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Existentialism: Its evolution and how it applies today

As humorously noted in popular web-based slang reference guide Urban Dictionary, “existentialism” is a word that can be used in any context to “make yourself sound pretentious and/or confuse the person you are talking to” (*Urban Dictionary* – “Existentialism”). Despite the term often being used by these “pseudo-intellectuals” who simply want to sound smart, there is far more behind this “ism” than this definition implies. More than a philosophical thought process, existentialism was a movement of theorists and writers during the late 19th and 20th century. Though this movement has largely dissipated into the history of writers and philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Albert Camus, the principles behind existentialism can still be found across many modern mediums of art. Through this report, existentialism will be explained first by defining the term, followed by explaining the main principles that comprise it, then exploring its history and evolution, and finally by looking at modern examples of existentialism to see how it influences rhetoric today.

Existentialism is a “philosophical theory or approach that emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of will” (*Oxford Dictionary* – “Existentialism”). Unlike many of the other complicated “ism” philosophies, existentialism derives from ordinary and everyday human experiences (Barrett 126). Existentialism simply seeks to explore the “fundamental dilemmas that human beings face during the course of their lives” (Wartenberg). Existentialism forces us to ask ourselves life’s fundamental questions: “Why am I here? What does my life mean? Of what significance is my death?” (Whipple & Tucker 97). Similarly, William Barrett (126) defined existentialism as a philosophy that “confronts the human situation *in its totality*, to ask what the basic conditions of human existence are and how man can establish his own

meaning out of these conditions.” Others, however, describe existentialism as nearly impossible to define as a philosophical process, and rather only as a movement (Pasko 160).

Regardless of how individuals perceive existentialism, the major premises that comprise the term remain the same. There are many different facets of varying importance to the different philosophers and writers grouped into the movement. We will begin by looking at what Whipple and Tucker (97) refer to as the “Four Givens” of existentialism. These include freedom (or responsibility), meaningless (or absurdity), isolation, and death. Each of these four concepts is often interrelated, with the recognition of one leading to a realization of another. According to many existential thinkers, though we often want to run away from the pain and anxiety of the world represented in these “tenets” of existentialism, it is only through facing them that we become “authentic” (Whipple & Tucker 98).

While we often hear the terms “freedom” and “responsibility” in our everyday lives, the two together have a different meaning entirely in existentialism. Often summed up as, “existence precedes essence,” freedom in existentialism simply means it is up to us as individuals to develop our own meaning of the world. In other words, there is no predefined pattern that we must fit into in our lives (Sunami,). Responsibility, then, is placed on the individual who is free in his perception of reality, as his actions formulate his world (Pasko 160). This perspective is in actuality the rejection of determinism, or the idea that we as humans have some form of fixed mold, or that every action is the result of a circumstance out of our control (Whipple & Tucker 98). According to French Philosopher Jean Wahl, man realizes he is free only when he also realizes that he is also completely responsible for his actions. If man allows external factors to determine their own future, then they are rejecting their own “authenticity” (Whipple & Tucker 98).

Another concept that often manifests itself into existential literature is the idea that one of man’s greatest challenges in life is to find and make meaning for their own reality, often in the face of an apparently meaningless world (Whipple & Tucker 99). When we find meaning, we as individuals can also find a sense of identity (Yalom). As thinkers, it is our responsibility to provide our own meaning to the world (Sunami). Meaning, however, is contradicted with the absurdity of our realities (*Stanford*

Encyclopedia of Philosophy – “Existentialism”). Both existentialism and modernism were heavily influenced by the idea of the world as absurd, such as in Samuel Beckett’s modern minimalist classic ‘Waiting for Godot’ (1953). While the play is technically considered to be absurdist or minimalist, it closely embodies the cores of existential meaninglessness, as the two main characters wait for something that never comes, yet they return each night the same. In fact, many of the peaks of existential thought came during times of an increasingly absurd world, such as the Russian Revolution during the works of Dostoevsky, and the two World Wars for Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

