

# what is existentialism

**what is existentialism** is a fundamental question in philosophy that explores the nature of human existence, freedom, and choice. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emerged primarily in the 19th and 20th centuries, focusing on individual experience, personal responsibility, and the search for meaning in an apparently indifferent or absurd world. This philosophy challenges traditional ideas about objective meaning, emphasizing subjective experience as the key to understanding life. It addresses themes such as angst, despair, authenticity, and alienation, often questioning the role of societal norms and conventions. Understanding what is existentialism requires exploring its origins, core principles, key thinkers, and its impact on literature, psychology, and modern thought. The following sections provide a detailed overview of existentialism's definition, historical background, main concepts, notable philosophers, and its relevance today.

- Definition and Origins of Existentialism
- Core Principles and Themes of Existentialism
- Major Existentialist Philosophers
- Existentialism in Literature and Culture
- Contemporary Relevance of Existentialism

## Definition and Origins of Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophical movement centered on the analysis of human existence and the way individuals find or create meaning in their lives. It is often described as a response to the perceived emptiness or absurdity of life when detached from traditional religious or metaphysical frameworks. The term "existentialism" itself was popularized in the mid-20th century, although its roots can be traced back to earlier philosophical inquiries.

## Historical Background

The origins of existentialism are linked to the works of 19th-century philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, who emphasized subjective experience and individual freedom. Kierkegaard, regarded as the "father of existentialism," explored the importance of personal choice and commitment in the face of uncertainty. Nietzsche challenged conventional morality and introduced the concept of the "Übermensch" as a creator of new values.

## **Development in the 20th Century**

Existentialism gained prominence in the 20th century through thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus. These philosophers expanded existentialist ideas to address issues such as freedom, responsibility, and the absurdity of existence. The movement became influential in post-World War II Europe, reflecting the disillusionment and search for meaning in a fractured world.

## **Core Principles and Themes of Existentialism**

Understanding what is existentialism involves recognizing its key principles and recurring themes that define the movement's perspective on human life and freedom.

### **Existence Precedes Essence**

One of the central tenets of existentialism is the idea that existence precedes essence. This means that individuals are not born with a predetermined purpose or nature; rather, they first exist and then define themselves through their actions and choices. This principle rejects essentialist views and emphasizes human freedom and creativity.

### **Freedom and Responsibility**

Existentialism places great importance on individual freedom, asserting that humans have the capacity to make choices independently of external determinants. However, this freedom comes with the burden of responsibility for those choices, leading to feelings of anxiety or "existential angst." The acknowledgment of freedom also implies a rejection of determinism and fatalism.

### **Authenticity and Individuality**

Authenticity is a key existentialist concept that encourages individuals to live true to themselves rather than conforming to societal expectations or roles. This involves embracing one's freedom and the inherent uncertainty of life without retreating into false security or denial.

### **The Absurd and Meaning**

Existentialism often grapples with the absurd—the conflict between humans' desire to find inherent meaning in life and the universe's apparent indifference. Philosophers like Albert Camus examined how individuals can

confront this absurdity without succumbing to nihilism, advocating for a life lived with courage and personal meaning.

## **Alienation and Isolation**

Feelings of alienation or estrangement from the world, other people, or oneself are common themes in existential thought. This alienation arises from the recognition of one's separateness and the challenge of forging authentic relationships in an absurd world.

## **Major Existentialist Philosophers**

Several philosophers have significantly contributed to shaping the existentialist tradition, each bringing unique perspectives and insights.

### **Søren Kierkegaard**

Kierkegaard focused on individual faith and the subjective experience of existence. His work emphasized the importance of personal choice, commitment, and the "leap of faith" in confronting existential uncertainty.

### **Friedrich Nietzsche**

Nietzsche challenged traditional morality and religion, proposing the revaluation of values and the concept of the "will to power." His ideas influenced existentialism's emphasis on self-creation and overcoming nihilism.

### **Jean-Paul Sartre**

Sartre is often considered the leading figure of existentialism. He articulated the idea that "existence precedes essence" and explored the consequences of freedom and responsibility in human life. Sartre's works also addressed themes of bad faith, authenticity, and the nature of being.

### **Simone de Beauvoir**

De Beauvoir contributed to existentialism by linking it with feminist theory. She examined the oppression of women and argued for authentic freedom and self-definition in the context of gender relations.

# **Albert Camus**

Though often associated with existentialism, Camus preferred to describe his philosophy as absurdism. He explored the tension between humans' search for meaning and the indifferent universe, advocating for a defiant embrace of life despite its absurdity.

