

James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*
Chapter Six: Beyond Nihilism:
Existentialism

Check out existentialism on line:

<http://www.connect.net/ron/exist.html>

<http://www.tameri.com/csw/exist/>

Introduction:

Existentialism resists definition. As a matter of fact, to try to define it is contrary to existentialism because this philosophical outlook glories in unshackled freedom, not rigid definition. To place an "ism" on the end of the term "existentialism" is to suggest that it is a codified system of thought which it also rejects in light of its own tenets. Hence, existentialism is difficult to define. Even catch phrases that are used to capture its content such as "philosophy of existence" or "existence precedes essence" or "do your own thing" (the popular existential cliché) fail to do justice as an overarching notion because these themes or phrases are interpreted and understood differently in the differing contexts of different existentialists.

Despite this difficulty, a few things may be proposed for introductory and descriptive purposes.

The term existentialism comes from the term "existence" (Ltn., *existere*, *existere*, to step or come forth, stand forth; *ex-*, out + *sistere*, to cause to stand, set, place) and consequently an existentialist emphasizes human existence.

An existentialist will emphasize the particular over the universal, the concrete over the abstract, becoming over being, the empirical over the rational, the personal over the propositional, subjectivity over objectivity, choosing over thinking, etc.

For him, existence always precedes essence in such a way that the emphasis is always on human freedom and the opportunity is present over against any universal, abstract, being, rational, propositional, or objective demand to make a choice to become virtually any kind of person one wants to be.

In terms of philosophical pedigree, existentialism has claimed an astonishing variety of thinkers as its patriarchs. These include Socrates (the examined life), Augustine (the restless heart), Pascal (the heart has its reasons), Dostoyevsky

(*Notes from the Underground*), Shakespeare ("To be or not to be") and Kierkegaard (truth is subjectivity) because of the heavy emphasis each of these thinkers placed on humanity and the human condition and what to do about it. Furthermore, existentialism can be seen as a reaction or response to other philosophies with which it has quarrels including:

1. Rationalism: existentialism believes that the emphasis ought not to be on some abstract, metaphysical, rational system (esp. Hegelianism), but on life! And that truth should be embraced not with the head, but with the heart, not with *a/pathos*, but with *pathos*. This viewpoint, however, does not necessarily commit existentialism to irrationalism (see below).
2. Naturalistic determinism: existentialism is marked by its understanding of and commitment to human freedom; human beings, far from being determined, are so free they are condemned to freedom.
3. Atheistic nihilism: existentialism, at least in its atheistic form, recognizes clearly that atheism breeds nihilism and that nihilism is unlivable. Squarely in the face of recognized meaninglessness and in a revolt against it, existentialism seeks to transcend nihilism. As Camus said, "In the darkest depths of our nihilism, I have sought only for *the means to transcend nihilism* " (*Le Été*). The goal of existentialism is this: to transcend nihilism, that is, how to create meaning and significance in a meaningless and insignificant, nihilistic world.

I. Basic Existentialists Themes

- A. The individual, the universe, and rational, philosophical systems of thought
- B. Intentionality:
- C. Being and absurdity
- D. Freedom and choice
- E. Anxiety, dread, and death
- F. Form of communication
- G. Existentialism can assume two fundamental forms: atheistic and theistic

II. The Essential Tenets of Atheistic Existentialism

- A. Atheistic existentialism accepts the following tenets of naturalism
 1. Matter exists eternally.

2. God does not exist.
3. The cosmos exists as a uniformity of natural causes in a closed system.
4. History is a linear stream of events linked by cause/effect but without an overarching purpose.
5. Ethics is related only to human beings.
6. Human personality is the result of chemical/physical processes and death ends all.

B. The cosmos is composed solely of matter, but to human beings reality appears in two forms—subjective and objective.

1. The objective world is the world of inflexible law, of cause/effect, of chronological, clock-ticking time, of flux, of mechanism, electrons, whirling galaxies, falling bodies, gases, waters, etc. Naturalism and nihilism say the self is only another object, an extended substance or variation of the objective world.
2. The subjective world is the world of mind, self-consciousness, self-determination, awareness, freedom, stability. Existentialism emphasizes the subjective world of persons over the objective world of things. Self-conscious, self-determining persons can mean and be valuable and create meaning and significance for themselves.

C. For human beings alone, existence precedes essence; people make themselves who they are.

1. J. P. Sartre's classic description of existentialism: "If God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept, and . . . this being is man." "First of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself."
2. Human beings are not intrinsically defined, but must define themselves or give themselves essence. We define our humanity, who and what we are, by our choices and actions.

D. Each person is totally free as regards his or her nature and destiny.

Each person is radically free, "condemned to freedom," as Sartre said. We can think, will, imagine, dream, ponder, create, etc. Each person creates his or her own meaning, significance, destiny, worth by his/her choices and freedom.