Often embodied in the characters of existential literature is the concept of isolation and longing for connection with other humans. As Yalom (9) stated, we as humans are often innately scared of being alone, creating a tension between connection and “ultimate isolation”. One of the core thoughts of existentialism is that despite this tension, the “ultimate reality” is that we are born and we will die alone no matter how close one becomes with another individual (Whipple & Tucker 101). Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, the main character in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel ‘Crime and Punishment’ (1866), is a great example of an individual heavily isolated both physically and emotionally. After dropping out of law school due to a lack of funds, Raskolnikov lives in a small apartment in Saint Petersburg with little money and growing depression. In a more modern example, the titular character from Richard Kelly’s ‘Donnie Darko’ (2001) makes a psychoanalytical breakthrough when he realizes that in some way we all want to die alone. A more extreme example of the tension between isolation and connection comes from Hideaki Anno’s animated television series ‘Neon Genesis Evangelion’ (1995-96). In what the show called the “Human Instrumentality Project,” the organization NERV has secretly plotted to destroy the world, but in a way that would merge the souls of every human together so no one would ever be alone.

The final tenet of existentialism that we as humans must face is death. As Yalom (30) stated “it is one of life’s most self-evident truths that everything fades, that we fear the fading, and that we must live, nonetheless, in the face of the fading, in the face of the fear.” We often do not think of death, pushing it out of minds and concentrating our sometimes-mundane worlds, but these are only distractions from the inevitability of death (Whipple & Tucker 100). It is death that causes the apparently meaningless

absurdity to our reality. Rather than fearing death, however, we can as humans, embrace our fate (Yalom 282). A modern example of this reverse of human fear would be the song ‘Do You Realize??’ (2002) by the Flaming Lips on the 2002 album ‘Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots’. During the chorus, for example, the lyrics state “you realize that life goes fast, it’s hard to make the good things last. You realize the sun doesn’t go down, it’s just an illusion cause by the world spinning around” (The Flaming Lips – “Do You Realize??”). Though the lyrics deal with realizing our unavoidable death and how precarious our existence is, the song also reminds us to enjoy the short time that we have

Other tenets that hold significance to existential thinkers and writers are the concepts of facticity and transcendence, authenticity, the ‘Other’ and the ‘Look’, existential angst, and existential despair. Just as the previous Four Givens, these concepts are often interrelated. Facticity, for example, can be seen as both a limitation and a condition of “Freedom” (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – “Existentialism”). To better explain, facticity is the collection of “brute facts that characterize us,” such as when and where we are born, how tall we are, and so on (Nicholson). These facts, however, do not fully determine a person completely. We as humans can negate and go beyond these facts, a concept known as transcendence (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – “Existentialism”; Nicholson). For example, though an individual may have grown up in a life of crime, this does not mean they do not have the choice to transcend this “fact” and live morally (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – “Existentialism”).

One of the major tenets held by many existentialists is the idea of authenticity, or the idea that one has to “create oneself” and then live in accordance with this self. An authentic action, then, is one that correlates to that individual’s freedom (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – “Existentialism”). Though authenticity is also utilized in other philosophical movements, such as in Aesthetics, existential authenticity is the degree to which an individual stays true to their own morals, values, or character despite external pressures (Golomb). Inauthenticity, then, is a failure to live in accordance with an individual’s freedom (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – “Existentialism”). As Marjorie Grene put it in her article ‘Authenticity: An Existential Virtue’ (1952) “What existentialism admires is not the

happiness of a man's life, the goodness of his disposition, or the rightness of his acts but the authenticity of his existence.”

Of the more interesting perspectives taken by philosophers in existentialism is the idea of the ‘Other’ and the ‘Look.’ Together, these terms refer to the experience of holding a perspective from another entity that inhabits the same world as the individual. The ‘Other’ is that entity, while the ‘Look’ is that perception (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – “Existentialism”). Put more simply, this concept is seeing oneself as he may think others see him. It is a self-consciousness based on an awareness of societal expectations (Marcia). To help explain this tenet, Sartre used an example of a gentlemen looking through a keyhole, when he hears a creak from behind him. Regardless of whether there was an actual person behind him, or just the house making noise, the gentlemen looking through the hole now perceives themselves as how that ‘Other’ would see him; as a peeping tom (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – “Existentialism”).

