

INTRODUCTION TO EXISTENTIALISM

PREFACE: A COUPLE OF JOKES

Perhaps a sense of humor is needed to begin with
Existentialism is often considered a depressing philosophy
a philosophy of despair

Woody Allen often includes jokes about this in his movies. Take this exchange, for example, the Woody Allen character encounters a girl contemplating a Jackson Pollock painting in a museum:

WOODY ALLEN: That's quite a lovely Jackson Pollock isn't it?

GIRL IN MUSEUM: Yes it is.

WOODY ALLEN: What does it say to you?

GIRL IN MUSEUM: It restates the negativeness of the universe, the hideous lonely emptiness of existence, nothingness, the predicament of man forced to live in a barren, godless eternity, like a tiny flame flickering in an immense void, with nothing but waste, horror, and degradation, forming a useless bleak straightjacket in a black absurd cosmos,

WOODY ALLEN: What are you doing Saturday night?

GIRL IN MUSEUM: Committing suicide.

WOODY ALLEN: What about Friday night?

GIRL IN MUSEUM: [leaves silently]

“Play It Again Sam”, Paramount Pictures, 1972

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So one general question to start out with, and perhaps a paper topic, is this:
To what extent do you think that this characterization of existentialism as a depressing philosophy justified?

and then secondly:
To what extent is the thought of any of these existentialist philosophers relevant for us today?

perhaps Existentialism is already somewhat dated
it was all the rage in the mid-twentieth century, but perhaps is eclipsed by more recent thinkers

In the section “The Legacy of Existentialism” from our primary text, the editors suggest that some ideas seem now dated. The search for a ‘reason for existing’ now satirized

Perhaps the best secondary text for Existentialism is still William Barrett’s *Irrational Man* this was written in the early 60’s but still valuable in it he reports that by the late 50’s the cult of French Existentialism had already passed, as dead as last year’s fad

—and yet Barrett argues for the relevance of Existentialism, particularly in this nuclear age, and particularly in America. Though some aspects of Barrett’s book are dated, particularly the chapter on modern art, and his characterizations of both Nietzsche and Heidegger, perhaps he was right about Existentialism’s relevance, perhaps it is even especially relevant for America today, now the lone superpower, unilaterally projecting its military might, complacent public, mindless approval of catastrophic direction of the country today. In the first chapter, “The Advent of Existentialism” Barrett relates Kierkegaard’s story about an absent minded man so abstracted from life he hardly knows he exists until one morning he wakes up dead. Perhaps this story has special relevance for us today. By the time America wakes up she may already be dead.

II. DIFFICULTY IN DEFINING EXISTENTIALISM

—only one of the major figures we shall cover, Sartre, accepted the label fully Kierkegaard and Nietzsche wrote in 19th century before the term “Existentialism” had even come up. They certainly were predecessors of existentialism, as well as Dostoevsky, who was certainly not an Existentialist philosopher but whose novels include characters that often display Existentialist attitudes and ideas. Walter Kaufmann regards Part One of *Notes from Underground*, included in our reader, as the best overture for existentialism ever written. Heidegger’s *Being and Time* was considered a masterpiece of Existentialism, but he rejected the label and later distanced himself from Existentialism. Camus eventually broke with Sartre and distanced himself from Existentialism

Existentialism is not really a school of philosophy, but a loose movement of very individualistic philosophers with diverse views on religion and politics. Has reputation as atheistic philosophy but this does not apply to all. Range of political positions

—‘Existentialism’ only a label for roughly characterizing a certain stream of thought within 20th century Continental thought

—refer to handout on “Branches of Continental Philosophy”

III: MAIN THEMES OF EXISTENTIALISM

1. The Crisis of Modernity—the death of God

start with a reading of Nietzsche’s *GS 125*—the death of God

theme that ties existentialists together not atheism

but that, as Barrett says, “each has put religion itself radically into question”

but the theme of the death of God is more than a question of religion

its about a crisis of modernity, existentialism begins with a sense of a crisis that is a consequence of the modern world view

