

Existentialism

Background

History

Existentialism is a philosophy that began to emerge in the early eighteenth centuries. It is difficult to define or categorize because it has no single organized expression. It is actually a philosophical stance that emerged out of the attempt to find meaning in life without acknowledging the existence of God.

While there is no single existentialist position, there are certain themes that define the philosophy. The writings of existentialists tend to focus on the topics of existence, change, freedom and self-awareness. The primary doctrine that ties them all together is that everything is subjective, and that “being” is prior to “doing.”

Existentialism is rooted in a naturalistic worldview and is, therefore, atheistic. Interestingly, however, there is a secular version and a religious version. But even the religious variation is atheistic. Basically it just uses religious vocabulary and simply redefines the words to convey Existentialist ideas.

Secular Existentialism

Of the variations of Existentialism, the secular variety is the largest. It has no religious orientation in any sense. This group includes such people as Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers and Jean-Paul Sartre. Its major themes include the following.

Being - Being is identified as: 1) concern, 2) existence and 3) moods. The human being's essence lies in his existence. An individual is free to choose different kinds of “being” for himself.

Angst - Angst refers to anxiety, dread, hopelessness and fear of the future. It is the dread that comes from an individual's realization that his very existence faces an undetermined future. The emptiness that comes from that sense of hopelessness must be filled by the individual's freely chosen actions.

Death - There is no existence before or after death. The person who recognizes this fact, freely accepts the inevitability of death and seeks nothing beyond this life. At that point he becomes free to choose his own existence and is no longer bound by fear.

Absurdity - Life is absurd. If life is to have any meaning at all, the individual must create that meaning for himself.

Autonomy - God does not exist. An individual must create his own values and way of living and can't blame anyone else for the outcome.

Freedom - There is no outside entity or authority to define man. He must define himself and has absolute freedom to do so.

Existence Before Essence - Man, by his own choices, defines his character, his essence and the person he is becoming. His choices determine his make-up. Man exists, and from that existence he creates his own essence.

Fulfillment - Man makes his own fulfillment. He can create whatever he likes, and in so doing will determine for himself what is fulfilling.

Forlornness - This is a state that people find themselves in when they understand that they are alone and must determine their own being.

Religious Existentialism

The basic understanding of reality for religious existentialists is the same as for their secular counterparts. They are simply willing to use the word “God,” and other Christian vocabulary, in their explanations. But it must be recognized, when reading these authors, that they redefine the religious terminology to convey godless Existential philosophy. As with all existential thought, the idea of subjectivity is central to everything. Two of the key religious words that are redefined to represent Existentialist thought are the words God and grace.

Religious Existentialists consider God to be “the source of one's being,” “the ground of all being,” or “one's ultimate concern.” This is not a personal God, but is the meaning that arises out of the deepest concern (the angst) of a person's life.

Grace is considered to be universal and subjective. It flows back and forth from each individual. It is the subjective experience of acceptance that a person feels during a crisis.

The most prominent names in this camp are Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Rudolph Bultmann, Soren Kierkegaard, and Gabriel Marcel.

Basic Beliefs and Practices

There are six common themes that are generally found in Existentialist writings.

1. *Experience is the basis of understanding* - Existentialist philosophy arises from “existential” experience – that which is based on observable or experimental evidence. This experience is unique to each person.
2. *Existence is the most important thing to try and understand* - While it is the most important thing to understand, it is often quite difficult to grasp what is meant by the word existence. Essentially, it is understood to be that which *consciously* exists. In their definition of the term, man is alone possesses existence.
3. *Existence precedes essence* - A thing must be aware of itself in order to exist in the way that Existentialists speak of it.
4. *Man is pure subjectivity and is not part of a transcendent life process* - There is no transcendent being who gives meaning to man’s existence. Man creates meaning on his own by living life and by personally interpreting his own subjective life experience.
5. *There is an interdependence between man and his world* - An individual is incomplete in and of himself. Man’s nature ties him absolutely to the world and to other people.
6. *Intellectual knowledge is of low value* - All existentialists deny any distinction between subject and object. Because of that, intellectual knowledge is seen to have little value. True knowledge is not achieved by the intellect, but through subjectively experiencing reality.

Essential Beliefs

God

Secular existentialists do not even entertain the concept of God. Religious existentialists say that God is simply the meaning that arises out of the deepest concern of a person’s life. Essentially, there is a total denial of any kind of transcendent existence.

Man

A human being’s essence lies in the fact that he even exists. An individual has many possibilities to define his or her essence, and each person must choose his own being for himself.

Salvation

Salvation is understood to be the subjective experience of acceptance that one feels during a crisis. When a person works through the state of forlornness and angst and accepts the true reality of existence (that life is meaningless), fulfillment comes.

Faith Foundation

1 & 2. What is the most fundamental reality and the nature of material reality? (Ultimate reality)

The only thing that exists is matter which is eternal, evolving and is the result of the eternal operation of natural laws.

3. What is a human being? (Humanity)

Human beings are nothing more than complex biological machines. They are the result of the operation of evolutionary processes over billions of years. A human being’s essence lies in his awareness of his existence. A person is free to choose different kinds of “being” for himself.

4. What happens to a person at death? (Death)

At death the individual life form simply ceases to exist.

5. Why is it possible to know anything at all? (Knowledge)

Knowledge is merely a chance happening because of a high level of evolution in the human animal.

6. How do we know what is right and wrong? (Morality)

There is no such thing as a transcendent reason for any system of morality. Right and wrong are decided by individuals or social groups as they seek to determine what is best for the survival and comfort of society.

7. What is the meaning of human history? (History)

There is no meaning in history. It is, simply, a linear progression of events moving from the past to the future.

Authority

There is no recognized scripture, but there are a number of writers who propose various forms of existentialism.

Evidence for the Authority

Since existentialism is based entirely on the ideas of individual thinkers, there is nothing to give it any validation except for the individuals, themselves, who assert it. There is no external or empirical evidence to back up their claims.

© 2006 by Freddy Davis