E. The highly wrought and tightly organized objective world stands over against human beings and appears absurd.

The hard, cold, chaotic, world appears to be very unsympathetic, absurd and alien in which human beings are strangers and foreigners. Death is the ultimate absurdity from which there is no escape. Humans must recognize this so they can pass beyond it.

F. In full recognition of and against the absurdity of the objective world, the authentic person must revolt and create value and meaning.

1. Since there is no meaning of life, one must create meaning in life. One, in short, must "do his own thing." This is how an existentialist goes beyond nihilism: by the personal creation of meaning and value in the face of absurdity.
2. This position is often criticized in two ways: (1) it is solipsistic; that is, each person alone is the determiner of values and there are as many centers of value as there are persons in the cosmos; the result can be chaos; (2) it is relativistic; that is, since there is no standard of good, the good is whatever one chooses, but consequently there is no way of determining if one's choice is really good.

G. Existentialism illustrated by Albert Camus' *The Plague* which attempts to make a case for the possibility of living a good life in a world where God is dead and moral values have no ultimate grounding or sanction.

H. Summary and Critique: Atheistic existentialism arose with J. P. Sartre and Albert Camus as a response to nihilism and the reduction of all things to absurdity; it took a subjectivist turn, lifted philosophy from the objective and created meaning from human affirmation and choice. Atheistic existentialism goes beyond nihilism only to reach solipsism.

Naturalism——Nihilism——Existentialism——Solipsism

III. The Essential Tenets of Theistic Existentialism

A. Theistic existentialism accepts the following tenets of theism

1. God is infinite and personal (Triune), transcendent and immanent, omniscient, sovereign and good.
2. God created the cosmos ex nihilo to operate with a uniformity of natural causes in an open system.
3. Human beings are created in the image of God, can know something of God and the cosmos and can act significantly.
4. God can and does communicate with us.
5. We were created good but now are fallen and need to be restored by through Christ.

6. For human beings, death is either the gate to life with God and his people or life forever separated from God.
7. Ethics is transcendent and based on God's character.

B. Human beings are personal beings who, when they come to full consciousness, find themselves in an alien universe; whether or not God exist is a tough question to be solved not by reason but by faith.

The world in which we find ourselves is absurd; there is much evidence to point to the existence of God, yet much evidence to point in the other direction. The fact of God's existence will never be fully determined; if one is to believe he/she must step forth and choose to believe and the choice and belief is a radical act of faith. But when faith is chosen, new vistas open for the believer. The act of faith, however, is without content and baseless; it is as much faith in faith than anything else.

C. The personal is the valuable. (I-Thou; I-It relationships).

1. The **I-It** relationship is between the person and the objective world; the human being is the objectifier; this is the realm of science, logic, of space and time, of measurability.
2. The **I-Thou** relationship is between persons and is primary. A subject encounters subject. "All real living is meeting." (—M. Buber) God is the Thou of all thous. Religiously all the major categories of Christian faith are interpreted personally or relationally (sin is betrayed relationship; repentance is sorrow over the betrayal; forgiveness is renewed fellowship; faith is commitment to a person; Christian life is pleasing a person, etc.).

D. Knowledge is subjectivity; the whole truth is often paradoxical.

1. Knowledge is subjectivity: this is not to say that theistic existentialists deny any objective truth; it is rather to emphasize that knowledge is to be experienced powerfully, personally, that it is perceived in intimate interrelatedness involving I-Thou relationships and is linked to authentic human life. Truth to be truth is truth digested and lived out, applied, on the nerve endings of life.
2. Truth is paradoxical: it is next to impossible to explain truth non-paradoxically or consistently. Ultimate truth is found in seemingly contradictory statements which human beings cannot resolve but God evidently can. Meanwhile human beings step out to act as best they can on the basis of what they know. The Bible itself resolves many paradoxes but seems to encourage others.

E. History as a record of events is uncertain and unimportant, but history as a model or type or myth to be made present and lived is of supreme importance.

1. The Bible is historically untrustworthy. This resulted from the higher critical study of the Bible which assumed a naturalistic outlook and thus discounted many of the supernatural biblical events (including creation, fall, redemption, resurrection, second coming, miracles, etc.); other findings allegedly discredited the facticity of Scripture. The historical basis for faith is given up.
2. Since the facts of the Bible could not be trusted, the emphasis was placed on the spiritual value of scriptural stories for personal application or meaning (hence there is what is called the "fact-value" dichotomy). The Bible is interpreted metaphorically, symbolically, mythologically, poetically, religiously but not factually or literally. The question is: can events that really didn't happen become a basis for hope and faith? It seems that there truly must be an event if there is to be true meaning and a basis of belief.

F. Summary: theistic existentialism arose with Kierkegaard as a response to dead orthodoxy; with Karl Barth it arose as a response to the reduction of Christianity to morality; It took a subjectivist stance, lifted Christianity out of history, focused attention on inner meaning.