## **Existentialism in Literature and Culture**

Existentialism has deeply influenced literature, art, and popular culture, providing a framework to examine human freedom, alienation, and meaning through various creative expressions.

### **Existentialist Literature**

Many literary works embody existentialist themes, focusing on characters who confront freedom, despair, and the search for authenticity. Notable examples include Sartre's play "No Exit," Camus' novel "The Stranger," and Franz Kafka's writings, which often depict absurd and alienating situations.

### **Impact on Art and Film**

Existentialist ideas have shaped modern art and cinema, emphasizing subjective experience and existential dilemmas. Films by directors such as Ingmar Bergman and Jean-Luc Godard explore existential themes of isolation, freedom, and the human condition.

### **Influence on Psychology and Theology**

Existentialism has also influenced existential psychology and psychotherapy, focusing on individual experience, anxiety, and authenticity. Theological existentialism examines faith and doubt from an existential perspective, as seen in the works of theologians like Paul Tillich.

## **Contemporary Relevance of Existentialism**

Existentialism remains relevant in contemporary philosophy and culture, addressing ongoing questions about identity, freedom, and the search for meaning in a complex world.

# Existentialism and Modern Society

In a world marked by rapid change, technological advancement, and social fragmentation, existentialist ideas help individuals navigate feelings of alienation and uncertainty. The emphasis on personal responsibility and authenticity resonates with contemporary debates on identity and ethics.

## Existentialism in Mental Health

Existentialist concepts continue to inform therapeutic practices that focus on meaning-making, confronting anxiety, and encouraging authentic living. Existential therapy helps individuals cope with existential crises and find purpose despite life's inherent challenges.

## Philosophical and Cultural Legacy

The legacy of existentialism endures in ongoing philosophical inquiry, literature, and cultural discourse. It challenges individuals to confront the realities of freedom, mortality, and meaning, making it a vital aspect of modern intellectual thought.

## Summary of Key Existentialist Questions

- What does it mean to exist as an individual?
- How do freedom and responsibility shape human life?
- Can life have meaning in an indifferent universe?
- What constitutes authentic living?
- How should one confront alienation and despair?

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is existentialism?

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emphasizes individual existence, freedom, and choice, focusing on the individual's experience in a seemingly meaningless or absurd world.

## **Who are the main philosophers associated with existentialism?**

Key existentialist philosophers include Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Martin Heidegger.

## **What are the core themes of existentialism?**

Core themes include the absurdity of life, freedom and responsibility, authenticity, angst, alienation, and the search for meaning.

## **How does existentialism view human freedom?**

Existentialism views human freedom as fundamental, asserting that individuals are free to make their own choices and must take responsibility for the consequences.

## **What is the existentialist concept of 'the absurd'?**

The absurd refers to the conflict between humans' desire to find inherent meaning in life and the silent, indifferent universe that offers none.

## **How does existentialism relate to authenticity?**

Existentialism encourages living authentically by embracing one's freedom, making genuine choices, and accepting responsibility rather than conforming to societal expectations.

## **Is existentialism only a philosophical theory or does it influence other fields?**

Existentialism influences literature, psychology, theology, and the arts, inspiring works that explore human freedom, meaning, and alienation.

## **How does existentialism address the meaning of life?**

Existentialism suggests that life has no predetermined meaning; individuals must create their own meaning through their choices and actions.

## **Can existentialism be applied in everyday life?**

Yes, existentialism encourages individuals to live authentically, face uncertainties, make conscious choices, and take responsibility for their lives.

## Additional Resources

### 1. *Existentialism is a Humanism* by Jean-Paul Sartre

This concise book is a foundational text in existentialist philosophy, based on a lecture Sartre gave in 1945. It explains the core ideas of existentialism, emphasizing human freedom, responsibility, and the absence of any predetermined essence. Sartre argues that individuals must create their own meaning in an inherently meaningless world.

### 2. *Being and Nothingness* by Jean-Paul Sartre

A seminal and complex work in existential philosophy, this book delves deeply into concepts such as consciousness, freedom, bad faith, and the self. Sartre explores what it means to exist and how people experience their own being and the being of others. It is considered a foundational text for understanding existentialism in a philosophical context.

### 3. *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus

In this philosophical essay, Camus explores the absurdity of life and the human struggle to find meaning in a world without inherent purpose. Using the Greek myth of Sisyphus as a metaphor, Camus discusses how one might respond to life's absurdity with defiance and acceptance. It is a key text for understanding existentialist and absurdist themes.

