

Existentialism and Humanism

9

Upon completing this chapter, students should be able to meet the following Learning Outcomes:

- 9.1** Articulate the main themes found in existentialism.
- 9.2** Explain why Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky are considered predecessors of existentialism.
- 9.3** Critically analyze Husserl's phenomenology and how it informed existentialism.
- 9.4** Explain the meaning of being and nothingness according to Sartre.
- 9.5** Discuss the concept of absurdity in Albert Camus' philosophy.

Reason Is Not Enough—Existentialism before Existentialism

The word existentialism came into use in the twenty-first century, but its themes go back a bit farther. Philosophers, theologians, and artists of the past such as Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821–1881) already shared existentialist concerns such as the fact that we are bound to be here and now, that in

more than one sense, existence precedes essence—or at least whatever meaning we find it is a meaning we bring. We all find ourselves first existing in the world—without or rhyme or reason, without essence before us—then it is up to us to decide what to make of our existence. There also has been the existentialist concern with the human search for identity and meaning, a deep form of humanism independent on whether or not one believed in God. Above all, existentialists then and now share a sense of interconnectedness with others, a way of taking stock of human freedom that links it to responsibility for ourselves and for others. It leads to an ethics of personal responsibility, if only in the realization that whatever we do and whatever we are, we are the ones choosing that. And reason is not nearly enough to justify that choice. It is personal. It is an always personal revolt against reason.

“Since the beginning of the century many great books have expressed the revolt of life’s immediacy against reason. Each in its own way has said that the rational arrangement of a system of morals or politics, or even of art, is valueless in the face of the fervor of the moment, the explosive brilliance of an individual life, the premeditation of the unknown. It would seem that the communion of man and his power to choose cannot long be endured. . . . As soon as we desire something or call others to witness, as soon as we live, we imply that the world is, in principle, in harmony with itself and others with ourselves. We are born into reason as into language. But the reason at which we arrive must not be the same reason we abandoned with such a flourish. The experience of reason cannot simply be forgotten: we must form a new idea of reason”

—*Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Sense and Non-Sense*
(*H. L. Dreyfus and P. A. Dreyfus, trans.*),
Northwestern University Press)

Dostoyevsky masterfully portrayed the anguish that comes with doubt and the necessity of choosing to confront that doubt personally in his novels such as *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment*. His own choice to believe in God was personal, a way to escape the anguish of facing everyday existence in this world.

Kierkegaard emphasized personal choice over reason, and he saw that the realization of just how lonely that choice can be leads to, in his words, a sickness-unto-death. As a Protestant Christian, Kierkegaard thought that all the previous proofs of the existence of God were meaningless. In his particular case, the philosopher found that the way to avoid the otherwise inescapable dread of living in doubt was to choose to believe. To take a leap of faith.

One reason Kierkegaard is often considered an existentialist is not that he found a way to believe in God without needing a proof through reason—most existentialists are atheists, in fact. But arguably what makes Kierkegaard an existentialist is that what matters to him is the realization that believing or not was his choice. Moral codes, including those of the church but also those of philosophers up to this time, were simply a crutch. We have to take responsibility for our choices, and it is the act of choosing that matters. It is what makes us human.



POWERFUL IDEAS: LEAP OF FAITH?

Have you ever met anyone who believes in God because he or she saw a good proof of his existence? Maybe Kierkegaard is right, and faith is a matter of taking a leap of faith. There is no reason to believe, one just chooses to do so, or not. And that choice is as personal as it is constant. That is, choosing is never a one-time event, but rather a constant state of affairs. To be human is to choose.

POWERFUL ANALYSIS: A LEAP OF FAITH?

Should we be willing to believe ideas without any evidence and take a leap of faith as Kierkegaard argues?

