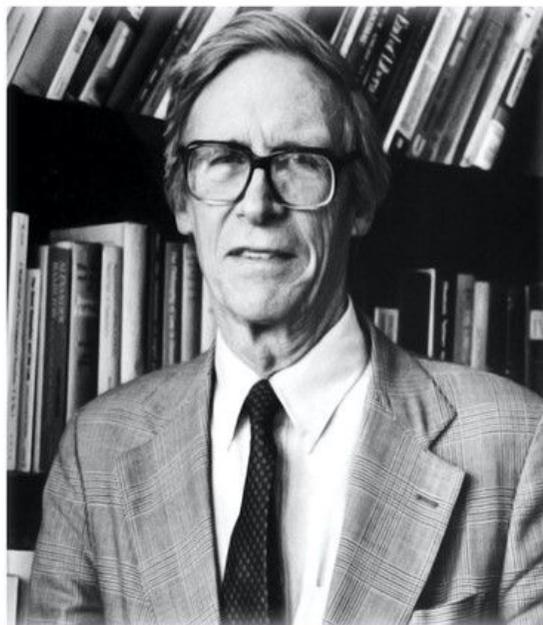
-Queer Existentialism

-Existential Humanism

-Existential Anarchism

-Existential Liberalism

-Black Existentialism



Progressive / Existential Feminists:

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) was French writer, intellectual, existentialist philosopher, political activist, feminist, humanist and social theorist. Though she did not consider herself a philosopher, she had a significant influence on feminist existentialism, feminist theory and existentialism at large.

De Beauvoir wrote novels, essays, biographies, autobiography and monographs on philosophy, politics, and social issues. She is best known for her 1949 treatise *The Second Sex*, a detailed analysis of women's oppression and a foundational for contemporary feminism; and for her novels, including *She Came to Stay* and *The Mandarins*. She was also known for her open, lifelong relationship with fellow French existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. De Beauvoir wrote popular travel diaries about their time spent in the United States and China and published essays and fiction rigorously, especially throughout the 1950s and 1960s. She published several volumes of short stories, including *The Woman Destroyed*, which, like some of her other later work, deals with aging and deconstructing the fear around death.

-**Judith Butler** (1956-) is an American philosopher and gender theorist whose work has influenced political philosophy, ethics, and the fields of third and fourth wave feminist, queer, and literary theory. Butler is best known for their books *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), in which they challenge conventional notions of gender and develop their theory of gender performativity. This theory has had a major influence on feminist and queer scholarship. Their works are often studied in film studies courses emphasizing gender studies and performativity in discourse.

-**Martha Nussbaum** (1947-) is an American philosopher and currently a professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, where she is jointly appointed in the law department and the philosophy department. She has a particular interest in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, political philosophy, existentialism, feminism, and ethics, including animal rights.

-**Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905-1980) was a French philosopher, playwright, novelist, screenwriter, political activist, speaker, biographer, and literary critic. Sartre and De Beauvoir challenged the cultural and social assumptions and expectations of their upbringings, which they considered bourgeois, in both lifestyle and thought. The conflict between oppressive, spiritually destructive conformity (*mauvaise foi*, literally, 'bad faith') and an "authentic" way of "being" became the dominant theme of Sartre's early work. This theme would continue to be embodied in his principal philosophical work *Being and Nothingness* in 1943 and beyond.

-**Maurice Merleau-Ponty** (1908-1961) was a French philosopher, writer and essayist, strongly influenced by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. The constitution of meaning in human experience was his main interest and he wrote on perception, art, and politics. He was on the editorial board of *Les Temps modernes*, the leftist magazine established by Jean-Paul Sartre in 1945. Ponty had a long lasting feud with Sartre, one that caused much tension within the French existentialism scene.

-**John Daniel Wild** (1902-1972) was an American philosopher and writer. He began his philosophical career as an empiricist and realist but became an salient proponent of existentialism and phenomenology. Phenomenology is the philosophical study of the structures within our conscious and how our experiences shape what we deem as reality. As a philosophical movement it was founded in the early years of the 20th century by Edmund Husserl in Germany.

-**Edmund Gustav Albrecht Husserl** (1859-1938) was a German philosopher who established the school of phenomenology. He also contributed significantly to existentialism, transcendentalism and intentionalism. In his early work, he critiqued historicism and of psychologism in logic based on analyses of intentionality. In his later work, he sought to develop a systematic foundational science based on the so-called phenomenological reduction. Arguing that transcendental consciousness sets the limits of all possible knowledge. Husserl redefined phenomenology as a transcendental-idealist philosophy.

Affiliated With Hate Groups and Conservative Ideals

-**Martin Heidegger** (1889-1976) was a German philosopher and a seminal thinker in the Continental tradition of philosophy. He is best known for contributions to phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existentialism. In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger addresses the meaning of "being" by considering the question, "what is common to all entities that makes them entities?" Adolf Hitler was sworn in as Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. Heidegger was elected rector of the University of Freiburg on April 21, 1933, and assumed the position the following day. On May 1, he joined the Nazi Party. He believed that Eugenics was an overall positive practice for society and subscribed to the myth of the "supreme aryan race".

-Although Friedrich Nietzsche died more than thirty three years before Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany his philosophies and bodies of work were used as a justification by Nazis and Fascists alike to justify their horrific actions. If there was one philosopher the Nazis and Fascists of the mid-20th century loved, it was Nietzsche. He was so adored by them that Hitler gifted Mussolini the complete works of Nietzsche for his birthday. He claimed that the Germans were great because of the "Polish blood in their veins", and saw German nationalism as a dangerous joke. He ended relationships over his disapproval of anti-Semitism, including ones with his sister and the composer Richard Wagner. After he had a mental health collapse, he wrote letters urging the great powers of Europe to attack Germany before it was too late and Germany became a powerful super state built on racism and mass destruction of those seen as different.

