

# EXISTENTIALISM

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# Introduction:

- Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice.
- It is the view that humans define their own meaning in life, and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe.
- It focuses on the question of human existence, and the feeling that there is no purpose or explanation at the core of existence.
- It holds that, as there is no God or any other transcendent force, the only way to counter

# Introduction:

- Existentialism originated with the 19th Century philosophers Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, although neither used the term in their work.
- In the 1940s and 1950s, French existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus (1913 - 1960), and Simone de Beauvoir (1908 - 1986) wrote scholarly and fictional works that popularized existential themes, such as dread, boredom, alienation, the absurd, freedom, commitment and nothingness.

# Introduction (conti...)

- **Søren Kierkegaard** is generally considered to have been the first existentialist philosopher, though he did not use the term existentialism.
- He proposed that each individual—not society or religion—is solely responsible for giving meaning to life and living it passionately and sincerely.

# Introduction (conti...)

- **Jean-Paul Sartre** : **Existence precedes essence** :
  - **existence**: means that the most important consideration for individuals is that they are individuals—independently acting and responsible, conscious beings .
  - **Essence**: rather than what labels, roles, stereotypes, definitions, or other preconceived categories the individuals fit.

Thus, human beings, through their own consciousness, create their own values and determine a meaning to their life.

# Introduction (conti...)

- As Sartre writes in his work “**Existentialism is a Humanism**” ... man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards.”
- Of course, the more positive, therapeutic aspect of this is also implied: A person can choose to act in a different way, and to be a good person instead of a cruel person. Here it is also clear that since humans can choose to be either cruel or good, they are, in fact, neither of these things essentially.

# Key themes of Existentialism

## 1. The Absurd :

- the idea here is that there is no meaning in the world beyond what meaning we give it.
- This meaninglessness also encompasses the "unfairness" of the world.
- This contrasts with the notion that "bad things don't happen to good people"
- To the world, metaphorically speaking, there is no such thing as a good person or a bad person; what happens happens, and it may just as well happen to a "good" person as to a "bad"



# Key themes of Existentialism

## 2. Facticity :

- Facticity is both a limitation and a condition of freedom.
- It is a limitation in that a large part of one's facticity consists of things one couldn't have chosen (birthplace, etc.), but a condition in the sense that one's values most likely depend on it.
- However, even though one's facticity is "set in stone" (as being past, for instance), it cannot determine a person.
- As an example, consider two men, one of whom has no memory of his past and the other remembers everything. They have both committed many crimes, but the first man, knowing nothing about this, leads a rather normal life while the second man, feeling trapped by his own past, continues a life of crime, blaming his own past for "trapping" him in this life. There is nothing essential about his committing crimes, but he ascribes this meaning to his

# Key themes of Existentialism

## Facticity (conti..):

- Another aspect of existential freedom is that one can change one's values.
- Thus, one is responsible for one's values, regardless of society's values.
- The focus on freedom in existentialism is related to the limits of the responsibility one bears as a result of one's freedom: the relationship between freedom and responsibility is one of interdependency.

# Key themes of Existentialism

## 3. Authenticity :

- Authentic existence involves the idea that one has to "create oneself" and then live in accordance with this self.
- The authentic act is one that is in accordance with one's freedom. Of course, as a condition of freedom is facticity, this includes one's facticity, but not to the degree that this facticity can in any way determine one's choices (in the sense that one could then blame one's background for making the choice one made).
- The role of facticity in relation to authenticity involves letting one's actual values come into play when one makes a choice (instead of, like Kierkegaard's Aesthete, "choosing" randomly), so that one also takes responsibility for the act instead of choosing either-or without allowing the options to have different values.

# Key themes of Existentialism

## 4. The Other and the Look :

- The Other (when written with a capital "O") is a concept more properly belonging to phenomenology and its account of inter subjectivity.
- The experience of the Other is the experience of another free subject who inhabits the same world as a person does.
- In existentialism, it also acts as a kind of limitation of freedom.