From Hegel to Existentialism

The rules of the game changed with **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** (1770–1831), an idealist of a different stripe from Plato or Berkeley. Hegel opened the door to doubt. The strikingly original and difficult philosophy he developed in *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), and later in his *Logic* (1816) and *Philosophy of Right* (1821), showed that everything depends on our apprehending the truth not only as substance but also as subject. Hegel believed the world, our world, was an unfolding of an idea, and that this idea—also called mind or spirit—was constantly unfolding in a dialectic of a thesis that contained within itself its own destruction, of the antithesis that contained that destruction, and of a synthesis that absorbed both. That synthesis then became a thesis, and the Hegelian dialectic would go on. The thesis needs the antithesis, just as subjectivity (that which thinks) and objectivity (that which is thought of) are dialectical opposites that form a synthesis that is constantly unfolding. Idea and nature, too, are dialectical opposites, perennially unfolding forward in a vision of human consciousness as the unfolding of reason.



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This unfolding move forward provided the means to understand human consciousness and thought. It has its own unique reason. There is reason in history, for example, but it is nearly impossible, if possible at all, for us to understand that because we ourselves are the actors in that history.

“All the great philosophical ideas of the past century—the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, phenomenology, German existentialism, and psychoanalysis—has their beginning in Hegel. It was he who started the attempt to explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason that remains the task of our century. He is the inventor of that reason, broader than the understanding, which can respect the variety and singularity of individual consciousnesses, civilizations, ways of thinking, and historical contingency but which nevertheless does not give up the attempt to master them in order to guide them to their own truth.”

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

This is a radical departure from traditional logic, and to this day some philosophers have difficulty reading Hegel much less understanding his phenomenological-dialectical logic. Since each era has its own internal logic, it is through critically examining human experience in all its facets that may approach understanding its meaning. That meaning, as Hegel points out in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, is the process consciousness understanding itself, free of any *a priori* concepts or categories of the mind. In a radical departure from Kant’s metaphysics, Hegel’s phenomenology starts with humanity’s efforts to comprehend its fundamental situation, assuming no such thing as a noumenal level of reality. Kant’s noumena—as opposed to phenomena—are unknowable, therefore, unthinkable. If it is unthinkable, then it does not exist. Only the phenomenon exists, or at the very least, it is

only to the phenomena that we have access. It is humanity’s responsibility to re-appropriate itself by understanding the phenomenon of its own existence as well as that of history. In this sense, Hegel is the ancestor of Edmund Husserl and modern phenomenology, of the existential philosophy, and of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ humanist interpretations of Marxism.

Husserl: Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy

The father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl was born on April 8, 1859 in Moravia, what is now the Czech Republic. He was active in Germany and died in Freiburg on April 27, 1938. Husserl’s revolutionary philosophy is aimed at a scientific analysis of experience as it is lived. Consciousness, he thought, has intentionality—it is always consciousness of something. In this sense, intentional thoughts and intentional acts are defined through consciousness. In a process of phenomenological reduction, the existence of the world beyond our experience of it can be neither confirmed nor denied. Through transcendental reduction, phenomenology allows us to return to the self, that is, to the self that is required to know a complete empirical self-consciousness.

That consciousness itself cannot be separated from the object of consciousness is the crux of Husserl’s phenomenology, solving the problem of the gap between the knower and the known. The intentionality of the mind—a concept that influenced the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus considerably—means that in an ontological sense, the two must exist together as two aspects of a single phenomenon. The self is not the act but rather it observes the act, it is present to it. Since his 1913 highly original work *Ideas*, through his 1931 *Cartesian Meditations*, and the valedictory 1936 *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, Husserl reworked his transcendental reduction, reaching what he called a sphere of own-ness. The transcendental ego is dialectically connected to the lived body of another ego. Husserl called this interconnectedness of two consciousnesses as transcendental inter-subjectivity.



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After Husserl: Existentialism

The phenomenological approach that suggested examining life experiences as a way to understand the subject of that experience in the world led to new and revolutionary ways of doing philosophy. Although Husserl's initial project was to return to the things in themselves as experienced in everyday life as it is lived, the philosophers that followed first in Germany and immediately afterwards in France concentrated on the self and its encounter with others and with the world.