### 4. *Fear and Trembling* by Søren Kierkegaard

This work examines the nature of faith and the individual's relationship with the divine through the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Kierkegaard introduces the concept of the "leap of faith" and the tension between ethical duty and religious belief. It is a profound exploration of existential anxiety and commitment.

### 5. *Existence and Existents* by Martin Heidegger

Heidegger's exploration of the question of being is central to existential philosophy. In this book, he discusses the nature of existence, the difference between beings and Being itself, and the human condition as "being-toward-death." It is essential for understanding the ontological foundations of existentialism.

### 6. *The Stranger* by Albert Camus

This novel tells the story of Meursault, an indifferent French Algerian who confronts the absurdity of life and the inevitability of death. Through its narrative and existential themes, the book illustrates the emotional and philosophical implications of living in a meaningless world. It is a classic literary work embodying existentialist ideas.

### 7. *The Ethics of Ambiguity* by Simone de Beauvoir

Beauvoir explores existentialist ethics, focusing on the ambiguity of human freedom and the responsibility that comes with it. She discusses how individuals can navigate freedom without falling into despair or nihilism and emphasizes the importance of solidarity and engagement with others. This work builds on and expands existentialist thought into moral philosophy.

#### 8. *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor E. Frankl

Though rooted in logotherapy, this book aligns with existentialist concerns about meaning in life. Frankl recounts his experiences in Nazi concentration camps and explains how finding a purpose can help individuals endure suffering. The text highlights the human capacity to create meaning even in the most dire circumstances.

#### 9. *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* by Albert Camus

In this philosophical essay, Camus examines rebellion and revolution as responses to oppression and absurdity. He argues that rebellion is a fundamental expression of human dignity and a search for justice, but warns against the dangers of absolute ideologies. The book offers a nuanced perspective on existentialism's engagement with political and ethical questions.

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**what is existentialism: What Is Existentialism? Vol. II** Frank Scalambrino, 2021-08-14 The term existentialism was coined in the 1940s. Whereas other books regarding existentialism merely repeat the platitudes that There is no such thing as existentialism or that The term 'existentialism' has no coherent meaning, this two-volume set actually answers the question What is existentialism? Volume I identifies the seven (7) principles of existentialism and the necessary and sufficient conditions for a philosophy to be existential, and introduces readers to the depth of the problem by showing how the question What is existentialism? can be answered in multiple ways, all of which are provided in this two-volume set. Vol. I, then, provides the archaeological answer to the question by showing the philosophical framework existentialism inherited from transcendental philosophy. Vol. I also provides the genealogical answer by tracing the history of the thematization of this framework through German Romanticism, concluding with an illustration of how the major existential philosophers: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Marcel, expressed and developed the principles of existentialism. Volume II provides a discussion of essential distinctions with which to correctly understand, and formulate thoughts about, existentialism, for example, discussions of existentialism as a kind of character ethics, existentialism as a critique of Descartes' philosophy, the difference between existential individuality and modern subjectivity, and a discussion of the moment of vision. Vol. II concludes, then, with a discussion of how existential philosophy takes being, as an end-in-itself, as its point of origin. Vol. II also provides a number of helpful appendices. These appendices address some miscellaneous, though important, concerns regarding existentialism, and provide charts illustrating the interrelations between the key concepts of existentialism.

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**what is existentialism: Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology** Jeff Greenberg, Sander L. Koole, Tom Pyszczynski, 2013-12-17 Social and personality psychologists traditionally have focused their attention on the most basic building blocks of human thought and behavior, while existential psychologists pursued broader, more abstract questions regarding the nature of existence and the meaning of life. This volume bridges this longstanding divide by demonstrating how rigorous experimental methods can be applied to understanding key existential concerns, including death, uncertainty, identity, meaning, morality, isolation, determinism, and freedom. Bringing together leading scholars and investigators, the Handbook presents the influential theories and research findings that collectively are helping to define the emerging field of experimental existential psychology.

**what is existentialism: Rethinking Existentialism** Jonathan Webber, 2018-07-12 In *Rethinking Existentialism*, Jonathan Webber articulates an original interpretation of existentialism as the ethical theory that human freedom is the foundation of all other values. Offering an original analysis of classic literary and philosophical works published by Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Frantz Fanon up until 1952, Webber's conception of existentialism is developed in critical contrast with central works by Albert Camus, Sigmund Freud, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Presenting his arguments in an accessible and engaging style, Webber contends that Beauvoir and Sartre initially disagreed over the structure of human freedom in 1943 but Sartre ultimately came to accept Beauvoir's view over the next decade. He develops the viewpoint that Beauvoir provides a more significant argument for authenticity than either Sartre or Fanon. He articulates in detail the existentialist theories of individual character and the social identities of gender and race, key concerns in current discourse. Webber concludes by sketching out the broader implications of his interpretation of existentialism for philosophy, psychology, and psychotherapy.