# Key themes of Existentialism

## The Other and the Look (conti..):

- This is because the Look tends to objectify what it sees. As such, when one experiences oneself in the Look, one doesn't experience oneself as nothing (no thing), but as something.
- Sartre's own example of a man peeping at someone through a keyhole can help clarify this: at first, this man is entirely caught up in the situation he is in; he is in a pre-reflexive state where his entire consciousness is directed at what goes on in the room. Suddenly, he hears a creaking floorboard behind him, and he becomes aware of himself as seen by the Other. He is thus filled with shame for he perceives himself as he would perceive someone else doing what he was

# Key themes of Existentialism

- **The Other and the Look (conti..):**
  - Another characteristic feature of the Look is that no Other really needs to have been there: It is quite possible that the creaking floorboard was nothing but the movement of an old house;
  - the Look isn't some kind of mystical telepathic experience of the actual way the other sees one (there may also have been someone there, but he could have not noticed that the person was there).
  - It is only one's perception of the way another might perceive him.

# Key themes of Existentialism

## 5. Angst and Dread :

- "Existential angst", sometimes called dread, anxiety, or anguish, is a term that is common to many existentialist thinkers.
- It is generally held to be a negative feeling arising from the experience of human freedom and responsibility.
- The archetypal example is the experience one has when standing on a cliff where one not only fears falling off it, but also dreads the possibility of throwing oneself off.
- In this experience that "nothing is holding me back", one senses the lack of anything that predetermines one to either throw oneself off or to stand still, and one

# Key themes of Existentialism

- **Angst and Dread :**

- In the case of fear, one can take definitive measures to remove the object of fear, in the case of angst, no such "constructive" measures are possible.
- There is nothing in people (genetically, for instance) that acts in their stead—that they can blame if something goes wrong. Therefore, not every choice is perceived as having dreadful possible consequences (and, it can be claimed, human lives would be unbearable if every choice facilitated dread).
- However, this doesn't change the fact that freedom remains a condition of every action.



# Key themes of Existentialism

## 6. Despair :

- Despair, in existentialism, is generally defined as a loss of hope. More specifically, it is a loss of hope in reaction to a breakdown in one or more of the defining qualities of one's self or identity.
- For example, a singer who loses the ability to sing may despair if she has nothing else to fall back on—nothing to rely on for her identity. She finds herself unable to be what defined her.

# Key themes of Existentialism

- **Despair (conti..):**
  - So long as a person's identity depends on qualities that can crumble, he is in perpetual despair.
  - In Sartrean terms, no human essence found in conventional reality on which to constitute the individual's sense of identity, despair is a universal human condition.
  - Kierkegaard defines it as : "Let each one learn what he can; both of us can learn that a person's unhappiness never lies in his lack of control over external conditions, since this would only make him

# Opposition to positivism and rationalism

- Existentialists oppose definitions of human beings as primarily rational and therefore oppose positivism and rationalism.
- Existentialism asserts that people actually make decisions based on subjective meaning rather than pure rationality.
- Kierkegaard advocated rationality as means to interact with the objective world (e.g. in the natural sciences), but when it comes to existential problems, reason is insufficient: "Human reason has boundaries".

# Opposition to positivism and rationalism

- Like Kierkegaard, Sartre saw problems with rationality, calling it a form of "bad faith", an attempt by the self to impose structure on a world of phenomena—"the Other"—that is fundamentally irrational and random.
- According to Sartre, rationality and other forms of bad faith hinder people from finding meaning in freedom.
- To try to suppress their feelings of anxiety and dread, people confine themselves within everyday experience, Sartre asserts, thereby giving up their freedom and acquiescing to being possessed in one form or another by "the Look" of "the Other"

# Existential psychotherapy

- is a philosophical method of therapy that operates on the belief that inner conflict within a person is due to that individual's confrontation with the givens of existence.
- These givens, as noted by Irvin D. Yalom, are: the inevitability of death, freedom and its attendant responsibility, existential isolation, and finally meaninglessness.
- These four givens, also referred to as ultimate concerns, form the body of existential psychotherapy and compose the framework in which a therapist conceptualizes a client's problem in order to develop a method of treatment.