Also referred to as dread, anxiety, or anguish, angst is another important tenet within Existentialism. While we may think of angst as youth rebellion, or counter culture, in existentialism angst is the “dread caused by man's awareness that his future is not determined but must be freely chosen” (*The Free Dictionary* – “Angst”). Existential angst is the collection of negative feelings that stem from a realization of freedom and responsibility (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – “Existentialism”). Søren Kierkegaard is believed to have been the first to use the term angst, adapting it from the Danish word “angest,” meaning dread or anxiety. He defined this term as the profound and deep-seated condition arising from our human awareness. While animals may be guided by instinct, humans hold a freedom that can be both appealing and terrifying (Marino). The example often given to explain angst is the sensation of standing on a cliff and experiencing fear, not only have falling off, but the possibility of throwing oneself off (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – “Existentialism”).

The final tenet of existentialism is that of despair, or the loss of hope. In existentialism, despair is narrowed down to the loss of hope in reaction to a breakdown in one of the defining qualities of what makes up a person's self-identity. For example, if a singer were to lose their voice, a characteristic they

find helps define themselves, they may experience despair (Hong 188). Despair can also be the result of realizing that human effort can seem futile or meaningless because they know that there is no way to go beyond the absurd (Park). According to some philosophers, despair is a universal human condition, though we do not need to be overtly in sadness for this to apply. According to Hong (188), “so long as a person’s identity depends on qualities that can crumble, he is considered to be in perpetual despair.” Hopelessness is a condition that arises within us, and though we may change our life-circumstances, this cannot alleviate our existential despair (Park).

So how did Existentialism begin? It is commonly held that the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) was the first existential thinker (Wartenberg). Kierkegaard rejected totalitarian claims, stating that human existence can never be enclosed in any one system. “To exist as an individual is to strive, change, develop, stand open to the future, [and] be incomplete” (Kierkegaard). Some of Kierkegaard’s most influential works include ‘Either/Or’ (1843), ‘Fear and Trembling’ (1843), and ‘Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragment’ (1846). Through these publications, Kierkegaard established his ideas of the “aesthetic” and “ethical” stage of existence; the first established the idea of absolute free will that rejected determinism (Sackmann). Together with Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), the two are known as the founding fathers of existential philosophy, even though they never themselves used that term (Bennet 129).

Nietzsche was a German philosopher who, along with Kierkegaard, inspired many of the leading figures in many genres that followed (Sackmann). As Sackmann summarized, Nietzsche was “interested in the enhancement of individual and cultural health, and believed in life, creativity, power, and the realities of the world we live in, rather than those situated in a world beyond.” Unlike Kierkegaard, who was a religious man, Nietzsche believed religion was only a distraction from the reality that we are alone in a world where we have to create our own values (Barrett 129). Some of Nietzsche’s most popular works include ‘Thus Spoke Zarathustra’ (1885) and ‘The Gay Science’ (1882), which is famous for its quote “God is dead.” Thus Spoke Zarathustra presents a nihilistic, existential philosophy, discussing what Nietzsche called the “Overman” (Sackmann). According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “The

overman represents a form of life, a mode of existence that is to blossom from the communalized, moralized 'last man' of the nineteenth century.”

At about the same time in Russia, Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) was writing novels that dealt with human psychology and existentialism. Some of his more popular novels include 'Crime and Punishment' (1866), 'The Brothers Karamazov' (1880), and his most existential work 'Notes From Underground' (1864) (Sackmann). As stated above, his characters often are isolated antiheroes searching for meaning in an absurd world. His work became influential, particularly for other Russian existential thinkers like Lev Shestove (1866-1938) (Tabachnikova 105).

