

Existentialism

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Abstract

The term 'existentialism' was officially coined by Gabriel Marcel in 1943 and is often reserved for the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who used it to refer to their own philosophies in the mid-1940s. But it is more often used as a general name for a number of thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who made the concrete individual central to their thought. Existentialism in this broader sense arose as a backlash against philosophical and scientific systems that emphasize the standpoint of theoretical detachment and treat all particulars, including humans, as members of a genus or instances of universal laws. It claims that our own existence as unique individuals in concrete situations cannot be grasped adequately in such theories, and that systems of this sort conceal from us the highly personal task of trying to achieve self-fulfilment and meaning in our lives. Existentialists therefore start out with a detailed description of the self as an 'existing individual', understood as an agent involved in a specific social and historical context. One of their chief aims is to understand how the individual can achieve the richest, most authentic and fulfilling life in the modern world.

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Ideally, the abstract will define topic and summarize the content of the entry in a concise manner as possible.

Please avoid language such as "in this entry" or "I will" as the abstract is meant to stand apart from the main entry.

Existentialists hold widely differing views about human existence, but there are a number of recurring themes in their writings. First, existentialists generally hold that humans have no pre-given purpose or essence laid out for them by God or by nature; it is up to each one of us to decide who and what we are through our own actions. This is the point of Sartre's definition of existentialism as the view that, for humans, 'existence precedes essence'. What this means is that we first simply *exist* - find ourselves thrown into a world that is not of our own choosing - and it is then up to each of us to define our own identity or essential characteristics in the course of what we do in living out our lives. Thus, our essence (our set of defining traits) is chosen or made, not given.

Second, existentialists hold that people decide their own fates and are responsible for what they make of their lives. Humans have free will in the sense that, no matter what social and biological factors influence their decisions, they can reflect on those conditions, decide what they mean, and then make their own choices as to how to handle those factors in acting in the world. Because we are self-creating or self-fashioning beings in this sense, we have full responsibility for what we make of our lives.

Third, existentialists generally maintain that the truths of the human situation are disclosed not by means of detached cognition or rational reflection but through powerful emotional experiences like 'anxiety', 'nausea', 'guilt', and the feeling of 'absurdity'. Moods, in this sense, not only reveal what matters and is at stake in our lives; they also have the power to pull us out of our ordinary tendency to conform to the stabilizing norms of the 'herd' and expose us to the fact that our existence is fundamentally precarious and finite.

Fourth, existentialists are concerned with the idea of ‘being true’ to oneself and identifying the most authentic and fulfilling way of life possible for individuals. Because of our conformist tendencies, we usually feel we are living well if we do what ‘one’ does in familiar social situations. In this respect, our lives are said to be ‘inauthentic’ or not really our own. To become authentic, according to this view, an individual must take over their own existence with a sense of clarity and intensity. Such a transformation is often made possible by emotional experiences such as anxiety or existential guilt. When we face up to what is revealed in such experiences, existentialists claim, we will have a clearer grasp of what is at stake in life, and we will be able to become more committed and integrated individuals.

Finally, although they are often criticized for promoting a kind of moral nihilism, existentialists from Kierkegaard onward have been concerned with fundamental moral questions such as ‘What should I do?’ and ‘How should I live?’ Although they reject the viability of traditional normative ethics that offer universal prescriptions for how we ‘ought’ to act, by emphasizing the underlying freedom of the human situation, existentialists make it clear that the individual alone is responsible for their choices and actions in the world. This explains why Beauvoir can say, ‘to will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision’ (1947/1948, 24). In this sense, there is a strong connection between ethics and authenticity for the existentialists, insofar as affirming one’s own freedom and owning up to the fact that our actions have consequences and affect the lives of others is central to the prospect of ‘being true’ to oneself.

1. Historical development

Although early thinkers such as Augustine, Montaigne, Shakespeare and Pascal have been called existentialists, the term should be reserved for a loosely connected group of thinkers in recent times who were responding to certain views that became widespread in the nineteenth century. These views include, first, the scientific picture of reality as a meaningless, value-free collection of material objects in causal interactions, and second, the modern sense of society as an artificial construct that is inevitably in conflict with the aspirations of the individual. German Idealism had attempted to counteract the implications of these new ideas, but it had largely collapsed by the 1840s, and the result was a growing feeling that the individual is ultimately alone and unsupported in a cold and meaningless universe (see [German idealism](#)).

Existentialism appeared in the nineteenth century alongside romanticism, but it was different from romanticism in important respects. For one thing, where romanticism tried to evoke a sense of the individual’s participation in the larger context of nature, the first great existentialist, Søren [Kierkegaard](#), held that humans are at the most basic level solitary, ‘existing individuals’ with no real connections to anything in this world. Instead of suggesting that we are at home in the world, Kierkegaard tried to intensify the individual’s feeling of anxiety and despair in order to bring about a ‘leap of faith’ that would bring the person into a defining relationship to the God-man (Christ).

The next figure usually included in the pantheon of existentialists, Friedrich [Nietzsche](#), began from the assumption that the development of science and rational thinking in Western history has led to the result that people have lost the ability to believe in moral absolutes, that is, an enduring and transcendent basis for our values and beliefs. When Nietzsche said that ‘God is dead’, he meant that all the things people previously thought of as absolutes - the cosmic order, Platonic Forms, divine will, Reason, History - have been shown to be human constructions, with no ultimate authority in telling us how to live our lives. In the face of the growing ‘nihilism’ that results from the death of God, Nietzsche tried to formulate a vision of a healthy form of life people can achieve once they have given up all belief in absolutes (see [Nihilism](#)).

