

## EXISTENTIALISM

### 1. Definition.

- a. "Existentialism" is a philosophical theory that holds that the norm of *authenticity* is necessary to grasp human existence.
- b. The term was explicitly adopted by Jean-Paul Sartre.
- c. Existentialism flourished in Europe in the 1940s and 50s.

### 2. Tenants.

- a. "Existence precedes essence." Our existence is more fundamental to who we are than some concept of objective human nature.
- b. We are radically free to determine who we are and what we do.
- c. Our freedom and our eventual demise necessarily leads to anxiety.
- d. We try to raise a bulwark of reason in the face of our absurd universe.
- e. To live an authentic life, we must recognise the absurdity of our universe and lack of objective meaning.
- f. We must decide for ourselves what we will consider meaningful, knowing our meaning is really a sham.
- g. The standard by which one assesses the rightness or wrongness of an individual's free choice is not whether it is a virtuous decision or in accordance with the objective world but whether it's authentic and genuine.
- h. "Matter exists eternally; God does not exist. Death is extinction of personality and individuality. Through our innate and autonomous human reason, including the methods of science, we can know the universe. The cosmos, including this world, is understood to be in its normal state. Ethics is related only to human beings. History is a linear stream of events linked by cause and effect but without an overarching purpose."<sup>1</sup>
- i. "Human beings are complex 'machines'; personality is an interrelation of chemical and physical properties we do not yet fully understand. For human beings alone existence precedes essence; people make themselves who they are."<sup>2</sup>
- j. "Each person is totally free as regards his or her nature and destiny. ... Each of us is uncoerced, radically capable of doing anything imaginable with our subjectivity. We can think, will, imagine, dream, project visions, consider, ponder, invent. Each of us is king of our own subjective world."<sup>3</sup>
- k. "The highly wrought and tightly organized objective world stands over against human beings and appears absurd."<sup>4</sup>
- l. "When we die, each of us is just an object among other objects. So, says Camus, we must ever live in the face of the absurd."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed., Kindle Locations 1295-97.

<sup>2</sup> James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed., Kindle Locations 1321-22.

<sup>3</sup> James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed., Kindle Locations 1333-35.

<sup>4</sup> James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed., Kindle Locations 1340-41.

<sup>5</sup> James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed., Kindle Locations 1347-48.

- m. “In full recognition of and against the absurdity of the objective world, the authentic person must revolt and create value.”<sup>6</sup>
- n. Human freedom is intrinsically valuable and the foundation of all other values.
- o. Personal authenticity is an almost categorical moral imperative.
- p. Themes associated with existentialism are: dread, boredom, alienation, the absurd, freedom, commitment, and nothingness.

### 3. Proponents.

- a. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55).
  - (1) One cannot arrive at synthesis by reason but by a leap of faith. This implies a total separation of reason and faith.
  - (2) If mans wants to deal with the really important things of human life (purpose, significance, love), he must discard reason and make a gigantic, non-rational leap of faith.
  - (3) All hope of a uniform field of knowledge must be abandoned.<sup>7</sup>
- b. Friedrich Nietzsche ([ ]).
- c. Karl Jaspers (1883-1969).
  - (1) Each person needs to wait for a non-rational final experience which will give meaning to life. This final experience cannot be communicated or rationally discussed. “I know I had an experience.”<sup>8</sup>
- d. Simone de Beauvoir.
- e. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976).
  - (1) We must authenticate yourself through feeling the dread, *angst*, of something that is beyond your comprehension, and that is all.
- f. Aldous Huxley (d. 1894-1963).
  - (1) A rational unified answer to knowledge and life is impossible.
  - (2) An irrational experience is needed to make some sense of life.
  - (3) We should aim for a “first-order experience” though drugs.
  - (4) This experience is not open to communication.<sup>9</sup>
- g. Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961).
  - (1) Life is “a short day’s journey from nothingness to nothingness.”<sup>10</sup>
  - (2) To give meaning to nothingness, we should taste life to the fullest—experience everything, feel everything, do everything.
  - (3) Even death can be overcome if treated as another experience, the most exciting and interesting experience of all.

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<sup>6</sup> James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed., Kindle Locations 1349-50.

<sup>7</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*.

<sup>8</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*.

<sup>9</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*.