# Existential therapy's view of the human mind

- Existential therapy starts with the belief that although humans are essentially alone in the world, they long to be connected to others.
- People want to have meaning in one another's lives, but ultimately they must come to realize that they cannot depend on others for validation, and with that realization they finally acknowledge and understand that they are fundamentally alone (Yalom, 1980).
- The result of this revelation is anxiety in the knowledge that our validation must come from

# Existential therapy's view of the human mind

- Existentialism suggests that it is possible for people to face the anxieties of life head-on and embrace the human condition of aloneness, to revel in the freedom to choose and take full responsibility for their choices.
- They courageously take the helm of their lives and steer in whatever direction they choose; they have the courage to be.
- One does not need to arrest feelings of meaninglessness, but can choose new meanings for their lives.
- By building, loving, and creating, one is able to live life as one's own adventure.
- One can accept one's own mortality and

# Four worlds

- Existential thinkers seek to avoid restrictive models that categorize or label people.
- Instead they look for the universals that can be observed cross-culturally.
- There is no existential personality theory which divides humanity into types or reduces people to part components.
- Instead, there is a description of the different levels of experience and existence with which people are inevitably confronted.



# Four worlds

- One can distinguish four basic dimensions of human existence: the physical, the social, the psychological, and the spiritual.
- On each of these dimensions, people encounter the world and shape their attitude out of their particular take on their experience.
- The four dimensions are obviously interwoven and provide a complex four-dimensional force field for their existence.
- Individuals are stretched between a positive pole of what they aspire to on each dimension and a negative pole of what they fear.

# Physical dimension (umwelt)

- individuals relate to their environment and to the givens of the natural world around them.
- This includes their attitude to the body they have, to the concrete surroundings they find themselves in, to the climate and the weather, to objects and material possessions, to the bodies of other people, their own bodily needs, to health and illness and to their own mortality.
- The struggle on this dimension is in general terms between the search for domination over the elements and natural law (as in technology, or in sports) and the need to accept the limitations of natural boundaries (as in ecology or old age).
- While people generally aim for security on this dimension (through health and wealth), much of life brings a gradual disillusionment and realization that such security can only be temporary.

# Social dimension (mitwelt)

- Individuals relate to others as they interact with the world around them.
- This dimension includes their response to the culture they live in, as well as to the class and race they belong to (and also those they do not belong to).
- Attitudes here range from love to hate and from cooperation to competition.
- The dynamic contradictions can be understood in terms of acceptance versus rejection or belonging versus isolation.
- some people prefer to withdraw from the world of others as much as possible. Others blindly chase public acceptance by going along with the rules and fashions of the moment.
- Otherwise they try to rise above these by becoming trendsetters themselves.
- By acquiring fame or other forms of power, individuals can attain dominance over others temporarily. Sooner or later, however, everyone is confronted with both failure and aloneness.

# Psychological dimension (eigenwelt)

- individuals relate to themselves and in this way create a personal world.
- This dimension includes views about their own character, their past experience, and their future possibilities.
- People search for a sense of identity, a feeling of being substantial and having a self.
- Activity – self affirmation and resolution; and passivity – surrender and yielding are an important polarity here.
- Facing the final dissolution of self that comes with personal loss and the facing of death might bring anxiety and confusion to many who have not yet given

# Spiritual dimension (uberwelt)

- individuals relate to the unknown and thus create a sense of an ideal world, an ideology, and a philosophical outlook.
- It is here that they find meaning by putting all the pieces of the puzzle together for themselves.
- For some people, this is done by adhering to a religion or other prescriptive world view; for others, it is about discovering or attributing meaning in a more secular or personal way.
- The contradictions that must be faced on this dimension are often related to the tension between purpose and absurdity, hope and despair.
- People create their values in search of something that matters enough to live or die for, something that may even have ultimate and universal validity.
- Usually the aim is the conquest of a soul, or something that will substantially surpass mortality (as for instance in having contributed something valuable to humankind).
- Facing the void and the possibility of nothingness are the indispensable counterparts of this quest for the eternal.

**THANK YOU**