The translation of Kierkegaard’s works and the discovery of Nietzsche’s writings had an immense impact on German thought after the First World War. The psychiatrist and philosopher, Karl [Jaspers](#), drew on

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these two figures to develop what he called a 'philosophy of existence' (*Existenzphilosophie*). Martin [Heidegger](#), influenced by Kierkegaard as well as by the movement called 'life philosophy' (then associated with the names of Nietzsche, Wilhelm [Dilthey](#) and Henri [Bergson](#)), began his major work, *Being and Time* (1927), with an 'analytic of Dasein' or 'existential analytic' aimed at describing life from the standpoint of concrete, everyday being-in-the-world (see [Lebensphilosophie](#)). Heidegger's thought was also influenced by Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, an approach to philosophy that emphasizes close description of our ordinary experience as it is prior to reflection and theorizing (see [Phenomenological movement](#)).

Working independently in France, Gabriel [Marcel](#) was building on Bergson's thought to develop an alternative to the dominant idealist philosophy taught in French universities. Basing his reflections on his own experience of life, Marcel claimed that a human being must be understood as an embodied existence already bound up with a concrete situation. Because the body and the situation can never be completely comprehended by the intellect, Marcel sees them as part of what he calls the 'mystery'. The body, understood this way, is not something I 'have' that is external to me, as the Cartesian tradition might suggest. It is, rather, who I 'am'; 'I am my body'. Maurice [Merleau-Ponty](#) took over Marcel's notion of embodied being-in-a-situation as a basis for his own existential phenomenology. Jean-Paul [Sartre](#) also drew on Marcel's thought, but he was especially influenced by the work of Husserl and Heidegger. Although the term 'existentialism' was first used by critics of Sartre, it quickly came to be accepted in the 1940s by Sartre and [Beauvoir](#) as they replied to their critics. Merleau-Ponty and Albert [Camus](#) were initially associated with the movement called existentialism during its heyday after the Second World War, but both eventually rejected the label as they came to distance themselves from Sartre due to political differences.

There have been important developments outside Germany and France as well. The Spanish philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno, for example, drew on the ideas of Kierkegaard to address the situation of 'the man who is born, suffers, and dies' (1912/1954, 1), and his compatriot José [Ortega y Gasset](#), influenced by Dilthey's life-philosophy, developed a number of ideas that closely paralleled those of Sartre, Heidegger and other existentialist thinkers. The novels and short stories of the Russian writer, Fëdor [Dostoevskii](#), were influential not only for Russian existentialists like Nikolai [Berdiaev](#), but for Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre and Camus as well. These literary influences continued to find expression in the writings of figures such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Herman Hesse, and Franz Kafka, and more recently in the novels of Philip Roth, Gabriel García Márquez, and Milan Kundera as well as the plays of Samuel Beckett and Arthur Miller. Existentialism has also had a wide and profound impact on other fields, influencing, for instance, the films of John-Luc Godard, Ingmar Bergman, and Michelangelo Antonioni, and the artwork of Edvard Munch, Alberto Giacometti, and Jackson Pollock. The movement continues to have an enormous influence on contemporary theology with the religious existentialism of Protestant figures such as Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Rudolf Bultmann, Jewish intellectuals such as Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, and the Catholic philosophy of Marcel (see [Existentialist theology](#)). And existential psychoanalysis (especially in the work of Ludwig Binswanger, Medard Boss, Viktor Frankl and Rollo May) continues to be of interest in psychotherapy. Given these wide-ranging influences, it is a mistake to view existentialism as a movement of purely historical interest. Furthermore, it continues to play a vital role in contemporary philosophy and social theory.

2. The human condition

Existentialists start out from the assumption that it is no longer possible to believe that there is some transcendent justification or underlying ground for our existence. If God is dead, then we find ourselves 'abandoned', 'forlorn' and 'thrown' into a world, with no pre-given direction or legitimation. Though we

seek some overarching meaning and purpose for our lives, we have to face the fact that there is no 'proper function of humans' or 'plan in God's mind' that tells us the right way to be human.

This picture of our predicament leads to a particular view of human existence that is accepted by many existentialists. In contrast to traditional theories, which think of a human as a thing or object of some sort (whether a mind or a body or some combination of the two), existentialists characterize human existence as involving a deep tension or conflict between two different aspects of our being. On the one hand, we are organisms among other living beings, creatures with specific needs and drives, who operate at the level of sensation and desire in dealing with the present. At this level, we are not much different from other animals. On the other hand, there is a crucial respect in which we differ from other organisms. One way to describe this difference is to say that, because we are capable of self-awareness, we are able to reflect on our own desires and evaluate ourselves in terms of some larger vision of what our lives are adding up to. In this sense we surpass or transcend our own being as mere things. What is characteristic of our being as humans is that we *care* about the kinds of beings we are, and we are therefore able to take a stand on our basic desires. According to the existentialists, humans are unique among entities in that we form second-order desires about our first-order desires, and we therefore have aspirations that go beyond the immediacy of our sensual lives.

Heidegger and Sartre try to capture this reflexive dimension of human existence by saying that what is unique about humans is that our own being is 'in question' or 'at issue' for us. What kind of person I am matters to me, and because I am concerned about what I am and will be, I take some concrete *stand* on my life by assuming roles and developing a specific character through my actions. But this means that my existence is characterized by a fundamental tension or clash between my immediate sensations and desires on the one hand, and my long-range aims and projects on the other. As Sartre puts it, a 'rift' or a 'gap' - a 'nothingness' - is introduced into the fullness of being in the universe by human existence. Because consciousness makes us more than what we are as creatures with immediate sensations and desires, Sartre says that human reality 'is not what it is and is what it is not' ([1943/1956](#), 107).