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- (4) At age sixty-one, Hemingway loaded his favorite gun, seated himself in the foyer of his Idaho home, braced the butt of the gun on the floor, put the barrel in his mouth, and pulled the trigger.<sup>11</sup>
- h. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80).
- (1) We live in an absurd universe. The total is ridiculous.
- (2) Nevertheless, each person must try to authenticate himself by an act of the will.
- (a) “Man is absurd, but he must grimly act as if he were not.”<sup>12</sup>
- (3) To authenticate yourself, content is unimportant. Just choose and act.
- (4) “There are no divine judges or controllers. The world is all there is, our existence is all we have.”<sup>13</sup>
- (5) “You are your life, and that’s all you are.”<sup>14</sup>
- (6) “Interestingly enough, on his deathbed, Sartre confessed that he believed his life did have purpose, that there had to be some reason he was in the world. His lover was shocked and felt betrayed by this confession, since it put the lie to everything he had said and written during his life. But in the end, Sartre himself could not live with the implications of his ideas. Most other people cannot either.”<sup>15</sup>
- (7) Read *Nausea*, *No Exit*, or *Being and Nothingness*.
- i. Albert Camus (1913-60).
- (1) Since the universe is without a master, all that’s left for the absurd hero is to exercise his free choice and rebel, thereby becoming his own master.<sup>16</sup>
- (2) Read *The Myth of Sisyphus*.
- (3) “Since I have been coming to church, I have been thinking a great deal about the idea of a transcendent, something that is other than this world.... And since I have been reading the Bible, I sense that there is something—I don’t know if it is personal or if it is a great idea or powerful influence—but there is something that can bring meaning to my life.”<sup>17</sup>
- j. Martin Buber.
- k. Rudolf Bultmann.
- l. Paul Tillich.
- m. Karl Barth.
- n. Viktor Frankl.
- o. Woody Allen (1935-).
- p. U. S. Supreme Court (1992).
- (1) “These matters [marriage, procreation, contraception, family relationships, child rearing, education], involving the most intimate and personal choices a person may make in a lifetime, choices central to personal dignity and autonomy, are

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?*, 260.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*.

<sup>15</sup> Glenn S. Sunshine, *Why You Think the Way You Do*, 178-179.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?*, 254.

<sup>17</sup> Albert Camus in dialogue with Howard Mumma, in Mumma, *Albert Camus and the Minister*.

central to the liberty protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life. Beliefs about these matters could not define the attributes of personhood were they formed under compulsion of the State.”<sup>18</sup>

- q. Many writers and artists are linked to existentialism: Fyodor Dostoevsky, Henrik Ibsen, Franz Kafka, André Malraux, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Jean-Luc Godard, Ingmar Bergman, and Woody Allen.

#### 4. Types.

- a. Religious.
- b. Atheistic.

#### 5. Strengths.

- a. It wrestles honestly with the problems created by nihilism.
  - (1) “[E]xistentialism’s major interest is in our humanity and how we can be significant in an otherwise insignificant world.”<sup>19</sup>
- b. It views human beings as being different from nature, if only subjectively.
- c. It serves as a religion for many atheists.
  - (1) The writing of even “atheist” existentialists *feels* religious to its readers.
- d. It protests against academic philosophy, systems, and the “iron cage” of reason.
- e. It recognises philosophy cannot be practiced in the disinterested manner of an objective science.

#### 6. Weaknesses.

- a. Existentialism is “nihilism-lite.”
  - (1) “Existentialism is essentially nihilism-lite. It gets its name from the axiom that ‘existence precedes essence,’ that is, that our existence is more fundamental to who we are than some concept of human nature. This means that we are radically free to determine what we do and who we are. This freedom, and the knowledge of our eventual demise, leads to anxiety—a common theme in existentialist writings and ubiquitous in Woody Allen films — against which we try to raise a bulwark of reason in the face of an absurd universe (another ubiquitous Woody Allen theme). Ultimately, to live an authentic life, we need to recognize the absurdity and lack of objective meaning in the world and then to decide for ourselves what we will consider meaningful, knowing that our ‘meaning’ is a sham—but following through with it anyway. This obviously echoes Nietzsche’s *übermensch* but on a much less earth-shattering level.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Justice Anthony Kennedy, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992).

<sup>19</sup> James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed., Kindle Locations 1298-99.

<sup>20</sup> Glenn S. Sunshine, *Why You Think the Way You Do*, 178-179.