Powerful Thinkers: Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was Husserl's student assistant at the University of Freiburg in 1919, eventually took over as department chairperson and continued the exploration of the self in the world. In his 1927 *Being and Time*, Heidegger analyzed the nature of Being in human terms, referring to us all as *Dasein*, or "Being there." We ask ourselves what we ourselves are, and we apprehend immediately that we are always "there," that is, we are thrown into a world not of our choosing: free as we might be there, there is where we are. We should be seen as "Being-in-the-world," a situation filled with things that are not us. The identity of *Dasein* is determined by its relation to others as well as to the world.



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After the 1933 election of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi racial laws that soon followed, Husserl was suspended from the University of

Freiburg for being a Jew. Martin Heidegger, Husserl's former star pupil who had dedicated his own *Being and Time* to Husserl, joined the Nazi Party, became Rector of the University of Freiburg, and refused his old teacher library privileges. Husserl died in 1938, sparing himself the gas chamber that awaited millions of Jews.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Also following Husserl, but transforming the ontology resulting from his method, Sartre believed that consciousness in fact can negate what the empiricists called reality. The role of the imagination, of intentionality at its most basic, emerges outside the order of causality. That was the beginning of French existentialism.

The leading figure of French existentialism, and one of the most influential writers of our time, Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre (1904–1980) studied philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure in his native Paris. He was profoundly influenced by the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1858–1938), with whom Sartre's friend Maurice Merleau-Ponty had just finished studying in Germany before World War II broke out. It was Husserl's revolutionary insight that human consciousness cannot be separated from its presence to the world, that is, from the object of consciousness. Consciousness is always consciousness of something, and the two together make up a phenomenon. Philosophy then must concert itself with that relationship: our intentionality, that is, our presence as witnesses to the world creates the meaning of that world that we are not. Philosophy became the study of life as it is actually lived.



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To say that Sartre was inspired by Husserl's phenomenology when he first heard about it from Merleau-Ponty over drinks in at Les Deux Magots café in Paris? Left Bank would be a spectacular understatement—he took Husserl's idea and

created a new philosophy from it himself. It was then that history intervened. In quick succession, Husserl died, the Germans invaded France, and Sartre joined the army and fought against the Nazis. Shortly thereafter he became a German prisoner of war, escaped, and worked in the Resistance movement against the German occupation.

During the German occupation, Sartre wrote both *Being and Nothingness* (1943), the seminal text of existentialism, and *No Exit* (1944), the first play staged in Paris after the liberation and arguably the clearest dramatization of existentialist philosophy. He also found time for ghost-writing anti-Nazi articles for the resistance underground paper *Combat* with his friend Albert Camus (1913–1969), and with his lifelong partner Simone de Beauvoir (1913–1960).



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In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre introduces a new concept: We are Nothingness, that is, we are not things. The world is a thing, it is solid, knowable—it's just there. Human beings, on the other hand, are defined by not-being, that is, by Nothingness. You can know this book you're reading, you can know your shoe, you can know your house. You can know everything there is to know about these things precisely because they are things. Your presence to them defines them. But you can never say that about the student sitting next to you: Whatever you think you know about another person, there's more there. There is always more.

Sartre refers to these two categories of reality as Being-in-itself (the world, *Être-en-soi*) and being-for-itself (us, *Être-pour-soi*). We are defined by freedom. We are condemned to be free. Our existence precedes essence precisely because it is our existence, our presence to Being that gives Being its meaning. We are witnesses to our lives, in other words, and we are constantly creating its meaning. We are always projecting ourselves into a future. "I am the Self that I will be," Sartre remarked. This can be and often is difficult, even intolerable. So an easy way out of this is to pretend to be a thing, or to pretend that others are things. That is what Sartre calls bad faith, and he points out that we know better.

"Dostoevsky once wrote 'if God did not exist, everything would be permitted,' and that, for existentialism, is the starting point. Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's actions by reference to a given and specific human nature. In other words, there is no determinism, man *is* freedom. We are left alone, without excuse."