The conception of human existence as a tension also appears in Kierkegaard's description of the self. For Kierkegaard, humans are both finite and infinite, temporal and eternal, determined and free. What defines our identity as selves is the concrete way we relate ourselves to this tension. In a similar way, Nietzsche holds that we are both creatures and creators, and we have to embrace both these dimensions of ourselves in order to be fully human. And Ortega y Gasset describes the human being as 'a kind of ontological centaur, half immersed in nature, half transcending it' ([1939/1941a](#), 111). Heidegger and Sartre refer to the two aspects of the self as 'facticity' (understood as the limitations of our givenness, such as our physiology and the sociohistorical situation we have been thrown into) and 'transcendence' (our ability to surpass our givenness through the interpretations and meanings we give to it). In their view, life is a continuous tension between these elements, a tension resolved only in death. Finally, Jaspers seems to have a similar conception of humans in mind when he points out the polarity between our being as an empirical consciousness-as-such and our desire to grasp the universal and realize our freedom as *Existenz*.

If we regard the self as a tension or struggle, it is natural to think of human existence not as a thing or object of some sort, but as an unfolding event or happening - the story of how the tension is dealt with. What defines my existence, according to this view, is not some set of properties that remain the same through time, but in Kierkegaard's words, a 'process of becoming' ([1846/1941](#), 176) through which I carry out the struggle to resolve the tension that defines my condition in the world. As an ongoing happening, I *am* what I make of myself throughout the course of my life as a whole. As Ortega writes, a human 'does not have a nature; what he has is... history' ([1935/1941b](#), 217). What defines my existence as an individual, then, is the ongoing story of what I choose to do and accomplish throughout my life.

To think of a human as an unfolding story suggests that human existence has a specific sort of temporal structure. We are not like rocks or trees that continue to exist through an endless sequence of 'nows'. Instead, human temporality has a kind of cumulateness and future-directedness that is different from the enduring presence of physical things. First, our existence is directed toward the future to the extent that we are striving to realize something for our lives. Heidegger calls this element of 'futura' our 'being-towards-death,' understood as a movement toward realizing our own being by achieving certain things throughout our active lives. Second, the past shows up for us as something retained and carried forward for the purposes of our future. Existence, understood this way, is a kind of 'thrown projection' ([Heidegger 1927/1962](#)) whereby, depending on our projects at any given time, our past actions show up for us as assets or as liabilities in relation to what we are doing. Finally, our present appears as a point of intersection between our future projects and our past accomplishments. Because we are time-binding beings whose lives always reach out into the future and hold on to the past, we can never achieve the kind of direct presence of self to self that Descartes thought he had found in the *Cogito* ('I think').

To say that human temporality is cumulative is to say that everything we do is contributing to creating our 'being' as a totality. In this sense, we *are* what we *do* in living out our lives: we define our own identity through the choices we make in dealing with the world. Because there is no fixed essential nature that we have in advance, our 'essence' as individuals is defined and realized through our concrete existence in the world. Whatever capacities and traits I am born with, it is up to me to take them over and make something of them in what I do. Thus, whether I am aware of it or not, I am creating my own identity with my actions.

3. Being-in-the-world

Existentialists are deeply suspicious of the detached, abstract theorizing about humans found in traditional philosophy and the sciences. In their view, the concern with subsuming all particulars under general concepts and building systems tends to conceal crucial features of our lives as individuals. For this reason, existentialists generally start out from a description of ourselves as agents in everyday contexts, prior to reflection and theorizing. These descriptions reveal that it is part of our 'facticity' that we are generally caught up in the midst of things, involved with others in trying to accomplish specific goals, and affected by moods and commitments that influence our perceptions and thoughts. Furthermore, we are embodied beings who encounter the world only from the standpoint of a particular bodily orientation that gives us a framework or set on things. We are, in Merleau-Ponty's words, 'first of all surrounded by [our] body, involved in the world, and situated here and now' ([1945/1962](#), 37), and this theme of situated embodiment became central to the work of Sartre and Beauvoir as well as more contemporary figures such as Franz [Fanon](#) and Iris Marion Young. The existentialists go on to suggest we are bound up with contexts of equipment in practical situations in our efforts to accomplish certain tasks. Finally, as social beings, we always find ourselves embedded in a particular cultural and historical milieu that conditions our outlook and determines our basic orientation toward the world. To say that we are 'factual' beings, then, is to say that we are always 'being-in-a-situation', where our being as selves is inseparable from a shared, meaningful life-world.

If we are always embedded in a situation, then all inquiry must start out from an 'insider's perspective' on things, that is, from a description of the world *as it appears to us* - to beings who are participants in our forms of life, with our unique bodily set, feelings and modes of perception. We have no choice but to begin from where we stand in the thick of our actual lives, with our local attachments and particular cares and concerns. But this means that there is no way to achieve a detached 'God's-eye view' on ourselves and our world, a view philosophers have sought ever since Plato. Existentialists are critical of the philosophical ideal of achieving a totally disinterested and disengaged 'view from nowhere' that will provide us with completely objective knowledge. The attempt to step back from our ordinary concerns in

order to achieve a totally detached and dispassionate standpoint - the stance Marcel calls 'desertion' and Merleau-Ponty calls 'high-altitude thinking' - will always give us a distorted view of the world, because it bleaches out our normal sense of the significance and worth of the things we encounter around us. In order to be able to gain an insight into the way reality presents itself to us at the most basic level, then, we need to start from a description of what Heidegger calls our 'average everydayness', our ordinary, familiar ways of being absorbed in practical affairs.