- (2) “Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; . . . his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms.”<sup>21</sup>
  - (3) “Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.”<sup>22</sup>
  - (4) Existentialism is a philosophy of despair. Instead of humbling oneself to God and his revelation, it surrenders to nihilism.
- b. It forces us to live a lie.
- (1) “[T]he exaltation of mankind devalues humanity in another way, a way that has appeared in modern existentialist philosophy. If man is indeed the measure of things then life is without meaning or value, for each of us knows that we do not contain the meaning of life within ourselves. Having striven to become sovereigns of the universe we have become meaningless victims of a vast cosmic bad joke: able to conceive of meaning when there is none. Thus, even before the appearance of God, our quest for total self-sufficiency has reduced us to nothing. How much more will that be true when we see him in *the splendor of his might*.”<sup>23</sup>
- c. It gives up on any kind of objectivity and surrenders totally to subjectivity.
- (1) “Your business is to fix [your patient’s] attention on the stream [of consciousness]. Teach him to call it ‘real life’ and don’t let him ask what he means by ‘real.’”<sup>24</sup>
- d. It necessitates an irrational leap of faith.
- (1) “Every truly modern man is forced to accept some sort of leap in theory or practice, because the pressure of his own humanity demands it.”<sup>25</sup>
  - (2) “Whether it is the existentialist speaking, or Aldous Huxley, or Eastern mysticism, we find a uniform need for an irrational experience to make some sense of life. Their views have brought them to a wall, and by an unrelated leap of faith they hope to clear the wall. Each of their views may be distinguished in detailed description, but they have come to the same wall and are making the same attempt to clear it. Each case involves a nonrational leap of faith.”<sup>26</sup>
- e. It produces an extreme form of narcissism.
- (1) “Psychologies of narcissism fall into the mainstream of the new American society in stressing the importance of the experiences of life. As materialism gives way to the new spiritualism, what is possessed seems less important than what is experienced. People would rather save for a luxurious vacation than a luxurious car. Experience is important because it is composed of sensations, and sensations are all that is left of man after the reductionisms of both behaviorism and pantheism destroy his being. For both behaviorists and pantheists human life

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<sup>21</sup> Bertrand Russell, *A Free Man’s Worship*.

<sup>22</sup> Bertrand Russell, *A Free Man’s Worship*.

<sup>23</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 124.

<sup>24</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (1959).

<sup>25</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*.

<sup>26</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 39.

consists of a succession of sensations inhering in nothing. Without experiencing sensations, then, man loses his identity, even his existence.”<sup>27</sup>

- f. It cannot and will not stand against injustice.
  - (1) “The demand for personal experience is completely self-centered, capable of being fully as costly as the demand for things. When it is driven by the religious need to validate life itself, it is incapable of considering any form of justice that may conflict with self-interest.”<sup>28</sup>
  - (2) Example: Jean-Paul Sartre and the Algerian Revolution.
- g. It eliminates communication about reality between human beings.
  - (1) “The built-in trouble with all these existential experiences is that the content of such an experience is not open to communication.”<sup>29</sup>
- h. It is not really liveable.
  - (1) “Absurdity and cuteness are fine to chuckle over and perhaps to muse upon. But they are no place to live. They provide no shelter or direction for being human.”<sup>30</sup>
  - (2) If there is no God, then the universe is a freak show. But I do not experience it as a freak show.<sup>31</sup>

## 7. Biblical Response.

- a. God is there.
- b. God is not silent.
- c. God has created a real, objective world of which we are a part.
- d. God has also created man as a real, personal, relational, communicative being.
- e. God has designed man with the capacity to understand and interact with the objective world.
- f. Man possesses a “mannishness” from which he cannot escape.<sup>32</sup>

## 8. Danger for Christians.

- a. Beware of those who, in order to express the leap of faith they are forced to take, use Christian symbols, not to express Christian concepts, but an irrational mysticism.<sup>33</sup>
  - (1) Example: viewing Genesis 1-11 as paradigmatic mythology and not history.
- b. “As Christians, we must not slip into our own form of existential methodology. We do this if we try to keep hold of the value system, the meaning system, and the ‘religious matters’ given in the Bible, while playing down what the Bible affirms about the cosmos, history, and specific commands in morals. We are following our own form of existential methodology if we put what the Bible says about the cosmos, history, and absolute commands in morals in the realm of the culturally oriented. If we do this, the

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<sup>27</sup> Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction*, 167.

<sup>28</sup> Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction*, 168.

<sup>29</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 40.

<sup>30</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 11.

<sup>31</sup> John Updike.

<sup>32</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*.

<sup>33</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*.

generation which follows will certainly be undercut as far as historic Christianity is concerned. But also, if we ourselves bear the central mark of our generation, we cannot at this moment in history be the voice we should be to our poor and fractured generation; we cannot be the restorative salt which Christians are supposed to be to their generation and their culture if in regard to the Scriptures we, too, are marked by the existential methodology. If we are so marked, we then have no real absolute by which to help, or by which to judge, the culture, state, and society.”<sup>34</sup>

- c. Because the New Zealand church abandoned the Bible and gravitated toward experience, that is, Christian existentialism, it is weak today.

## 9. Application.

- a. Ground your experience of God in Scripture. Don’t skip the Bible and jump to an experience with God.

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<sup>34</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*

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