

What is Existentialism?

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Interest in philosophy has increased as people ponder ways in which they can make sense of their lives and live a more fulfilled life. However, trying to decipher meanings from original philosophical works is an arduous task since concepts are often so complex that we are unable to apply them to our everyday lives. This is no less the case with Existential Philosophy.

Anyone who has searched for a clear definition of what existentialism is will have realised how complex and opaque a subject it is. Much of the difficulty in defining existentialism is due to broad differences in writings and perspectives and the lack of a specific philosophy. It is not a school or system of thought, but can be considered more a style of philosophising than a distinct body of knowledge, beliefs or philosophy. In identifying its parameters, the main themes or styles can be pinpointed to ascertain its nature and key concerns.

Existentialism was a philosophical activity which developed in Continental Europe in the 1940s and 1950s. However, whilst existential writing became prolific during this period, the main ideas can be traced back much further in the history of philosophy and even in pre-philosophical attempts to understand the nature of existence. The teachings of Socrates, Buddha and Christianity all highlight questions pertinent to understanding the human condition.

All existential ideas indicate an interest in human freedom, choice and the individual's experience in the world and the environment in which they exercise their power of choice. Underpinning all existential writing is an attempt to demonstrate an existent's freedom and to highlight where this has not been recognised, or even denied. This highlights the social construction of reality and how this might blind people to fully choosing their way of being. The aim of existentialism is not only to acknowledge our inherent freedom but to transform our very experience of being and meaning-making in the world. As Warnock (1970:2) says, 'Someone in the process of reading and understanding an existential philosopher ought to be in the grip of a mood which actually transforms his way of seeing the world and his place in it'.

Enormous diversity exists amongst the works of existential writers, making it difficult to fully grasp what existentialism is and what it is not. For example, some writers take a theological perspective whereas others are atheistic. Some focus on an individual existent's freedom in the world whereas others pinpoint 'relating' as the medium for co-constituting who we are. Some pronounce existence to be meaningless and absurd whereas others highlight the potential for us to relate to someone beyond ourselves as intrinsically hopeful.

A number of key existential writers have been influential in developing existential ideas. From the works of these writers, we can extract connections and themes that arise out of their viewpoints. For a fuller explanation of their contributions, see more

When you read the original works of existential authors, their ideas are often difficult to grasp and even more difficult to apply to your own life. A language is needed to make these concepts meaningful in your everyday experience. In the following section, the key themes in existential philosophy will be explored, then an attempt will be made to make those concepts readily applicable to your own life through the language of Myths.

Key Themes in Existential Philosophy

Despite the diversity of approaches in existential thought, all writers focus on the nature of existence and what it is to exist. A distinction is made between Existence and Essence. Existence of an entity is that it is, that is has a particular being. Essence is what it is and its unchanging, universal characteristics that result in it being one entity and not another.

All philosophy attempts to identify universal, abstract and unchanging truths behind manifest existence (Macquarrie 1972), and scientific empiricism studies inanimate objects in a scientific way to identify the natural and abstract world. Positivism, developed by Auguste Comte (1778–1857) proposed that all human beings, and society in general, could be understood by unearthing their underlying laws and rules (Mautner 1996). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this scientific approach has been applied to understanding human beings and this is apparent in behaviourism and psychology which disseminate an individual's behaviour into constituent parts.

Existential writers argue that we cannot posit a nature or essence on a human being and then make conclusions or deductions because the focus is on existence. Existentialists therefore reject the application of scientific reductionist principles in understanding the nature of human existence. Rather,

The aim of existential philosophy, then, is to develop a deeper and more complete understanding of this existence – the irreducible, indefinable totality that you, me and others are. (Cooper 2003:10)

The following themes can be identified as central to this study of Existence:

- Existence is unique and subjective
- Existence is a process
- We have freedom to choose our own being
- There are limits to our freedom
- Existence is Relational
- The experience of time
- Existence is embodied
- Existence is anxious and guilty
- Inauthentic nature of existence
- Existence is paradoxical
- Unique and subjective nature of existence

Because each human existent is seen as irreplaceable and unique, a qualitative approach to understanding subjective experience is deemed appropriate. Different writers put different emphases on the individual as alone in their freedom to choose in an undefined world (despite social construction suggesting the opposite) or relatedness with others. Each appreciates how an existent is torn between the individual and communal poles of existence.