The idea that our being-in-a-situation or being-in-the-world is fundamental and inescapable gives the existentialists a way of criticizing the idea, central to philosophy since Descartes, that we are at the most basic level *minds* receiving sensory inputs and processing information. Sartre, for example, rejects the idea that the self can be thought of as a 'thinking substance' or self-encapsulated 'field of consciousness' distinct from the world. In my pre-reflective activities, Sartre says, I encounter myself not as a bundle of beliefs and desires in a mental container, but as being 'out there' *with* the things I am concerned about. When I am chasing a bus, I encounter my *self* as 'running-toward-the-bus'. My being is found not in my head, but with the bus. Sartre thinks that this follows from Husserl's view that consciousness is always 'intentional,' always directed *towards* entities in the world (see [Intentionality](#)). If Husserl is right, according to Sartre, then the 'I' is not an object, not a 'something', but is instead sheer intentional activity directed towards things in the world. The totality of my intentional acts defines me; there is no residue of 'substantial thinghood' distinct from my acts.

The existentialist conception of our irreducible being-in-a-situation calls into question some of the dualisms that have dominated so much of Western thought. First, existentialists deny the romantic distinction between an outer self - what we *do* in the world - and an inner, 'true' self that embodies our genuine nature. If we *just are* what we *do*, as existentialists contend, then there is no basis for positing a substantive 'real me' distinct from the parts I play and the things I do. Second, the account of the primacy of being-in-the-world tends to undermine the traditional subject-object model of our epistemological situation. Existentialists suggest that the assumption that humans are, at the most basic level, subjects of experience trying to formulate beliefs about objects on the basis of their inner representations, distorts our situation. If it is true that we are initially and most basically already out there involved with things in the world, then there must be something wrong with traditional epistemological puzzles about how a knowing subject can 'transcend' its veil of ideas to gain knowledge of objects in the external world. This is why, in rejecting this dualistic picture, Merleau-Ponty can say 'the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world' ([1945/1962](#), 408). Finally, the existentialist view of our basic situation as always bound up with a practical life-world seems to raise questions about the traditional fact-value distinction. Existentialists hold that we always encounter the everyday life-world as a context of equipment bound up with our aims as agents in the world. If the things we encounter are initially and most basically functional entities tied up with our purposive activities, however, then it is an illusion to think that what is given 'at first' is a collection of brute objects we subsequently invest with subjective values. In our everyday lives, fact and value are inseparable.

In general, existentialists hold that traditional dualisms arise only when we try to adopt a detached, theoretical stance towards things. But since such a stance is derivative from and parasitic on a more basic way of being in which we are inseparably bound up with things in practical contexts, it cannot be regarded as providing us with a privileged insight into the way things really are.

4. Freedom and responsibility

As being-in-the-world, we are already engaged in a shared life-world that gives us a prior sense of what is possible, and we find ourselves with choices in our past that carry weight in determining how we can act in the future. This is our 'facticity', and it makes up what is already 'given' in our lives. However,

existentialists regard facticity as only one aspect of human existence, for they hold that humans always have the ability to surpass or transcend their given situation by taking a stand on their own lives. As 'transcendence' we are always taking over our situations and making something of them through our choices. This ability to transcend our facticity means that we have free will. Our choices are free in the sense that (1) no outside factors can fundamentally determine our will, (2) in any particular case we could have acted otherwise than we did, and (3) we are therefore responsible for our choices in a way that justifies moral praise and blame (see [Free will](#)). (Nietzsche is inclined to reject the third sense because of its presupposition of irreducibly moral terms, but in other respects he seems to be committed to believing in human freedom.)

The existentialist belief in human freedom is based on a phenomenological description of our everyday lives. In confronting situations where I must make a choice, I find myself facing an open range of possible courses of action where nothing compels me to choose one course of action over the others. Even in cases where I am not aware of making choices, a moment's reflection shows that I am in fact deciding my own life. Suppose that I show up for work faithfully each day, and I believe that I am compelled to do this because I need to make money to support my family. Does this mean that I am forced to do what I do? An existentialist like Sartre would say that it is self-deception to think I am *compelled* to be a conscientious worker, for I *could* always walk away from it all and join a monastery or turn to a life of crime. If I am choosing to let considerations of duty or money be deciding factors for me in this way, then this is my choice. What this suggests is that even in my habitual and seemingly 'automatic' actions I am actually *assuming* a particular identity for myself through my own free choices, and am therefore responsible for what I do.

Sartre tries to capture this idea by saying that humans are 'condemned to be free'. Because our being is 'in question' for us, we are always taking it over and giving it some concrete shape through our actions. And this means that, whether we are aware of it or not, in continuing to act in familiar ways we are constantly renewing our decisions at every moment, for we could always change our ways of living through some radical self-transformation. Moreover, since all criteria or standards for evaluating our actions are also freely chosen, in our actions we are also deciding what sorts of reasons are going to guide our actions. With no higher tribunal for evaluating reasons for acting, we are entirely responsible for what we do: as Sartre says, there are 'no values or commands to turn to which legitimize our conduct... We are alone with no excuses' ([1946/2001, 296](#)).

Existentialists generally hold that we are not only responsible for the direction our own lives take, but also for the way the world around us appears. This idea has its roots in Kant's view that the reality we experience is partly shaped by the constituting activity of our own minds, though existentialists differ from Kant in holding that our construction of reality depends on our own choices (see [Kant, I, §5](#)). Kierkegaard, for example, contends that one's sense of reality is determined by the 'sphere of existence' in which one lives, so that the person who lives the life of a pleasure-loving aesthete will experience a world that is quite different from that of the duty-bound follower of the ethical. Similarly, Nietzsche holds that reality is accessible to us only through some 'perspective' or other, that there is no way to get in touch with reality as it is in itself, independent of any point of view or framework of interpretation.