Review: Rise of the Modern Worldview in *The Legacy of Existentialism*

—rise of modern science and the “disenchantment of the world”
the universe now seen as vast aggregate of meaningless brute objects
Galileo undermined Aristotelean separation of terrestrial and celestial spheres
Pascal “The silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me”
the feeling of homelessness
—a change in understanding of human nature: man just another animal
—rise of modern worldview and centralized political state: alienation of individual

but the central fact of modern history is decline of religion
perhaps not just a crisis of modernity
but a crisis in Western culture that goes all the way back to Socrates and Plato
already there in Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* with portrayal of Socrates as murderer of tragedy
existentialism not only a reaction against consequences of modernity
but also a reaction against Platonism, or the history of Western metaphysics
common theme of much 20th century philosophy, critique of essentialism, foundationalism

the ground falling away
man on a rope over an abyss
need for courage! A few quotes from *Zarathustra* on courage
and then a reading of *The meaning of our cheerfulness*
why a cheerfulness?
the question of the overcoming of nihilism, the twisting free of Platonism
Nietzsche’s whole career, perhaps all of Existentialism,
a confrontation with nihilism or the crisis of modernity
central questions of the course:

Is this diagnosis of crisis of modernity accurate? To what extent is this crisis of nihilism, if it is accurate, overcome in any of these thinkers?

2. Individualism

all these characters truly eccentric
Kierkegaard defined himself against reigning doctrines of the age (Hegel)
collective consciousness, bourgeois, mass society
defined himself as “the individual”
put that on his tombstone

Nietzsche great eccentric, wrote and lived in isolation
distanced himself from humanity of his time
dedicates his books to the very few, writes as if he is writing for you, the singular reader
we are different from all of them

notion of individuality takes different forms in different thinkers
Camus, the French-Algerian, in Algeria found himself at odds with both French population
and the Algerians who were fighting for independence
took very independent stand

Sartre takes individuality in different direction
focuses on individual choice
the heart of his philosophy—we are always making choices, responsibility always on the individual and accepting the consequences that flow from it

What are the consequences of this current of radical individualism that runs through Existentialism?

3. Human Existence: Who am I?

Challenging the traditional oppositions of Soul/Body; Rational/Irrational; Reason/Passions
a focus on the individual . . . but what is it that is an individual?
what is the self? just who am I?

the overcoming of nihilism and western metaphysics, the history of Platonism
will be a twisting free of the series of oppositions which structure Platonism
in Existentialism we can perhaps see this twisting free in a new way of thinking about human existence—one in which the traditional oppositions between the soul and body, reason and the passions, will be challenged, overturned, subverted, twisted . . .

go over this structure of Platonism
the self as eternal soul, identified with reason
the body, emotions, passions all the chains that bind the soul to the shadows on the wall
beginning with Kierkegaard's rejection of Hegel, one of the main themes of existentialism
has been a rejection of the notion of man as simply the rational animal
if one of the developments of the rise of the modern worldview
is the recognition of man as an animal, existentialism goes one step further
and no longer recognizes man as the rational animal
hence the title of Barrett's book—*Irrational Man*
one of the consequences in each of these thinkers is an emphasis on the passions
the soul is rooted in the body
the passions are not to be eliminated
wisdom is not found by 'pure reason'

rejection of Descartes' "I think, therefore, I am"
Kierkegaard defines what it means to really exist
special notion of 'existence' that gives rise to the term 'Existentialism'
to really exist is to be passionate
to passionately commit oneself to a way of life—in his case to Christianity
talks about passionate inwardness
passions that one might feel but not show
not the ostentatious passion, the truly passionate is inwardly contained, but defined by passions
often have the idea that passion take us over
intermittent bouts of insanity
but to Existentialists, to live is to live passionately

there was perhaps a precedent to this estimation of the passions
 before Socrates and Plato, in the pre-Socratic Heraclitus, and in the Greek tragedians
 a challenge to Socrates and Plato,
 and subversion of the traditional opposition between reason and the passions
 precisely the controversial thesis of Nietzsche's first book *The Birth of Tragedy*
 perhaps the twisting free of Platonism begins here
 the relation between the soul and body, reason and the passions
 one of the main themes of his work, his focus on psychology, the unconscious
 Nietzsche's criticism of Platonic privileging of detached rationality over instinctual drives
 opened up whole field of depth psychology, Freud, Jung. . .
 Nietzsche a very passionate philosopher
 in person apparently quiet and courteous, but in his writings . . . a volcano . . . dynamite

