Definition: **Existentialism** from *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*

A philosophical attitude owing much to the writings of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55), which developed in Germany after the First World War and somewhat later in France and Italy. Atheistic existentialism was popularized in France by Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80) during the Second World War. Existentialists emphasize the freedom and importance of individual 'existence' and personality and show a distrust of philosophical idealism. Much of their writing is characterized by disillusionment. The term is a translation of the German *Existenz-philosophie*.

**Summary Article: Existentialism**

from *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*

Existentialism is difficult to define. This is due, in large part, to the fact that although it was conceived as a serious philosophical doctrine, it has been frequently vulgarized to the level of some loosely related styles of writing or, worse yet, to a fad, so that the existentialist label gets applied to authors or ideas that are only remotely, if at all, connected to existentialist philosophy. More significantly, a further complication derives from the fact that, as is the case with so many philosophies, the ideas proposed by various existentialist thinkers often do not share any one cardinal point. For example, Martin Heidegger, one of the major voices of the existential philosophy, vehemently chides Jean-Paul Sartre, a giant of existentialist thinking in his own right, for misunderstanding the term *existence* and thus debasing the label *existentialism* to mean some kind of nihilistic view on life and human history. Moreover, even when existential philosophers draw on the same author as a common source of their thinking, they disagree so substantially over the interpretation of this source that the end products are hard pressed to form a coherent system of thought.

Despite all the differences among existentialist thinkers, however, there is nevertheless a core theme around which their respective works orbit, a theme that gives what is called existentialism a recognizable contour and helps gather diverse writings as parts of a distinct philosophical perspective. This theme—also known as one of the battle cries of a general philosophical revolt taking place in Europe during the early decades of the 20th century—can be stated as follows: *Existence precedes essence*. If existentialism has made any significant contribution to philosophy, this contribution can be measured by what this statement means to suggest.

The relation between existence and essence is one of the oldest problems in philosophy. To say that something exists is simply to point to the fact that "it is." Existence is therefore characterized by concreteness and particularity, in short, by a sheer givenness. The idea of "essence" is different in a significant way from that of the "givenness" that defines existence. If the existence of something has to do with the fact that "it is," the essence of that something consists in "what it is." The essence of an object, a silver dollar, for example, is constituted by the specific characteristics that make this object, this silver dollar, one kind of object rather than another. Seen in this way, essence is something that lends itself to rational thought, to analysis, comparison, and synthesis, in ways that the sheer
particularity and “thatness” of existence do not.

As the statement “existence precedes essence” suggests, existentialism prioritizes existence and conceives of essence as derivative or secondary. In contrast to rationalist thinking, which exalts existence at the expense of essence, existentialism begins by emphasizing the fact of existence—the undeniable fact that there is something rather than nothing. This emphasis is meant by existentialists to drive home two ideas that challenge what they take be a type of anemic thinking characteristic of idealist philosophers, most notably Plato and Georg Hegel. First, existence is not to be understood as a property, as the point one makes when one says that “height” is the property of a tall person; second, the priority of existence over essence must be affirmed when one makes the metaphysical distinction between reality and appearance, if only because, as Kierkegaard, following Kant, argues, no concept of a given object entails the existence of that object. Put simply, while essences are something that can be thought about, existence is a fact that has always and already taken place, and being a fait accompli, it cannot be wished away. Existence, as existentialists would say, is irreducibly factual; it is the very datum, the first principle, from which philosophical reflections begin and in which they should finally end.

Now, it should be noted that by existence, existentialists do not mean something being there in the abstract. Rather than designating a general concept arrived at by abstracting what is common to all that appears, existence here means—exclusively and precisely—individual existence or, we can say, existence grasped according to one’s inalienable individuality. This emphasis on the individual follows from existentialists’ insistence that existence be approached and comprehended from the first-person perspective. This perspective opens a new vista of philosophical exploration in two ways. On one hand, it constitutes the individual as a legitimate category of philosophical reflection; on the other, it calls for confronting and rethinking the individual according to the horizon of possibilities that defines his or her identity, that is, not in terms of contingent sociocultural determinations but in terms of the individual’s fundamental truth as an ongoing engagement with what lies ahead of him or her. Unlike an object, a chair, which is simply and indifferently there, an individual exists concretely. The individual exists concretely in the sense that his or her existence is lived by himself or herself only—lived, that is, in the singularity of a life that is his or her own, and about which he or she cannot but be concerned in the most intimate manner.

Existentialism highlights the concept of agency as it relates to the human condition. Existence means living and acting in the world. By extension, to act is to make a choice; action is always the outcome of choice making. This is the case, not simply because we make choices all the time, but because we cannot avoid doing so; indeed, even when we refuse to make a choice, the refusal is nonetheless a choice. In this sense, choice making is always of the self, in that a choice is always made by the self and for the same self as well. Because one must make a choice on one’s own and because the choice made is for oneself only—although the choice made might have consequence for others—one is essentially responsible for oneself and for the choices one has made. Moreover, because one is responsible for oneself as one responds to one’s own calling to make a choice, one must be considered free. According to existentialism, in the strict sense, humans are essentially free, for no one can prevent us from making choices. Or, as existentialists phrase it aptly, we are “condemned” to freedom. In existentialism, freedom and existence collapse into each other in the figure of the individual who, willingly or not, must be held responsible for himself or herself.

Existentialism is one of the major movements in philosophy of the 20th century. Although its
fundamental tenets have been challenged by subsequent developments such as structuralism and critical hermeneutics, the deep analyses of the human condition made by existentialists have continued to fascinate writers and artists working across the spectrum of the humanities. From Fyodor Dostoyevsky to Albert Camus, from Edvard Munch to Mark Rothko, the theme of human freedom and anguish in existence can be found across literary and artistic expressions in our own time. As made clear by existentialism, the question of existence is one that comes to us all, even if we try to repress it. In existentialism, philosophy meets life in its bare truth. To understand existentialism, one must read existentialist philosophers. When we read these philosophers, we might not find any consolation for the difficulties we face in life, but we will not fail to find the truth—the all too cruel truth—of who we are and why we cannot but face a future that is solely of our own making.

See also
Hermeneutics, Ontology, Phenomenology, Philosophy of Communication

Further Readings


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