

Chapter 1

What Is Existentialism?

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering what existentialism is
 - ▶ Understanding that existentialism is a philosophy
 - ▶ Seeing existentialism in an historical context
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Existentialism is the philosophy that makes life possible.

As incomplete as this statement seems, when you understand what it means you're well on your way to understanding what existentialism is all about and what the existentialists saw themselves as doing.

But if existentialism is the philosophy that makes life possible, you may ask why you need a philosophy for that. Doesn't oxygen do a pretty good job? Yes, quite good — if all you want to do is breathe. According to the existentialists, however, you want to live a full and authentic human life, a rewarding and fulfilling life that embraces your human dignity. For that, they say, you need, at a minimum, oxygen *and* a healthy dose of existentialism. To understand why, it may help to consider that many philosophies come about as responses to a problem. Necessity is, after all, the mother of invention.

On a very general level, the problem the existentialists were concerned with was the problem of meaning. Human beings crave meaning; they crave an orderly universe that they can make sense of. When you find that the universe isn't going to cooperate, when you discover that the stories you've told yourself in an attempt to force it to have meaning have ceased to work, you feel like you're a stranger in the world.

This historical circumstance is precisely the one that the existentialists found themselves in. As the scientific and Industrial Revolutions came to a head in the 19th century, and society became increasingly secularized, the traditional social order underwent radical change in a very short time. During

this period, people began to feel disconnected from the traditional belief systems that had helped them make sense of the world and of their lives. In these conditions, people may not literally commit suicide, but a kind of spiritual death — a spiritual suicide — becomes a very real danger. It occurs when people give up to resignation and surrender in the face of what they see as the pointlessness of their existence.



Existentialism is the philosophy that recognizes this problem and attempts to address it. If you want to spruce up the description we start with, you might say that existentialism is the philosophy that makes an authentically human life possible in a meaningless and absurd world.

Because the existentialists were fiercely independent and differed widely in both their precise analyses of this problem and in the details of their responses, presenting a more detailed definition — one that's both illuminating and accurate — is hard to do. What unites the existentialists, besides the problems of meaning and existence with which they all wrestled, is a series of themes and concerns that informed their discussion of these issues. We have, to a large extent, organized this book by these different themes and concerns.

Existentialism Is a Philosophy

If you've ever asked, "What does it all mean?" or "Why are we here?" or "What should I do with my life?" you've asked an existential question. Of course, these questions have been around since humans came down from the trees. Or at least since after they perfected farming, settled down, and had time for questions beyond "Where will I get my next meal?" and "Is the big toothy thing dangerous?" and "Will eating those mushrooms prevent me from living long enough to have offspring who will someday ask about the meaning of life?"



But asking a deep question doesn't make you a philosopher. What makes existentialism a *philosophy* of existence? Philosophers analyze, they pick apart, and they try to come up with reasons for their beliefs and reasoned answers for their questions. They also tend to develop systems, but as we discuss in Chapter 3, the existentialists aren't big fans of systems. In the most primitive times, human beings didn't have the time or the literacy necessary for such extended reflection and investigation. Even in today's remarkably literate society, the situation is much the same. Think of your own life. You may have asked existential questions from time to time, but between taking the kids to soccer practice, meeting your boss's or teacher's latest deadline, and doing your taxes, have you had the time to come up with much in the way of a detailed answer?

Is existentialism *really* a philosophy?

Some have argued that existentialism, especially as espoused by its earliest thinkers, can't be called a philosophy, because philosophy seeks reasons and proceeds on the basis of rational and logical arguments. An important aspect of existentialism is its *irrationalism* — its belief that rationality isn't the only or even the primary mode of human understanding and relating to the world. Further, much of the philosophy is communicated through novels, poetry, and parables. These factors have led many in the philosophical community to be dismissive of the existentialist movement as a branch of philosophy. We maintain, as many who study existentialism do, that the

existentialists developed their positions and discovered much that is true through the use of careful reasoning. Does this make them hypocrites? Not at all. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's hero tells of meeting an ear that he only later realized was attached to the withered husk of a man. He is told that the ear-man is a great man, but Zarathustra believes he has suffered from having overdeveloped only one part of himself. The existentialists don't make this mistake; they reject the exclusive or overdevelopment of reason and embrace a broader perspective, but they don't reject their philosophical roots entirely.

Philosophy develops when a society gets to the point at which at least some of the people within it have the leisure not only to sit around asking these questions, but also to work out detailed, reasoned responses. Because of philosophy's complex and abstract nature, it also helps if you can write this stuff down. The oral tradition is great for telling historical and religious stories. These stories have great complexity, weight, and depth, and many — like the epic of Gilgamesh — are even existential in nature. The powerful themes and concepts that underlie these stories were fully abstracted from those stories only with the advent of writing. The gods' involvement in the battle of Troy over the most beautiful woman in the world is a great story to tell at the campfire over a few beers. You can hear it again and again until you know it by heart and can start telling it yourself and discussing what it means at the next campfire over a few more beers. Plato's theory of the forms? Heidegger's theory of Dasein? Sartre's explanation of the for-itself? Not so much.