in Heidegger and Sartre we also find this inversion of the Platonic hierarchy
 and positive estimation of the passions
 what we find in all these thinkers is an emphasis that the self is not an unchanging essence
 but a process, a project, a product of a continuous artistic activity
 reason and the passions are not opposite ends of a hierarchical structure
 but are both essential components of a human being and in an essential tension
 Hegel pictured human existence as a tension between two aspects of the self
 Hegel tried to resolve the tension in the dialectic
 existentialism perhaps begins in a rejection of this dialectic, and this resolution
 and a recognition of the tension as essential
 the most one can hope is to live in the tension with maximum lucidity

in each of these thinkers we will have to examine this new conception of the self
 what is this new way of thinking about human existence?
 what are the consequences of this way of thinking about human existence?
 what consequences for the crisis of modernity?
 is it an overcoming of the crisis or only a further deepening of it?
 is it a simple overturning of the opposition of reason and the passions,
 or a more subtle subversion, or perhaps twisting free of it?

What is it to be human? Who am I?

Am I a soul or a body, or some combination of the two?

What is the relationship between soul and body and between reason and the passions?

4. Being-in-the-world, Perspectivism

another aspect of this new way of thinking about human existence
 this has to do not with the internal relation between reason and the passions, soul and body
 but our relationship with the world
 and the consequences this has for epistemology,
 for our knowledge of the world

return again to the myth of the cave

in a sense Existentialism's rejection of Platonism
is a rejection of Plato's exhortation to make the steep ascent and climb out of the cave
ever since Plato philosophers have dreamed of getting out of the cave
finding an external vantage point beyond the cares and concerns of life
a view of reality from the standpoint of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*)

existentialists reject such God's eye perspective
in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* the cave will be a metaphor not for ignorance but wisdom
we are always caught up in the middle of things
we must always start out with an "insider's perspective"
Nietzsche's perspectivism
from a description of the world *as it appears to us*
emotions, bodily orientation, perceptual functions...
no choice but to begin from an account of the thick and complex weave of our actual lives
as experienced prior to abstraction and theorizing [phenomenology]
we can never get beyond this insider's perspective
there is no "God's-eye-view" of the world, no "view from nowhere"

this view is central to all existentialists
in Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel
in Nietzsche's invocation of a philosophy of the future
when philosophers recognize themselves as artists
living in the shining of the world of appearance
(go to end of Preface of *The Gay Science*)
in Heidegger and Sartre's insistence on the importance of starting from
a careful "phenomenology" of ordinary existence

existentialists think that our existence as minds or fields of consciousness
is derivative and parasitic on a more fundamental way of being
it is definitely not just because I am thinking that I am
we are instead full participants in the stream of life
self-aware consciousness turns out to be a side-effect
consciousness is an achievement, not a given
for Heidegger what is "given" is not a mind distinct from a world of everyday objects
but "the unified phenomenon of *being-in-the-world*"
the purely reflective stance is derivative on a way of being practically involved with things
priority of practical over theoretical

epistemological consequences:

the picture of reality we arrive at through detached, objective theorizing is not necessarily a
"truer" or more accurate view
the disengaged, dispassionate "spectator attitude" actually distorts
conceals the richness and complexity of life in the world
Nietzsche considers the possibility of science as the "most stupid" interpretation of the world

the problem with science is not that it is false
but that its objectifying approach forces things into a framework that
blots out many of the most important things in the world as we actually encounter them

the existentialist position of being-in-the-world undermines traditional dualisms
by showing that our very being as selves is always inextricably tied up with a practical life-world
the assumption that we are really “minds” or fields of consciousness distinct from an “external”
world of material objects is undermined
separation of reality into distinct spheres of mind and matter
begins to seem like an unwarranted prejudice of the philosophical tradition

undermines also the subject/object model as a way of characterizing our relation to the world
the idea that we never have access to the world
except through the mediation of “sense-data” or representation thus dissolves
the mind/body problem dissolves as well

in Nietzsche’s perspectivism the notion of truth becomes problematic
the notion of objective truth is a myth
there are only perspective truths

Contingency

another aspect of our being-in-the-world is contingency
the idea that our lives are happenstance, they could be very different

what if I lived in Middle Ages what would my life be like?
Philosophers: if you lived in Middle Ages you wouldn’t be you
because you would be so different, your very physical being would be different

what if, driving down the street, a close call
if I had arrived just a few seconds later . . . ?

what if I had been born five minutes earlier, would I still be the same person?
or would the contingencies of the universe be such that I would be quite a different person?