Philosophers Labeled As “Existentialists”

-**Gabriel Honoré Marcel** (1889–1973) was a French philosopher, playwright, music critic and theist. Though often regarded as the first French existentialist, he dissociated himself from figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus. He preferred the term philosophy of existence or neo-Socrateanism to define his own thought. One of the reasons he distanced himself from existentialism was because of their lack of inclusivity of theology. He felt excluded from the french existentialism movement because of his christainity.

-**Walter Kaufmann** (1921-1980) was a German-American philosopher, translator, essayist and poet. He wrote extensively about authenticity, existentialism, life, death, theism, atheism and the nature of morality. He often debated whether existentialism is a philosophy or a theory with conflicting contributors. He analyzed how most existentialists had very little in common. In fact the only thing they had in common was that they resented traditional philosophy in his opinion.

-**Lev Shestov** (1866-1938) was a Russian philosopher known for his “philosophy of despair”. Shestov cultivated a respect for mystery and paradox that survived the most intensive rationalist training. Yet Shestov was both Jewish and a Christian; and for him the fundamental antinomies were not between the Old and New Testament, or even between religion and atheism, but rather, as the titles of his last two books clearly state, between, Speculation and Revelation, and Athens and Jerusalem (1938). Though Shestov never had any official followers he influenced philosophers such as Albert Camus and Heidegger.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a Danish philosopher, poet, religious author. Positively was at the heart of his work and the infinite requirement and strenuous difficulty of religious existence in general and Christian faith in particular. Some of his most notable quotes are, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards" and "Marriage brings one into fatal connection with custom and tradition, and traditions and customs are like the wind and weather, altogether incalculable." He was a non traditionalists and believed in the power of individual experiences.

Kierkegaard is also famous for his "leap of faith theory." A leap of faith according to Kierkegaard involves believing in things that don't have any evidence to back it, such as religion. Kierkegaard describes "the leap" using the famous biblical story of Adam and Eve, particularly Adam's qualitative leap into sin. Adam's leap signifies a change from one quality to another, mainly the quality of possessing no sin to the quality of possessing sin. Kierkegaard maintains that the transition from one quality to another can take place only by a "leap". When the transition happens, one moves directly from one state to the other, never possessing both qualities. "In the Moment man becomes conscious that he is born; for his antecedent state, to which he may not cling, was one of non-being. In the Moment man also becomes conscious of the new birth, for his antecedent state was one of non-being." In his book *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, he describes the core part of the leap of faith: the leap. Kierkegaard is often credited as the "grandfather of existentialism". It has widely been debated whether or not Kierkegaard would have appreciated the label existentialist. The majority of existentialist philosophers have been atheists and many existentialist have disagreed with Kierkegaard's theistic philosophy.

Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) was a German-Swiss philosopher, psychiatrist and writer. Jaspers held Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to be two of the most important figures in post-Kantian philosophy. Jaspers identified with the liberal political philosophy of Max Weber, although he strongly rejected Weber's nationalism. Jaspers' dissatisfaction with the popular understanding of mental illness led him to question both the diagnostic criteria and the methods practiced by clinical psychiatry. Not unlike Freud, Jaspers studied patients in detail, giving biographical information about the patients as well as notes on how the patients themselves felt about their symptoms.

Most people associate Jaspers with the philosophy of existentialism, in part because he draws largely upon the existentialist roots of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, and in part because the theme of individual freedom permeates his work. Jaspers however rejected the label. Beginning with modern science and empiricism, Jaspers points out that as we question reality, we confront borders that an empirical (or scientific) method simply cannot transcend. At this point, the individual faces a choice: sink into despair and resignation, or take a leap of faith toward what Jaspers calls Transcendence.

Although he rejected explicit religious doctrines, including the notion of a personal God, Jaspers influenced contemporary theology through his philosophy of transcendence and the cultures surrounding the world's religions. During World War II, he had to abandon his teaching post because his wife was Jewish. After the war he resumed his teaching position, and in his work *The Question of German Guilt* he unabashedly examined the culpability of Germany as a whole in the atrocities of Hitler's Third Reich. Jaspers strongly disagreed with Nazism and anti-semitism.

-John Rawls (1921-2002) was an American philosopher, writer and liberal theorist. Rawls's theory of "justice as fairness" promotes equal rights, equal opportunities and the interests of the least privileged members of society. During World War II, Rawls served as an infantryman in the Pacific, where he toured New Guinea and was awarded a Bronze Star; and the Philippines, where he endured intensive trench warfare and witnessed traumatizing scenes. It was there that he lost the Christian faith he was born into and became an atheist. He would later go on to write about how he had never previously thought about his faith through a critical lense because god was all he knew. What other options did he have? He believed that if there was a god and they allowed for such violence and inequality in the world they would be therefore unworthy of his worship.

Rawls seldom gave interviews. He had both a stutter, partially caused by the deaths of two of his brothers, who died through infections contracted from Rawls as children, and a dislike for being in the public eye. Rawls often studied the need humans seem to have for purpose and meaning. One of Rawls central philosophies was "The Veil Of Ignorance" also known as "The Original Position". The thought experiment was developed to explore the principles and ethos that should structure a society of free, equal and healthy people. you are asked to consider which principles you would select for the basic structure of society, but you must select as if you had no knowledge ahead of time what position you would end up having in that society. This choice is made from behind a veil of ignorance, which prevents you from knowing your ethnicity, wealth, social status, gender, sexuality, neurodiversity, abilities, personality or your individual idea of how to lead a good life. Ideally, this would force participants to select principles impartially and be more compassionate since they will not know how privileged they will be.

References and Resources

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