—Jean-Paul Sartre

A novelist, screenwriter, and playwright as well as a philosopher and political activist, Sartre was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964, with the Nobel Academy praising "his work which, rich in ideas and filled with the spirit of freedom and the quest for truth, has exerted a far-reaching influence on our age." True to form, and not wanting to become an institution, Sartre respectfully refused the award.

Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus all practiced what they preached, not only in their heroic work for the French resistance against the Nazis, but also in committing themselves to the fights against colonialism, against racism, for women's equality, for a woman's reproductive rights, for gay rights, against tyranny anywhere. He was the conscience of a generation, a witness to his century. Jean-Paul Sartre died in Paris on April 15, 1980. A crowd of 60,000 Parisians marched in his funeral. He is buried alongside Simone de Beauvoir in the Montparnasse Cemetery, not far from where they lived their whole lives. Fittingly, the city of Paris in 2000 renamed its Place de St. Germain, in the heart of the Left Bank, the Place Sartre-Beauvoir.

Existentialism and The Arts

Especially following the spectacular critical and popular success of Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus, existentialism became a sensibility that permeated the arts. The stereotype of the goateed intellectual in a black turtle neck sweater spouting deep thoughts and sipping coffee in the Left Bank made its way to Stanley Donen's 1957 musical *Funny Face*, starring Audrey Hepburn and Fred Astaire, with the beautiful Hepburn as a "sympathicalist." French existentialism made it to the cover of *Time* and *Life* magazines. It was news.

The themes were there before, of course: the individual confronts the world alone, asking the world for reasons is simply absurd since the world does not offer any, anxiety and doubt are inescapable or escapable only by lying to oneself, everything that matters does so in an intensely personal way, confronting the need to choose can be as painful as it is necessary—all these ideas emerged previously not just in philosophy but also in literature and the arts.

Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment*, Miguel de Unamuno's novel *La Tía Tula* and his essay *The Tragic Sense of Life*—just as later the novels of Franz Kafka, the plays of the Nobel Prize laureates Samuel

Beckett and Harold Pinter, and the early short stories of Guillermo Cabrera Infante all were drenched in existentialist themes that nevertheless were and are best illustrated in the novels and plays of Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus.

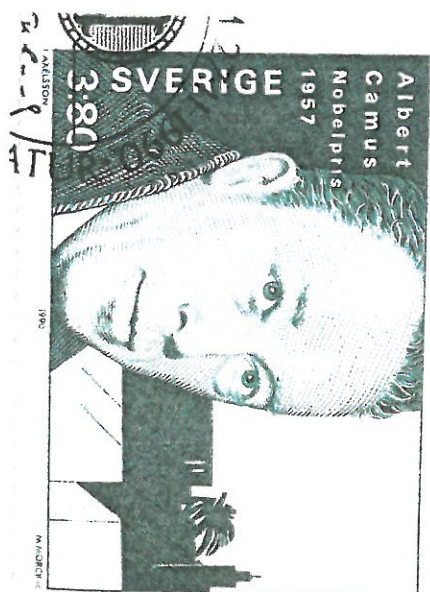
But it is on film, which Sartre called “the art of the twentieth century,” that existentialism best found a home outside the academy. The Jean-Luc Godard (b. 1930) portrayed alienation and the sheer absurdity of life as it is actually lived beginning with his revolutionary *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*) (1960) and especially the intensely personal *Vivre sa vie* (*My Life To Live*) (1962). Alain Resnais (1922–2014), followed his controversial 1959 *Hiroshima Mon Amour* with the 1961 cinematic masterpiece *Last Year at Marienbad*, bursting asunder the doors of existentialism in film with an exquisite explosion of disorientation, elegantly and heartbreakingly portraying the utter loneliness of life and questioning the meaning of memory.