Sartre works out an especially strong version of this Kantian outlook by developing the theory of constitution in Husserl's phenomenology. Husserl held that the world we experience is constituted through the meaning-giving activity of consciousness. Sartre takes this account of constitution to mean that, because I shape the world around me through my meaning-giving activity, I am ultimately responsible for the way the world presents itself to me in my experience. Thus if I have had some painful experiences as a child, it is up to me to decide what these mean to me. I can use them as an excuse for going through life feeling cheated, or regard them as challenges that will make me stronger. Sartre's point

is not that there are no constraints on the ways I interpret my situation, but that constraints and obstacles gain their meaning from me, and since there are an indefinite number of possible meanings any situation can have, there is no way to identify any supposedly hard facts that could be said to compel me to see things one way rather than another. But this means, according to Sartre, that in choosing my interpretation of myself, I simultaneously choose the world. It is our own freely chosen projects that determine how reality is to be carved up and how things are to count. Sartre even goes so far as to say that, if a war breaks out around me, then I am responsible for that war, because it is up to me to decide what the war is going to mean to me in my life.

Other existentialists have tried to formulate a more tempered conception of freedom. Kierkegaard argues that, because being human involves both necessity and possibility, the extreme sort of 'anything-goes' freedom (such as that later envisaged by Sartre) would lead to the despair of lack of necessity. Both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty work towards a notion of situated freedom according to which choice is always embedded in and dependent upon the meaningful choices disclosed by a specific social and historical situation. Beauvoir tries to show how institutions and social practices can cut off the choices open to women and oppressed groups. Finally, Nietzsche calls attention to the way biological and historical factors operate behind our backs, influencing our decisions without our awareness. But even when such limitations are recognized, the belief that we can rise above our situations to be creators remains fundamental to existentialist thought.

5. Everyday existence, anxiety and guilt

Though existentialists agree that people are free to choose their own fates, they also hold that most people are quite unaware of their freedom. This obliviousness results not from ignorance or oversight, but from the fact that we usually try to avoid facing up to our responsibility for our lives. For the most part we are 'fleeing' from ourselves, throwing ourselves into mundane concerns and drifting into standardized public ways of acting. Existentialists are generally quite critical of everyday social existence. As they see it, there is a strong temptation to let ourselves get swallowed up by the 'public' (Kierkegaard), the 'they' (Heidegger), the 'herd' (Nietzsche) or the 'masses' (Ortega y Gasset). We try to do what 'one does' in familiar situations, and we assume that our lives are justified so long as we are following the norms and conventions laid out in our social context. In throwing ourselves into the kinds of workaday busy-ness characteristic of contemporary society, we become more and more effective at finding means to achieving socially accepted ends, but at the same time we lose the ability to understand what is at stake in existing. Life then becomes a disjointed series of episodes with no real coherence or direction, and we end up dispersed and distracted, lacking any basis for meaningful action.

Existentialists give similar accounts of how social existence undermines our ability to realize ourselves as individuals. Kierkegaard describes the way that being a well-adjusted member of 'the public' levels everything down to the lowest common denominator, with the result that qualitative distinctions between things are flattened and nothing can really *count* or *matter* to people anymore. Similarly, Nietzsche describes the way that our being as 'herd' animals domesticates us and deadens our creativity, and Heidegger points out the 'tranquilization' and 'alienation from ourselves' that results from our absorption in the familiar social world. Sartre presents an especially harsh picture of social relations. Since, in his view, people can only see each other as things or objects and not as free beings, the Look of the Other always objectifies me and pressures me into thinking I am just a brute thing. As each individual struggles to affirm their being as a free 'transcendence' against the objectifying look of others, the result is inevitable conflict: in the words of a character in Sartre's play, *Huis clos* (*No Exit*) 'Hell is other people'.

But many existentialists also see a positive side to social life. Though Heidegger criticizes the temptation to self-loss in our participation in the 'they', he also holds that all our possible ways of interpreting

ourselves ultimately come from the social context in which we find ourselves. For this reason, becoming authentic is not a matter of escaping society, but of embracing our social existence in the right way. Marcel's attitude toward social existence shows how different he is from Sartre. He criticizes the 'technocratic attitude' of mass society not because it leads to conformism, but because it breeds an 'atomic individualism' that robs us of our deep sense of connection and obligation to others. And Jaspers and [Buber](#) both emphasize the importance of 'I-Thou' relations in realizing a full and meaningful life.

Although existentialists differ in their assessment of social existence, they agree in thinking that our ordinary, day-to-day existence is shot through with concealment and self-deception. What can free us from this distorted sense of things is not rational reflection, but a profound affective experience. This emphasis on the role of emotions or moods in giving us access to the truth about ourselves is one of the most distinctive features of existentialist thought. Kierkegaard and Heidegger, for example, focus on the disclosive role of anxiety in leading us to confront the fact that we exist as finite beings who must decide the content of our own lives. Jaspers' concept of 'limit-situations' refers to situations in which our ordinary ways of handling our lives 'founder' as we encounter certain inescapable 'antinomies' of life. For Sartre, the feeling of 'nausea' shows us that it is up to us to impart a meaning to things, and 'anguish' reveals our 'terrible freedom' to decide our own fates. And Marcel refers to the experience of 'mystery' in which we encounter that which defies our ability to gain intellectual mastery through our problem-solving skills.

Some existentialists also talk about an experience of the absurd that can come over us in our rationalistic age. Sartre claims that there are no ultimate grounds that validate our choices, so that any fundamental project we adopt must be absurd in the sense that it is ultimately unjustified. Camus' conception of the absurd is perhaps the best known of all, though it is not really representative of existentialist thought. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942a), he describes the feeling of futility we can experience when we become aware of the repetitiveness and pointlessness of our everyday routines and rituals. For Camus, this feeling of the absurdity of existence, a feeling in which suicide begins to seem like a real possibility, is the most fundamental experience philosophy must confront.