Existentialism reached its peak in late 1930s and 1940s France, with the works of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), and Albert Camus (1913-1960). It was during these post-World War II years that existentialism became a catch-all term for the cultural and artistic avant-garde, as well as for radical critiques of universal principles (Flynn 698).

Perhaps the best known and the most influential existentialist of the 20th century, Jean-Paul Sartre is the acknowledged father of French Existentialism (Sackmann; Flynn 699). Politically a Marxist, and often leaning toward Nihilism, Sartre was a philosopher, novelist, and a playwright whose work was heavily impacted by existentialism (Sackmann). As a large part of the French Existential movement, Sartre was friends with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Albert Camus. He is also known for his longtime non-monogamous relationship with another French existentialist, Simone de Beauvoir (Flynn 699). Some of Sartre's more popular and impacting works are 'Nausea' (1938), 'Being and Nothingness' (1943), and 'Existentialism is a Humanism' (1946). Sartre reiterated many of the pillars of existentialism, such as existence preceding essence, freedom, absurdity, and the rejection of "determinist excuses" for man not taking responsibility for his behavior (Sackmann).

More than simply Sartre's longtime partner, Simone de Beauvoir was an important writer whose work with fiction and semi-autobiographical books dealt with ideas of existentialism and feminism. Her major work, 'The Second Sex' (1949), discusses the treatment of women throughout history and is often regarded as canon in feminist philosophy and the starting point of the second-wave of feminism

(Sackmann). The thesis of this work, the idea that one is born female but becomes a woman, summarizes many of the arguments between essentialists and social constructionists that have engaged feminist thinkers ever since (Flynn 701).

Though Albert Camus was never a professional philosopher, his novels often closely reflected the ideologies of existentialism. The characters in his works, such as 'The Plague' (1947) and 'The Rebel' (1951), sought to find meaning in an ultimately absurd world (Flynn, 701). Camus technically never was an existentialist, but rather worked with the similar philosophical school of Absurdism. As Camus defined it, "the absurd is born out of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." Put more simply, the notion that people look for rational meaning in the universe is in itself absurd, as they will find no meaning (Sackmann). This concept was explored more in depth in one of Camus' most popular works, 'The Stranger' (1942).

Existentialism began to decline after the era of the post-World War II French movement, evolving only in shared concepts with later movements such as modernism and avant-garde. Though the movement has ended, existential thought can still be found in many contemporary mediums of art and rhetoric today, such as television, movies, and even in song. Films in particular have taken particular inspiration from the ideologies of existentialism, influencing genres from science fiction, to action flicks, and even to comedies. For example, despite the ambiguity of the meaning for Stanley Kubrick's science fiction epic '2001: A Space Odyssey' (1968), Kubrick placed several references to the existential thought of Nietzsche into the film. The most prominent includes the use of Richard Strauss' tone-poem 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra' into the soundtrack, alluding to Nietzsche's concept of the overman, or *übermensch*. The film's depiction of the evolution of man from primitive apes to overman also seems to parallel Nietzsche's view of man's "struggle for existence" (MacGregor).

Andy and Larry Wachowski's more contemporary dystopian action flicks 'The Matrix,' (1999) a film noted for his multiple references to religion, mythology, philosophy and other literary and cinematic works, demonstrates a similar theme with the main character Thomas "Neo" Anderson's realization that he is free to make his own decisions and can transcend to become an overman. For example, the scene

where Neo bends the spoon by realizing it is only a perception is homage to Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' (Godoski). Even comedies such as Harold Ramis' 'Groundhog Day' (1993) embody a number of the pillars of existentialism, as the arrogant character Phil Connors is caught in an endless time loop until he finally realizes he must improve himself. As Connors wakes up to the same day every day, he goes through a series of existential crises, including isolation, despair, angst, and finally the freedom to change himself. Though we may not know it, these examples exhibit existentialism's profound impact on rhetoric and art today.

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