By the time philosophy got up and running, then, many of these big questions already had answers that were widely accepted — even if they weren't true or very helpful. With pockets of exceptions and the stray rebel here and there, this general acceptance lasted until the end of the Middle Ages. Only then do you see the first real stirrings of modern existentialism, but even then, the philosophy is a quiet whisper in the wind for centuries: a monologue in Shakespeare, maybe a few stanzas in Milton. By the 18th century, elements of what became existentialism started cropping up regularly in literature and even philosophy; the whisper grew to a loud murmur. In the 19th

century, it sprang to life as a cry in the desert, and by the 20th century, it was shouted from one side of the Atlantic to the other.

The Top Ten Existential Themes

What unifies the existentialists are the themes and concerns that tend to show up in their work. Here are the top ten themes that recur again and again in existential philosophy, as well as in art, literature, movies, and any number of other fields:

- ✔ **Absurdity:** For the existentialists, life is absurd; it makes no sense and has no meaning or ultimate purpose, but human beings need it to make sense, to have meaning and purpose.
- ✔ **Rejection of meaning-giving narratives:** It isn't enough to say that life is absurd; the existentialists repeatedly make the point that when philosophy, religion, or science tries to make sense of it, the attempts always fail.
- ✔ **Alienation:** This is the feeling that you're a stranger in your own life, a stranger in the world.
- ✔ **Anxiety:** This is the feeling of unease you get when you start to recognize that life is absurd.
- ✔ **Forlornness:** This is the feeling of loneliness you get when you realize that no one can help you make sense of your existence.
- ✔ **Responsibility:** Everyone bears responsibility. If no one is going to give you a guidebook to life, you have to bear responsibility for making your way through it and creating some kind of meaning for it.
- ✔ **Authenticity:** People want authenticity — to live in a way that's in tune with the truth of who they are as human beings and the world they live in.
- ✔ **Individuality:** An important part of developing an authentic and satisfying life is individuality. Reason, science, and systems that try to cover up the absurdity of life often take individuality from you.
- ✔ **Passion/engagement:** Being passionate or engaged is another important aspect of living an authentic life, and it's under attack from the same forces that take away your individuality.
- ✔ **Death:** This is the ultimate context for all human actions and an important source of the absurdity of life.

Why is it called existentialism?

A more technical definition of existentialism reveals the reason for its name. Existentialism is the study of *existence*. If you take existence to be everything that exists — such as chairs and tables, people and llamas — all philosophy, science, and religion would seem to have the same subject. But existentialism isn't the study of everything *that* exists; it's the study of *existence* itself — the study of what it means for

something to exist at all as opposed to not existing. It's also the study of what it means for *something*, as opposed to *nothing*, to exist at all. Of course, the primary focus of existentialism is a particular kind of existence, the kind of existence that includes existing things like you, because you're aware of your existence and capable of questioning it.

Existentialism's Place in the History of Philosophy

In the ancient world, philosophy was the study of everything there was to study. The specialization in most modern endeavors simply wasn't present. This gave philosophy a broad perspective; nothing was off limits. The place of human beings in the universe and the meaning of life were questions to which the earliest philosophers gave ample attention. Thinkers from Epicurus, who advised the pursuit of pleasure, to Aristotle, who advocated the pursuit of philosophy, tried to determine what constituted the good life and how it could be attained.

Socrates and Plato, two of the earliest and greatest of the major philosophers, were particularly concerned with how a person should live. For them, the issue was moral and spiritual. Plato saw justice as the right ordering of the soul and compared the philosopher to a doctor whose job it is to look after the health and well-being of the soul. Philosophy, then, was a highly pragmatic activity aimed at living well.

As society and philosophy developed, however, this orientation changed. Over the centuries, the overall tendency in philosophy was to become more and more specialized and more and more abstract. Indeed, after Sir Isaac Newton became everyone's paradigm for knowledge, philosophy aimed more and more at being scientific. Questions about the meaning of life and health of the soul gave way to more technical issues, well removed from the concerns of everyday life. Even ethics became a narrow discipline of separating right from wrong, as opposed to determining what makes an entire life successful.

This is where philosophy was when existentialism burst upon the scene and why existentialism was seen as such a radical departure from philosophy as it had come to be practiced. We think that in many ways existentialism represents a return to the roots of philosophy, a return to the ancients' concern with living well and even to their concern with the health of the soul. Although most of the existentialists wouldn't accept the existence of a soul in the sense that Plato gives it in his more spiritual moments, they were certainly concerned with the health of all those things traditionally associated with the soul, such as will, vitality, joy, and mental strength.