Finally, many existentialists point to the experience of guilt as providing an insight into our own being. Existential guilt refers to something broader than the feeling we sometimes have when we have done something wrong. In its broadest significance, existential guilt refers to the fact that there is no pre-given legitimation or justification for our existence. Though we are creatures who feel the need for some 'reason for existing', we find ourselves thrown into a world where there is no higher court of appeals that could validate our lives. We are ultimately answerable only to ourselves. In a somewhat narrower sense, existential guilt can refer to the fact that, because we are always engaged in acting in concrete situations, we are implicated in whatever happens in the world, and so we always have what Sartre calls 'dirty hands'.

6. Authenticity

Experiences like anxiety and existential guilt are important, according to existentialists, because they reveal basic truths about our own condition as humans. Everyday life is characterized by 'inauthenticity', and in our ordinary busy-ness and social conformism we are refusing to take responsibility for our own lives. In throwing ourselves into socially approved activities and roles, we disown ourselves and spin a web of self-deception in trying to avoid facing up to the truth about what we are. This picture of inauthentic existence is contrasted with a vision of a way of living that does not slide into self-loss and self-deception. Such a life is (using the term found in Heidegger and Sartre) 'authentic'. Authenticity suggests the idea of being true to yourself - of owning up to who you really are. However, it is important to see that authenticity has nothing to do with the romantic ideal of getting in touch with an 'inner self'

that contains one's true nature, for existentialists hold that we have no pre-given 'nature' or 'essence' distinct from what we do in the world.

If authenticity is not a matter of being true to some core of traits definitive of the 'real me', what is it? For most existentialists, becoming authentic is first of all a matter of lucidly grasping the seriousness of your own existence as an individual - the raw fact of the 'I exist' - and facing up to the task of making something of your own life. Kierkegaard, for example, holds that the only way to succeed in becoming a 'self' (understood as an 'existing individual') is by living in such a way that you have 'infinite passion' in your life. This kind of intensity is possible, he thinks, only through a 'leap', a total, life-defining commitment to something that gives your life enduring sense of meaning and significance. Nietzsche is also concerned with getting us to take hold of our own lives in a more intense and clear-sighted way. To free people from the attempt to find some overarching meaning for their lives, he proposes the idea of eternal recurrence: the idea that everything that happens in your life has happened before in exactly the same way, and will happen again and again, an endless number of times. If we accept this, Nietzsche suggests, we will be able to embrace our lives as they are, on their own terms, without regrets or dreams about how things could be different. Heidegger suggests that, in the experience of anxiety, one confronts one's own 'naked' existence as 'individualized, pure and thrown'. As we become aware of our 'being-towards-death' in this experience, we will grasp the weightiness of our own finite lives, and we will then be able to seize on our own existence with integrity, steadiness and self-constancy (see [Integrity § 5](#)).

Many existentialists agree that owning up to one's own existence requires a defining commitment that gives one's life a focus and sense of direction. For Kierkegaard, a religious thinker, self-fulfilment is possible only for the 'knight of faith', the person who has a world-defining relation to a particular being which has infinite importance (the eternal being who has existed in time, the God-man). For Heidegger, authenticity requires 'resoluteness', a commitment to some specific range of possibilities opened up by one's historical 'heritage'. The fact that the ideal of commitment or engagement appears in such widely different existentialist works raises a question about the distinction, first made by Sartre, between 'religious' and 'atheist' existentialists. Kierkegaard, Marcel and Jaspers are often grouped together as religious existentialists, yet there are profound differences in their views of the nature of religious commitment. Where Kierkegaard emphasizes the importance of relating oneself to a concrete particular, Marcel and Jaspers speak of a relation to the 'mystery' or to 'transcendence' (respectively). At the same time, so-called 'atheist' existentialists like Heidegger and Sartre tend to agree with Kierkegaard's view that being 'engaged' or having a 'fundamental project' is necessary to achieving a focused, intense, coherent life. The distinction between atheist and religious existentialists becomes harder to maintain when we realize that what is important for religious thinkers is not so much the factual properties of the object of commitment as the inner condition of faith of the committed individual. Thus, Kierkegaard says that what is crucial to faith is not the 'objective truth' about what one believes, but rather the intensity and passion of one's commitment (the 'subjective truth'). In making a commitment, then, 'it is not so much a question of choosing the right way as the energy, the earnestness, [and] the pathos with which one chooses' ([Kierkegaard 1943b/1987b](#), 167).

The idea that intensity and commitment are central to being authentic is shared by all types of existentialists. Another characteristic attributed to an authentic life by most existentialists is a lucid awareness of one's own responsibility for one's choices in shaping one's life. For Sartre, authenticity involves the awareness that, because we are always free to transform our lives through our moment to moment decisions, if we maintain a particular identity through time, this is because we are choosing that identity at each moment. Similarly, Kierkegaard and Heidegger talk about the need to sustain our identity at each moment through a 'repetition' of our choice of who we are because there is always a 'temptation' to slip back into the conformist routines of the 'they'. In recognizing our freedom to determine our own lives, we also come to accept our responsibility for who we are.