Michelangelo Antonioni (1912–2007), the Italian master of existentialist film, created a body of work that remains one of the best and most accessible ways to understand the existentialist worldview and the absurdity of the human situation, particularly in his pioneering black-and-white trilogy of in *L'avventura* (1960), *La notte* (1961), and *L'ecclésiaste* (1962). There, as well as in his first color films *Il deserto rosso* (*The Red Desert*, 1964) and *Blowup* (1966), Antonioni created existential puzzles without solutions, much as in life itself. The alienation inherent in human relations, and the impossible attempts to find meaning in them, have seldom if ever been portrayed with such cruel clarity as in *L'ecclésiaste*, starring Alain Delon and Antonioni's muse Monica Vitti. Alienation is inevitable, drenched in immensities of sadness, and any hope to be found is a hope to be created by us. Life is on us. Antonioni's pictures illuminate existentialism in visual terms, dazzlingly, starkly.

Near the end of the twentieth century, Krzysztof Kieślowski (1941–1996) added bitter irony to the existentialist themes of alienation and absurdity with his *Trois Couleurs* (*Three Colors: Red, White, and Blue*) trilogy in 1993–1994.

Albert Camus: Existentialism, Absurdity, and Life

The outlier of existential philosophy, Albert Camus (1913–1960) was born in Algeria, worked in France, and remained ambiguous about his identity in every sense. Like Sartre and Beauvoir, he worked in the French resistance during World War II; like them, too, he enjoyed immense success in literature, theater, and philosophy. In social issues, he was on-and-off friend or enemy of his Left Bank colleagues—he was very much of the Left but never a communist, existentialist in his metaphysics but humanistic in his politics. He celebrated resistance and rebellion, but he denounced terrorism from the Left or the Right, decrying the use of violence in the name of an idea—any idea. Progressive to the core, Camus nevertheless refused to become a fellow traveler in any way. “All the dead,” he wrote in a newspaper article about both sides of the Algerian conflict, “belong to the same tragic family.”



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Existentialists believe that an intellectual must be engaged in the actual life of his or her world that philosophy in particular must focus on the confrontation of the individual with a world that reason simply cannot explain. Camus' philosophical position, everywhere from his novels and plays to his essays, was in this sense the definition of French existentialism. Camus made the concept of absurdity a key concern of his oeuvre, from the novels *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947) right through *The Fall* (1956) and the posthumously published *A Happy Death* (1971) and *The First Man* (1995); absurdity is also a central theme in his plays *Caligula* (1945), and *State of Siege* (1948) as well as in philosophical essays including *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), *The Rebel*, (1951), and *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (1961). In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the eponymous hero was punished by the gods likely because he had stolen some of their secrets. The punishment was cruel and simple: Sisyphus was condemned to roll a heavy rock uphill, and when at last he got to the mountaintop, the rock rolled back downhill. Sisyphus had to roll it back up, up he kept on pushing, and down the rock went again, and again . . . Forever. This hopeless labor was his punishment, this hopeless situation his condition. What interested Camus here was Sisyphus as he headed back down, smiling: he is an absurd hero in this tale, a witness to his own absurdity. The situation is as absurd as it is real. At the end of the story, Camus exhorts us to imagine Sisyphus happy.

POWERFUL ANALYSIS: IS THE CHECK IN THE MAIL?

Should we work to better our lot in this life, or simply hope for the after-life? Is the check in the mail (after our deaths)? In other words should we hope that God will reward us in the next life as opposed to in this life? Or is it really better to bet on this life than on the next, as Camus wrote?

The world is not absurd for Camus, but life is. The world is a thing, neither absurd nor rational. Life is absurd because we keep asking the world for reasons, and the world remains and always will remain silent. We are alone. Yet we have a choice: the world remains and always will remain silent. We are alone. Yet we have a choice: suicide or just be happy. He chose to be happy, by all accounts having a rich and joyful life, by any standards enjoying great literary success. He was given the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957, at the age of 44, with the Nobel Academy citing him "for his important literary production, which with clear-sighted earnestness illuminates the problems of the human conscience in our times." Three years later, he was found dead in a car accident in the South of France, leaving behind, bloodied in the wrecked remains of his new sports car, the manuscript of an unfinished masterpiece, *The First Man*. The absurdity of the situation was as tragic as it was obvious.

"It is better to bet on this life than on the next," wrote Camus in *A Happy Death*. Finding joy—choosing joy—while you can is a difficult but necessary project for all of us. The choice is ours and ours alone.