

Existentialism

I. INTRODUCTION

Existentialism, philosophical movement or tendency, emphasizing individual existence, freedom, and choice, that influenced many diverse writers in the 19th and 20th centuries.

II MAJOR THEMES

Because of the diversity of positions associated with existentialism, the term is impossible to define precisely. Certain themes common to virtually all existentialist writers can, however, be identified. The term itself suggests one major theme: the stress on concrete individual existence and, consequently, on subjectivity, individual freedom, and choice.

A Moral Individualism

Most philosophers since Plato have held that the highest ethical good is the same for everyone; insofar as one approaches moral perfection, one resembles other morally perfect individuals. The 19th-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who was the first writer to call himself existential, reacted against this tradition by insisting that the highest good for the individual is to find his or her own unique vocation. As he wrote in his journal, "I must find a truth that is true *for me* . . . *the idea for which I can live or die.*" Other existentialist writers have echoed Kierkegaard's belief that one must choose one's own way without the aid of universal, objective standards. Against the traditional view that moral choice involves an objective judgment of right and wrong, existentialists have argued that no objective, rational basis can be found for moral decisions. The 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche further contended that the individual must decide which situations are to count as moral situations.

B Subjectivity

All existentialists have followed Kierkegaard in stressing the importance of passionate individual action in deciding questions of both morality and truth. They have insisted, accordingly, that personal experience and acting on one's own convictions are essential in arriving at the truth. Thus, the understanding of a situation by someone involved in that situation is superior to that of a detached, objective observer. This emphasis on the perspective of the individual agent has also made existentialists suspicious of systematic reasoning. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and other existentialist writers have been deliberately unsystematic in the exposition of their philosophies, preferring to express themselves in aphorisms, dialogues, parables, and other literary forms. Despite their antirationalist position, however, most existentialists cannot be said to be irrationalists in the sense of denying all validity to rational thought. They have held that rational clarity is desirable wherever possible, but that the most important questions in life are not accessible to reason or science. Furthermore, they have argued that even science is not as rational as is commonly supposed. Nietzsche, for instance, asserted that the scientific assumption of an orderly universe is for the most part a useful fiction.

C Choice and Commitment

Perhaps the most prominent theme in existentialist writing is that of choice. Humanity's primary distinction, in the view of most existentialists, is the freedom to choose. Existentialists have held that human beings do not have a fixed nature, or essence, as other animals and plants do; each human being makes choices that create his or her own nature. In the formulation of the 20th-century French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, existence precedes essence. Choice is therefore central to human existence, and it is inescapable; even the refusal to choose is a choice. Freedom of choice entails commitment and responsibility. Because individuals are free to

choose their own path, existentialists have argued, they must accept the risk and responsibility of following their commitment wherever it leads.

D Dread and Anxiety

Kierkegaard held that it is spiritually crucial to recognize that one experiences not only a fear of specific objects but also a feeling of general apprehension, which he called dread. He interpreted it as God's way of calling each individual to make a commitment to a personally valid way of life. The word *anxiety* (German *Angst*) has a similarly crucial role in the work of the 20th-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger; anxiety leads to the individual's confrontation with nothingness and with the impossibility of finding ultimate justification for the choices he or she must make. In the philosophy of Sartre, the word *nausea* is used for the individual's recognition of the pure contingency of the universe, and the word *anguish* is used for the recognition of the total freedom of choice that confronts the individual at every moment.

III HISTORY

Existentialism as a distinct philosophical and literary movement belongs to the 19th and 20th centuries, but elements of existentialism can be found in the thought (and life) of Socrates, in the Bible, and in the work of many premodern philosophers and writers.

A Pascal

The first to anticipate the major concerns of modern existentialism was the 17th-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal. Pascal rejected the rigorous rationalism of his contemporary René Descartes, asserting, in his *Pensées* (1670), that a systematic philosophy that presumes to explain God and humanity is a form of pride. Like later existentialist writers, he saw human life in terms of paradoxes: The human self, which combines mind and body, is itself a paradox and contradiction.

B Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard, generally regarded as the founder of modern existentialism, reacted against the systematic absolute idealism of the 19th-century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who claimed to have worked out a total rational understanding of humanity and history. Kierkegaard, on the contrary, stressed the ambiguity and absurdity of the human situation. The individual's response to this situation must be to live a totally committed life, and this commitment can only be understood by the individual who has made it. The individual therefore must always be prepared to defy the norms of society for the sake of the higher authority of a personally valid way of life. Kierkegaard ultimately advocated a "leap of faith" into a Christian way of life, which, although incomprehensible and full of risk, was the only commitment he believed could save the individual from despair.

C Nietzsche

Nietzsche, who was not acquainted with the work of Kierkegaard, influenced subsequent existentialist thought through his criticism of traditional metaphysical and moral assumptions and through his espousal of tragic pessimism and the life-affirming individual will that opposes itself to the moral conformity of the majority. In contrast to Kierkegaard, whose attack on conventional morality led him to advocate a radically individualistic Christianity, Nietzsche proclaimed the "death of God" and went on to reject the entire Judeo-Christian moral tradition in favor of a heroic pagan ideal.

D Heidegger

Heidegger, like Pascal and Kierkegaard, reacted against an attempt to put philosophy on a conclusive rationalistic basis—in this case the phenomenology of the 20th-century German philosopher Edmund Husserl.

Heidegger argued that humanity finds itself in an incomprehensible, indifferent world. Human beings can never hope to understand why they are here; instead, each individual must choose a goal and follow it with passionate conviction, aware of the certainty of death and the ultimate meaninglessness of one's life. Heidegger contributed to existentialist thought an original emphasis on being and ontology (see *Metaphysics*) as well as on language.

E. Sartre

Sartre first gave the term *existentialism* general currency by using it for his own philosophy and by becoming the leading figure of a distinct movement in France that became internationally influential after World War II. Sartre's philosophy is explicitly atheistic and pessimistic; he declared that human beings require a rational basis for their lives but are unable to achieve one, and thus human life is a "futile passion." Sartre nevertheless insisted that his existentialism is a form of humanism, and he strongly emphasized human freedom, choice, and responsibility. He eventually tried to reconcile these existentialist concepts with a Marxist analysis of society and history.

F. Existentialism and Theology

Although existentialist thought encompasses the uncompromising atheism of Nietzsche and Sartre and the agnosticism of Heidegger, its origin in the intensely religious philosophies of Pascal and Kierkegaard foreshadowed its profound influence on 20th-century theology. The 20th-century German philosopher Karl Jaspers, although he rejected explicit religious doctrines, influenced contemporary theology through his preoccupation with transcendence and the limits of human experience. The German Protestant theologians Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann, the French Roman Catholic theologian Gabriel Marcel, the Russian Orthodox philosopher Nikolay Berdyayev, and the German Jewish philosopher Martin Buber inherited many of Kierkegaard's concerns, especially that a personal sense of authenticity and commitment is essential to religious faith.

G Existentialism and Literature

A number of existentialist philosophers used literary forms to convey their thought, and existentialism has been as vital and as extensive a movement in literature as in philosophy. The 19th-century Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky is probably the greatest existentialist literary figure. In *Notes from the Underground* (1864), the alienated antihero rages against the optimistic assumptions of rationalist humanism. The view of human nature that emerges in this and other novels of Dostoyevsky is that it is unpredictable and perversely self-destructive; only Christian love can save humanity from itself, but such love cannot be understood philosophically. As the character Alyosha says in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-80), "We must love life more than the meaning of it."

In the 20th century, the novels of the Austrian Jewish writer Franz Kafka, such as *The Trial* (1925; trans. 1937) and *The Castle* (1926; trans. 1930), present isolated men confronting vast, elusive, menacing bureaucracies; Kafka's themes of anxiety, guilt, and solitude reflect the influence of Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, and Nietzsche. The influence of Nietzsche is also discernible in the novels of the French writers André Malraux and in the plays of Sartre. The work of the French writer Albert Camus is usually associated with existentialism because of the prominence in it of such themes as the apparent absurdity and futility of life, the indifference of the universe, and the necessity of engagement in a just cause. Existentialist themes are also reflected in the theater of the absurd, notably in the plays of Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco. In the United States, the influence of existentialism on literature has been more indirect and diffuse, but traces of Kierkegaard's thought can be found in the novels of Walker Percy and John Updike, and various existentialist themes are apparent in the work of such diverse writers as Norman Mailer, John Barth, and Arthur Miller.