The notion of authenticity is supposed to give us a picture of the most fulfilling life possible for us after the 'death of God'. It calls on us to assume our own identities by embracing our lives and making something of them in our own way. It presupposes lucidity, honesty, courage, intensity, openness to the realities of one's situation and a firm awareness of one's own responsibility for one's life. But it would be wrong to think of authenticity as an *ethical* ideal as this is normally interpreted. First, becoming authentic does not imply that one adopts any particular moral code or follows any particular path: an authentic individual might be a liberal or a conservative, a duty-bound citizen or a wild-eyed revolutionary. In this respect, authenticity pertains not to *what* specific kinds of things you do, but *how* you live - it is a matter of the style of your life rather than of its concrete content. Second, in formulating their different conceptions of authenticity, many existentialists describe the ideal of authenticity in terms that suggest that it can be opposed to ethics as ordinarily understood. Kierkegaard, for example, says that it is possible that the knight of faith might have to 'transcend the ethical', and Nietzsche holds that authentic individuals will live 'beyond good and evil'. Thus, authenticity seems to have more to do with what is called the 'art of self-cultivation' than it does with ethics as traditionally understood.

7. Criticisms

Existentialism has been criticized from a number of different angles. One line of criticism holds that the emphasis on individual freedom and the rejection of absolutes in existentialism tends to undermine ethics; by suggesting that everyday life is 'absurd' and by denying the existence of fixed, binding principles for evaluating our actions, existentialists promote an 'anything-goes' view of freedom that exacerbates the nihilism already present in contemporary life. Camus' novel *The Stranger* (1942b), for example, has come under attack for glorifying immoral 'gratuitous acts' as a way of affirming one's own absolute freedom. In reply, supporters of existentialism have noted that the stance portrayed in the work is not at all typical of existentialist views, and that existentialism's ideal of freedom and its sense of the need for human solidarity after the 'death of God', far from undermining ethics, might provide a very good basis for a moral point of view in the modern world (see [Existentialist ethics](#)).

Other critics have tried to show that the basic picture of reality presupposed by existentialism necessarily leads to nihilism. Hans Jonas (1966) argues that existentialism, despite its avowed goal of overcoming Cartesianism, tends to introduce a new kind of dualism with its sharp distinction between humans (who are thought of as absolutely free centres of choice and action), and an inert, meaningless 'being' that is on hand for humans to interpret and transform as they please. Not only does this extreme opposition exclude animals from the realm of beings with intrinsic worth, its view of humans as thrown into an indifferent universe seems to give us freedom only at the cost of making nothing really worthy of choice.

This line of criticism is closely connected to the claim, formulated by various postmodern theorists, that existentialism is still trapped within the assumptions of Humanism, a view now supposed to have been discredited. Humanism in this context means the view, central to modern philosophers from Descartes to Kant, that the human subject is immediately present to itself as a centre of thought and action, and that the rest of the universe should be thought of as a collection of things on hand to be represented and manipulated by the subject. Postmodern theorists claim that a number of intellectual developments in the last two centuries have made it impossible to accept this picture of the centrality of the subject. The semiotic theories of [Saussure](#), for example, have shown how language tends to work behind our backs, controlling our capacities for thought and speech, and Freudian theory has shown how unconscious drives and desires lie behind many of our conscious thoughts and actions. Given these developments, it is claimed, we can no longer accept the idea that humans are capable of the sorts of self-transparency and self-determination that seem to be presupposed by existentialists like Sartre (see [Postmodernism](#)).

In reply to this objection, one might point out that most existentialists have been very critical of the Cartesian belief in the transparency of consciousness to itself. Such themes as being-in-a-situation, 'thrownness', embodiment and mystery show the extent to which many existentialists think of humans as embedded in a wider context they can never totally master or comprehend. Moreover, the existentialist description of humans as temporal beings whose 'present' is always mediated by what is projected into the future and retained from the past undermines any Cartesian conception of the immediate presence of self to self in self-awareness. Finally, as Sonia Kruks (1990) argues, postmodern theorists seem to have run up against a wall in their attempts to 'de-centre the subject'. Having identified the pervasive background structures that influence the thoughts and actions of subjects, these theorists now find it difficult to give an account of the kind of critical thinking they see as central to the postmodern stance. In Kruks' view, existentialists have much to offer postmodern theory in formulating the conception of a 'situated subjectivity' that will fill this gap.

It is not clear what the future holds in store for existentialism understood as a philosophical movement. Many of the ideas that sounded so exciting in Paris in the 1940s now seem terribly old-fashioned. Many of the more viable themes in existentialism have been absorbed into new philosophical movements, especially into hermeneutics with its emphasis on humans as self-interpreting beings (see [Hermeneutics](#)). While some existentialist writers have faded from the scene, others have become more and more influential (though not always *as* existentialists). Nonetheless, there has been an explosion of interest in Heidegger and Nietzsche recently, and the works of Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and Beauvoir are widely discussed. Indeed, it could be argued that existentialism is experiencing something of a renaissance in some of the most important debates in contemporary philosophy and social theory.

8. Contemporary relevance

Although it was initially ghettoized in mainstream Anglophone philosophy, there is a renewed interest in applying existentialist thought in a number of core areas. In cognitive science, for instance, English-speaking philosophers are increasingly turning to figures like Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty to challenge the long-standing assumption that human behaviour must always be mirrored in or mediated by the cognizing mind. Beginning with the pioneering work of Hubert Dreyfus and Richard [Rorty](#) in the 1970s, these philosophers suggest that in our everyday lives, we are already embedded in a world and engaged in skillful acts and practices in ways that we are never explicitly conscious of and that are not accompanied by mental representations. The upshot is that in our everyday lives, we are not necessarily thinking about what we are doing because—as a way of being-in-the-world—we already embody a tacit understanding of the situation we've been thrown into. This existentialist critique has forced researchers in cognitive science and philosophy of mind to reevaluate the dominant mentalistic picture of human agency.