Existence is a process

Contrary to the positivist perspective that human existence is subject to similar laws as the natural world, existential philosophers focus on the dynamic, changing process of being rather than a static, fixed approach. This perspective stands in stark contrast to the contemporary views on psychology which regards personality as a relatively stable set of variables which change little over the lifespan.

Freedom to choose

Contrary to the scientific perspectives that conditions, genes, stimulus-response reactions etc. are major determinants of human experience, the existential premise is that freedom is intrinsic to existence. Sartre, for example, says our identity is a function of our choices. He states: 'Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself'. (1945/1996:259) From this perspective, conditions and genes, for example, are the limits within which we are free to choose our being.

Limits to our freedom

Whilst we are free to choose our being, there are limits to this freedom. For example, we do not choose the circumstances of our birth, nor do we choose our death. Even if we plan to take our life, we do not know if we will live until that time. Heidegger highlights our being-towards-death. He is not only pointing to our ultimate demise but the many deaths we experience in the process of choosing and, from an existential perspective, rejecting alternatives. Death is an intrinsic aspect of every moment of being since we do not have a fixed self but a phenomenal, changing self. However, we do have choice over how we face the ontological limitations of our existence.

Existence is Relational

Whilst existential writers highlight our aloneness in a world where there is no objective rightness to our choices, they also emphasise the in-betweenness of the individual and their world. Thus all our actions are inter-world and not intra-personal. So, in contrast to the western philosophical view of separateness and a fixed sense of who we are, existential philosophy focuses on the inter-subjective nature of human existence and how we co-constitute each other through our relating.

Buber's concept of 'I-It' and 'I-Thou' focuses on the inter-subjective nature of existence and different modes of relating. In the I-It mode, the other is experienced as a fixed object that can be identified, defined and categorised. For example, we may categorise someone as an introvert or friendly. In the I-Thou mode, the other is experienced as unique, undefinable, and as a free-choosing existent with infinite possibilities. In the I-Thou mode, any past and present assumptions are put aside, allowing the existent to be seen as unfixed in nature. This also allows for our own infinite possibilities to be and for us to be transformed through the encounter. Often we experience the other as an object in the I-It mode as no more than an interface between our own stereotypes, assumptions and desires. The existential perspective identifies ways in which we limit the infinite possibilities we have and truly are.

The experience of time

When we talk of the past, present and future, we appear to consider them as distinct linear realities. However, existential philosophers see them as inseparable in that what we experience now is inextricably linked to what we have experienced and what we anticipate. Because of the unfixed nature of existence, the focus is on the present becoming the future and focuses on motives rather than causes. Differences exist between philosophers as to whether living has meaning beyond that defined by the individual. Sartre and Camus, for example, see no objective rightness against which to evaluate choices, but Marcel and Buber are more hopeful about some order or universal meaning.

Existence is embodied

The Cartesian dualistic perspective of mind/body separation is not one shared by existential philosophers. Instead, the existential approach is that we are our body and our bodily reactions are an immediate, direct or intuitive appreciation of the world which may precede our intellectual grasp of any experience. Thus our embodied experiences are equi-primordial, and led Heidegger to say we are always in a 'mood' i.e. the human existent is intrinsically attuned to their world.

Existential anxiety and guilt as givens of existence

Existential philosophers see existence as intrinsically anxious because:

- a) our freedom means we have to choose without any objective rightness other than social constructions of what is appropriate;
- b) in choosing we reject alternative choices and never know what would have happened if we had taken an alternative path;
- c) our existence is finite and therefore choice is truly limited.

Freedom, according to Heidegger, does not only give rise to anxiety but guilt, in that we have wronged ourselves and failed to fulfil our own potential. This is inherent in choosing, since one choice negates another and we never know the outcome of other choices and whether they would have been preferable.

Inauthentic nature of existence

Our attempts to deny the nature of our existence and the freedom to choose our own being is seen by Heidegger as Inauthentic and by Sartre as living in Bad Faith. By relating inauthentically, we both deny our freedom to act out of choice and the responsibility for such.

We regularly see examples of denying our freedom by turning ourselves into an object. We say things like, 'I am not a person who does this' or 'I am an introvert and can't speak publicly'. Comments like this limit our essential nature and deny the potential and possibility of us being otherwise. When we act out of character, we blame someone else for 'making' us do something, or some unconscious urge to do something. These examples are seen as inauthentic, implying that we have no choice and that somehow an external or internal influence 'made us do something'.

