

Existentialism

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Thesis: Existentialism poignantly calls our attention to the limits of idealism and rationalism redolent of the early modern era. The idealism of modern rationalism is to be rejected as providing a bad foundation for value judgments. Existentialism's critique of this foundation issues a disturbing challenge to us to own up to our freedom and responsibility in a more realistic manner order to lead rich and meaningful lives.

I. The Birth of Existentialism out of the Spirit of Rationalism

- rationalist goal: a quest for certainty as a foundation seeking objective & universal truth [idealism]
- existentialism as a rejection of rationalism and idealism as foundations

II. Existentialism: characteristics, themes, & figures

- A preliminary description of existentialism: five general characteristics of existentialism
 - emphasis on the non-rational
 - emphasis on the individual, subjective
 - emphasis on freedom
 - emphasis on responsibility
 - emphasis on styles of expression
- moving from "What is the good life?" → "What is authentic existence?"
- The First Wave [19th century]
 - Kierkegaard: authentic religious existence; Fear and Trembling
 - Nietzsche: "God is dead!"; living beyond good and evil, Twilight of the Idols
- The Second Wave [20th century]
 - Sartre: inauthenticity and bad faith, *The Wall*
 - de Beauvoir: committed literature; The Second Sex
 - Camus: suicide as the fundamental problem for philosophy; living in the absurd

III. Is Existentialism Pessimistic?

- false optimism of enlightenment rationalism
- no purpose, no reason, no certainty
- absurdity, death, angst, dread, nausea
- "condemned to freedom", "condemned to meaning"
- good / evil → authentic / inauthentic
- 3 aspects of authenticity
 - anguish
 - abandonment
 - despair
- authenticity, transcendence, and achieving freedom

IV. Struggling in the Shadows: Finding Meaning in Our Lives Today

- the shadows of authority: totalitarianism, technology
- the shadows of history: dialectical materialism
- care and hope: ideals without idealism

Some Resources:

Walter Kaufmann (ed.), Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, Meridian, New York, 1975. ISBN 978-0452009301 *This is a very good anthology that includes excerpts from most of the major philosophical and some of the literary existentialists. Kaufmann was the person most responsible for cultivating interest in Nietzsche's work in the English-speaking world after WW II.*

Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals [tr. Kaufmann & Hollingsdale], Viking Press, New York, 1989. ISBN0-679-72462-1 *This is a shrill polemical attack upon traditional religion and morality. Nietzsche makes some amazing observations about art and the authentic creation of values—what he calls the transvaluation of all values.*

Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, Vintage Books, New York, 1989. ISBN 0-679-72451-6 *This is surely de Beauvoir's masterpiece in philosophy [though her novels were brilliant as well]. It was decades ahead of its time, and lays the groundwork for more contemporary feminist work.*

Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness [tr. H. Barnes], Pocket Books, New York, 1956. ISBN 0-671-83405-3-395 *This long essay is generally regarded as Sartre's most important work as well as the central text of all French existentialism. Sartre conducts a thorough analysis of the nature of human existence, warts and all.*

-----, Nausea [tr. L. Alexander], New Directions, Publishing, New York, 1964. ISBN 0-8112-0188-0 *This disturbing little novel is an excellent example of existentialist literature. Sartre paints a vivid picture of the shock we feel at recognizing our own status as a thing among other things in the world.*

Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays [tr. J. O'Brien], Vintage Books, New York, 1983. ISBN 0-679-73373-6 *The central essay in this volume contains the tiny excerpt we have in our reader and a lot more. Camus describes poignantly the absurd human endeavor to make life meaningful without recourse to traditional values.*

Thomas Flynn, Existentialism, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006. ISBN 978-0192804280 *This is an excellent little overview of existentialism by an important American philosopher. Flynn sets the philosophy of existentialism in historical context. He addresses common understandings and misunderstandings of existentialism and shows the relevance of existentialism in contemporary times.*