Regarding human existence as an interpretive activity or event rather than an objectively present substance has also influenced a generation of Anglo-American philosophers in developing a narrative conception of the self. Important works by Charles [Taylor](#), Alasdair [MacIntyre](#), and Bernard [Williams](#) have all drawn on existentialism to illuminate the ways in which humans are, in Taylor's words, 'self-interpreting animals' to the extent that we 'make' or 'create' our own identities by constructing narratives or stories about who we are and what is at stake in our lives. On this view, it is a mistake to reduce the self to a substance that is either mental (as a 'thinking thing' or *ego cogito*) or physical (as the byproduct of neurophysiological brain states) because we exist and understand who we are only in the interpretations and stories we choose to create for ourselves. The process of self-making, on this view, is always 'dialogical' insofar as it occurs in conversation with the cultural values and resources that are already opened up to us and that we draw on to compose our life-story.

Existentialism is also continuing to make inroads in contemporary social and political theory by focusing on 'the human' not as a universal genus or category but as a concrete 'existing individual' that is always subject to the social and political forces unique to one's own situation. This attention paid to one's lived-situation has allowed philosophers to give an experiential account of those who have been marginalized or oppressed by the dominant cultural discourse. Beauvoir, for example, shows how a woman born into a patriarchal world is 'shaped in a mould by her situation' (1949/1952, 664), and this informs the woman's narrow, passive, and objectifying self-interpretation. And Fanon draws on the work of Sartre, Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty to explore this aspect of situated oppression from the perspective of race in the context of European colonialism. This has paved the way for an explosion of existentialism-informed research in a wide range of areas, from feminist philosophy and critical race theory, to disability and post-colonial studies (see [African feminism](#); [Feminism §§5-6](#); [Postcolonialism](#); [Race, theories of](#)).

The understanding that human existence is structured by the anguish and despair of our own finitude has also brought existentialism into recent conversation with the Eastern philosophical tradition, especially Buddhism. Notable comparative scholars such as David Loy and Stephen Batchelor, for instance, have explored the ways in which the Buddhist notion of suffering (or *dukkha*) as a manifestation of our clinging to worldly attachments and the illusory permanence of the self reflects, in important ways, the existentialist notions of inauthenticity and self-deception (see [Suffering, Buddhist views of the origination of](#)). Part of what it means to be authentic in both the existentialist and Buddhist traditions involves owning up to our own structural impermanence which can, in turn, free us from our ordinary tendency to cling to thing-like attachments and open us up to the possibility of being in the present in a more focused, steady, and committed way (see [Mujō](#)).

Existentialism's affinity to Buddhism is also evident in the non-dualistic conception of the self advanced by figures such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, and this has influenced new ways of thinking about our relationship to the natural world and has had a significant impact on recent developments in deep ecology and environmental philosophy (see [Ecological philosophy](#)). By rejecting the traditional view of the human being as a cognizing subject that is separate and distinct from worldly objects, existentialism illuminates the extent to which we are already bound up in a world that has affective meaning for us, a meaning rooted in our own situated and embodied perspective. Heidegger's work has been decisive in this regard as he radically alters our standard philosophical orientation toward the world, one that is based not on detached 'knowledge' of the world but on the ways in which we enact a sense of 'care' and 'concern' for it. As environmental philosopher Neil Evernden suggests, Heidegger's recognition of our affective enmeshment in the world transforms the Cartesian adage from 'I think, therefore I am' to 'I care, therefore I am' (1985, 70).

Finally, existentialism is having a significant impact on approaches to medicine and interpretations of health and illness. Although its influence on psychiatry and psychotherapy is well known, recently health care professionals have been drawing on existentialism to critique the medical standpoint of scientific detachment which views the patient as an object of investigation, focusing instead on the lived or experiential aspects of illness, on 'what it means' and 'what it feels like' to be ill. This shift in orientation hinges largely on the way existentialists like Sartre, Beauvoir, Marcel, and Merleau-Ponty have reinterpreted the body, not as a physical object with measurable functions but as a living-body. For these philosophers, the lived-body is the experiential and mediating activity on the basis of which we affectively grasp the world and understand ourselves. Healing, on this view, does not just involve treating the physiological body; it also involves helping the patient interpret and give meaning to the experience of bodily breakdown that they are living through. By focusing on the experiential 'to be' of illness rather than the objective metrics of the disease, existentialism is increasingly finding its way into cutting edge medical research in diverse areas such as narrative medicine, nursing, bioethics, gerontology, and palliative care.

From the preceding discussion it is clear that existentialism should not be viewed as a moribund or outdated movement but one that continues to play a vital and evolving role in contemporary philosophy and social theory in both European and Anglo-American traditions. Whether or not existentialism as such will continue to thrive, it seems that there will always be a place for the style of critique of society and the concern with the concrete realities of life that are central to existentialist thought. As a reactive movement, existentialism challenged the uncritical assumptions of mainstream philosophy as well as the complacency of everyday social existence. In its more positive side, it attempted to counteract the tendency to self-loss in contemporary life by formulating a vision of the kind of coherent, focused way of living that would provide a basis for meaningful action. These certainly seem to be valuable aims, and it is likely that existentialist writers will always have important contributions to make toward realizing them.

See also:

[Beauvoir, Simone de](#);
[Existentialist ethics](#);
[Existentialist theology](#);
[Existentialist thought in Latin America](#);
[Heidegger, Martin](#);
[Hermeneutics](#);
[Kierkegaard, Søren](#);
[Marcel, Gabriel](#);
[Merleau-Ponty, Maurice](#);
[Nietzsche, Friedrich](#);
[Nihilism](#);
[Ortega y Gasset, José](#);
[Phenomenological movement, §4](#);
[Sartre, Jean-Paul](#)

Commented [R5]: At the end of the entry, we have a list of related articles in the encyclopedia (required).

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(Well written and insightful study of existentialist themes and their relevance to psychotherapy.)

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