For Heidegger, inauthenticity is related to the 'They Self' and giving in to all that is associated with the socially agreed meanings rather than seeing them as unfixed and contingent. To act inauthentically is costly. It not only denies future possibilities to choose but relegates us to duty, routine and obligation with the resultant existential guilt of this awareness. Once we become aware of our inauthenticity, we can begin to take responsibility for our choices in the knowledge that there is no objective rightness for them.

Existence is paradoxical

Despite the emphasis on living authentically in the awareness of our freedom and finitude, existential philosophers do not see the goal of existentialism as achieving authenticity once and for all. This would be contrary to the view of our unfixed, process-oriented nature. Instead, life is made up of paradoxes and tensions such as freedom and limitation, being alone and being with others, hope and despair, dependence and independence. We do not 'arrive' at authenticity through a one-time awareness. Instead, we are pulled between the polarities of authenticity and inauthenticity.

The Myths of Life – Applied Existentialism

The existential themes of choice, freedom, responsibility, anxiety etc. require interpretation at a level that is applicable to our own lives. This is where Myths or Unquestioned Assumptions are a more accessible means of examining existential concepts. There are various Myths, each of which focuses on a particular socially-constructed assumption which has become culturally embedded in everyday social existence. Such is their influence, that individuals believe in their objective existence and the impossibility of challenging them or failing to realise they are merely socially-constructed assumptions. Myths enable us to examine where we are denying our freedom and in so doing, living inauthentically. This is the first step in making changes to live authentically.

The following example highlights the unquestioned assumptions that give rise to inauthentic living.

Example

I recently moved from the city to a rural town. During a conversation with a shop owner regarding this move, I was asked what my husband did. However, prior to being asked, I had only told the person that I had moved to the area from the city and was enjoying the beauty of the countryside. Presumably, he had made a number of assumptions about me on very little information. What were some of these assumptions?

- I was in a relationship and not single.
- I was married and not co-habiting.
- I was heterosexual.
- Husbands are bread-winners.
- It was not necessary to ask what my occupation is.

On the face of it, this might seem like an innocuous question, made purely to pass the time of day. However, the unquestioned assumptions inherent in his question highlight the pervasiveness and limitations of a ubiquitous Myth, namely: The Group Myth, which states that It is better to be part of a group than an individual.

It would appear from his question that the shopkeeper held a number of fixed beliefs about the world, and I suggest the following:

People who are in a certain category or group should display the behaviours of that group. In this case, women of my age should be married, heterosexual and not hold the key responsibility for the family income.

This example highlights inauthenticity, since such assumptions deny our freedom to choose our own being. Once we accept that society's norms are automatically desirable and preferable to other ways of living, we deny the infinite possibilities of who we are and might be. We see ourselves and others as having a fixed identity rather than our existence being a process, subject to constant change. Whether or not we adopt the beliefs that the majority advocates is not the issue. The awareness that such beliefs are socially constructed and not concrete, fixed or open to future modification is the issue.

Whilst I have, of course, made a number of assumptions about this man and in doing so have objectified him, my interpretation is only for the purpose of example. To face another person and put aside our assumptions and beliefs about who and what they might be is a challenging task. Our stereotypes, desires and assumptions act as a useful shorthand to negotiate the social world. However, they inhibit us from relating to ourselves and others more authentically in the I-Thou mode of relating put forward by Martin Buber and described earlier.

The language of Myths allows us to apply existential concepts to our everyday experiences. Because they are more accessible and easily applicable to our lived experiences, they offer us the possibility of leading a more authentic life. For more information on Myths, see more.

Conclusion

Whilst we are able to pinpoint a number of themes and styles of philosophising in existentialism, writings are still highly disparate. The key themes have been identified here, and the interested reader is encouraged to explore the original writings of the authors to grasp their full meanings. However, for a clearer and more accessible explanation of existential concepts, I encourage you to explore the notion of Myths. This will allow you to consider how you deny the responsibility to create your own being and how you might develop more authentic ways of living your life.

Existential philosophy offers a very different perspective on existence and what it is to be human. Its rejection of scientific methods to define, measure and categorise its nature offers a fresh approach to understanding the human condition and experience. On the one hand, this highlights our infinite possibilities to be, and on the other, anxiety arises out of the responsibility of this realisation. This can be summed up by the following quote by Sartre (1956:296)

...man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards. If man, as the existentialist sees him, is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later and then he will be what he makes of himself.

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