Heidegger has dramatic notion of “*thrownness*” for the contingency of our being-in-the-world
we don’t choose the century we are born, don’t choose our parents, our language we first learn to
speak, our early friends—much of our life, especially early life, is not something one chooses but
something one is thrown into

what is it to exist in this world?

What is our relationship to the world?

What is the relationship between the human and natural world?

What is knowledge? What is truth?

5. Freedom

the most famous theme of Existentialism, and certainly for Kierkegaard and Sartre the most central, is the notion of freedom

what freedom means is highly debated
there is freedom in the political sphere—freedom from restraint
and freedom in a metaphysical sense—the so called ‘free-will’ problem
neither of these are the kind of freedom that existentialists are primarily concerned with

Sartre comes out as vigorous defender of political freedom
but this notion is parasitic on more basic sense of freedom that lies at heart of his philosophy
as for metaphysical freedom—the idea that there is free-will in the nature of things
this question is addressed by none of these philosophers directly—except in the negative
Nietzsche attacks this notion of free-will of a subject detached from causal nature of universe
is really just a kind of illusion

the kind of freedom they do talk about is the sense of personal freedom—neither political nor metaphysical
but has very much to do with how we think of ourselves
how we behave, how we think about our behavior

Kierkegaard’s aphorism:

“People hardly make use of the freedoms that they do have, like the freedom of thought; instead they demand freedom of speech as compensation”

this sense of freedom comes from taking on the responsibility which comes with the recognition that we are the artists of our lives
we recognize that we are responsible for the way the world around us appears to us
though we are thrown into a world not of our making
we do have a choice, and thus a freedom in determining just what stand we are going to take in the world we are thrown into

this sense of freedom is an inescapable component of human existence
nothing compels us to one course of action over another
instead we are forced to choose
as Sartre says everywhere one turns one encounters one’s freedom
in his famous phrase one is “condemned to be free”

this notion of freedom underlies Sartre’s famous phrase “existence precedes essence”
this is where the label “Existentialism” derives from
traditionally there is the idea that essence comes first, then existence
but Sartre’s phrase means that there is no fixed essential nature of human being which would determine in advance how humans are supposed to be
for existentialists, on the contrary, we exist first as beings-in-the-world and have the responsibility to determine our essence
our essence is determined by the choices we make

our freedom is not just limited to the creation of our own lives
we are also responsible for the way the world around us appears to us
in this sense existentialism involves a radicalization of Kant's "Copernican Revolution"
in which the mind is no longer just a passive mirror that reflects accurately (if appropriately
polished) the way the world is "in itself"
but is instead active,
thus imposing order on our experience
this does not mean that "thinking can make it so"
that reality can be anything we want it to be
it does mean that the way reality show up for us is always endowed with a meaning
through the stands that we take

Kant assumed there was a universal structure to the human mind
thus, even though it is the human mind that orders experience
there is still the possibility of objective, universal knowledge

Existentialists develop this notion of the human mind as active, artistic
but do not assume that there is any universal structure to the human mind
thus the world shows up for us differently

I never apprehend facts as they are in themselves, but only facts as I choose to interpret them
this means that I freely choose the *meaning* of all reality
including the meaning of the social world that I draw on for my interpretations of things

thus freedom is a tremendous burden—we are condemned to be free
we are thus responsible for fashioning our own essence
and for determining the meaning of existence for ourselves
this tremendous responsibility leads to an experience of anguish

not all existentialists put as much emphasis on the individual's freedom to choose the meaning of
reality as Sartre does
there is disagreement among the existentialists about the nature and extent of freedom
Kierkegaard would find the sort of freedom envisioned by Sartre to lead to a form of despair
but all existentialists tend to agree that reality is accessible to us only as interpreted