**what is existentialism: Existential America** George Cotkin, 2003 As Cotkin shows, not only did Americans readily take to existentialism, but they were already heirs to a rich tradition of thinkers - from Jonathan Edwards and Herman Melville to Emily Dickinson and William James - who had wrestled with the problems of existence and the contingency of the world long before Sartre and his colleagues. After introducing the concept of an American existential tradition, Cotkin examines how formal existentialism first arrived in America in the 1930s through discussion of Kierkegaard and the early vogue among New York intellectuals for the works of Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus.

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the philosophy of human existence, which flourished first in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s and then in France in the decade following the end of World War II. The operative meaning of existentialism here is thus broader than it was circa 1945 when the term first gained currency in France as a label for the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. However, it is considerably less broad than the view proposed by commentators in the 1950s and 1960s who, in an attempt to overcome Sartre's hegemony, discovered the seeds of existentialism far and wide: in Shakespeare, Saint Augustine, and the Old Testament prophets. In this dictionary, existentialism is understood as a decidedly 20th-century phenomenon, though with roots in the 19th century. Effort has been made to understand the philosophy of existentialism, as all philosophies should be understood, as part of an ongoing intellectual tradition: an evolving history of problems, concepts, and arguments. The A to Z of Existentialism explains the central claims of existentialist philosophy and the contexts in which it developed into one of the most influential intellectual trends of the 20th century. This is done through a chronology, an introductory essay, a bibliography, and more than 300 cross-referenced dictionary entries offering clear, accessible accounts of the life and thought of major existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, Martin Buber, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as well as thinkers influential to its development such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, and Max Scheler. This book affords readers an integrated, critical, and historically-sensitive understanding of this important philosophical movement.

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Existentialism, as a philosophy, gained prominence after World War II. Instead of focusing upon a particular aspect of human existence, existentialists argued that our focus must be upon the whole being as he/she exists in the world. Rebelling against the rationalism of such philosophers as Descartes and Hegel, existentialists reject the emphasis placed on man as primarily a thinking being. Freedom is central to human existence, and human relations and encounters cannot be reduced simply to thinking. This Dictionary provides--through alphabetically arranged entries--overviews of the various tenets, philosophers, and writers of existentialism, and of those writers/philosophers who, in retrospect, seem to existentialists to espouse their philosophy: Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevski, et al.

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fascinating introductory volume, Existential Psychoanalysis: A Contemporary Introduction integrates existential philosophy with psychoanalysis, drawing on key theorists from both areas and expertly guiding the reader on how to incorporate these two disciplines, which may appear disparate on the surface, into their clinical and theoretical work. This unique and accessible book sees M. Guy Thompson explore key concepts, such as experience, authenticity, freedom, psychic change, agency, and the pervasive role of suffering in our lives. Throughout, he draws on a wide range of thinkers from both fields, including Sartre, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Freud, Winnicott, Bion, Laing, and Lacan.

Exquisitely lucid and engaging, Thompson deftly brings the reader into thoughtful and enlightening territory typically inaccessible to the general reader. Although existential philosophy and psychoanalysis are often thought of as incompatible fields, Thompson shows how they share far more in common than is usually supposed. This volume will help clinicians, scholars, and students of all persuasions learn how integrating the two disciplines introduces a more personal and revolutionary understanding of what psychoanalysis can be in the twenty-first century. This compelling assimilation of continental philosophy and psychoanalysis will be of interest to psychoanalytic practitioners and psychotherapists, as well as philosophers, social scientists and any student of the human condition.

**what is existentialism: Sartre's Life, Times and Vision du Monde** William L. McBride, 2013-09-13 William L. McBride Professor of Philosophy at Purdue University, is co-founder of the North American Sartre Society, and the first chairperson of its executive board. His most recent publications include *Social and Political Philosophy* and *Sartre's Political Theory*. He was recently named Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes Academiques by the French Government, and has served as Chairperson of the Committee on International Cooperation of the American Philosophical Association and as President of the Societe Americaine de Philosophie de Langue Francaise.

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