*What is "freedom" for these philosophers and what are the consequences of their conception of
freedom?*

6. Authenticity

this sense of freedom is connected with the notion of *authenticity*
most of the time people fail to see that they are self-creating beings
there is only a going along with the crowd, doing what "one" does
generally avoid facing up to their own responsibility for their lives
existentialists characterize this conformity in different ways

Kierkegaard is critical of “so called existence” where one is simply going along with the crowd, doing what one is supposed to do, being a ‘good person’
Kierkegaard talks about the “public” and its way of leveling all differences
everything exceptional is reduced to something commonplace
all meaningful distinctions in life are obliterated
thus difficult to find anything that has any real meaning to our lives
life a dreary string of episodes with no overarching direction

Kierkegaard did not glorify the life of the anti-social rebel however
on the contrary, he has deep respect for “the ethical”
where everyone is doing their duty within a cohesive state
it is this contrast between the call to be an individual and one’s duty
that the very idea of being an authentic human being fills Kierkegaard with “fear and trembling”

harshest indictment of social conformity found in Nietzsche
our existence as social animals tends to domesticate us
“herd animals,” nothing more than mindless conformists
we thus lose our capacity for creativity and originality
for Nietzsche to be truly existing has to do with taking hold of one’s own life
realizing what your particular talents and virtues are
understanding that what one’s life is about is manifesting those virtues and talents
passionately throwing oneself into what one does
“becoming who one is”—a phrase taken from early Greeks

Heidegger and Sartre carry forward the existentialist critique of everyday social existence
Sartre ridicules pompous spirit of bourgeoisie
sharply critical of the effect of being brought within a “We”
Heidegger criticizes “alienation from one’s own self”
in “average everydayness” we tend to be interchangeable bits in the public mosaic
for much of our lives we are just sets of anonymous roles
even in rebelling against social norms there is conformity (just to a different set of norms)
we exist as the “anyone” or the “they” —*das Man*
for Heidegger this conformity is inevitable, being *das Man* is a “*primordial phenomenon*”

authentic existence requires taking hold of one’s freedom
in much of the history of western philosophy, to be free is to act rationally
acting according to reason makes us free, acting according to passions makes us a slave
of course, the Existentialist propose different kind of thesis
the Existentialists contend we should think of our lives in terms of passion
through passionate commitment we give our lives the meaning it has
and thus in a sense it is through passion that we are free

according to existentialists, what can free us, and thus lead to authentic existence, is not rational reflection or cognition but rather a life-transforming insight resulting from a profound emotion or affective experience

Kierkegaard's "despair" accompanying our self-loss in the humdrum, mundane existence
experience of "dread" or "anxiety" that can wrench us away from our mindless drifting
Heidegger also speaks of "anxiety" as a mood or form of "attunement"
in anxiety we are "delivered over to ourselves"
and realize that we are ultimately responsible for giving our lives a meaning
Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence" supposed to lead to shattering confrontation with nihilism
Sartre speaks of feeling of "nausea" through which being as such is revealed to us
for each of these thinkers the deepest grasp of our condition in the world
occurs not as an act of cognitive reflection but as a result of a noncognitive affect

such intense emotional experiences lead to a transformed way of being
Nietzsche describes a new stance of "playfulness"
Heidegger talks about "sober joy" of authentic existence
by facing up to one's being-toward-death
Sartre clearly believes it is possible to take over one's freedom
a kind of commitment that gives one's life a "fundamental project"
Kierkegaard is unique among these four in holding that one cannot become an "existing
individual" through one's own will
the highest realization of one's existence found in becoming a "knight of faith"

there is no necessary ethical or political implication in the existentialist conception of authentic
existence and this leads many to question the concept of authenticity
existentialism does not rule out any particular moral or political position
this seems to suggest that an authentic individual could turn out to be monstrous in some way

Heidegger, for example, turns out to have been a Nazi
did he fall short of his own conception of authentic existence
or is there something flawed about his conception of authentic existence?

*What is authentic existence for these philosophers and what are the consequences of their
conception of authentic existence?*