

# EXISTENTIALISM

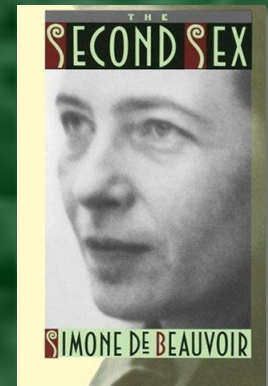
- **Existentialism**, any of various philosophies, most influential in continental Europe from about 1930 to the mid-20th century, that have in common an interpretation of human existence in the world that stresses its concreteness and its problematic character.

# Existentialism:

- Concerned with the *existential* (living, concrete):  
*Who am I? What does my life mean? Why do I feel guilty? Why am I afraid? What am I to do?*
- Not a specific school of philosophy but any philosophy that says that meaning and choice as they affect individuals is what is most important.
- Concerns: the meaning of the individual, freedom, living an authentic life, alienation, and mortality.
- Inevitable in modern age? Postindustrial, highly specialized, technical, “sophisticated” society creates loss of individuality, pressure to conform, threat to human freedom: the massing of society.

# Existentialism (cont.):

- Most fashionable philosophy in Europe immediately following WWII.
- Flourished in universities, journalism, among intellectuals, in poems, novels, plays, films.
- Major figures in 19th century: Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche.
- Major figures in 20th century: Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre.



**There are several versions of  
existentialism, so we will concentrate  
on six main points:**

1. Individual Essence
2. Subjectivity
3. Choice and Commitment
4. Dread and Anxiety
5. Absurdity
6. Alienation

# Individual Existence

- 1. Many philosophers outside of Existentialism have declared that the highest ethical good is the same for everyone. As one seeks to achieve moral perfection, they resemble other persons seeking moral perfection.
- Existentialists reject this and say that the highest good for people is to find their own unique vocation. The herd thinking of copying other “morally good” individuals is just an illusion of happiness. Do we really know something to be right or wrong? What if the things we are doing are really quite the opposite of what we think?

- 2. Existentialists believe that one must choose one's own way without the aid of universal, objective standards. Against the traditional view that moral choice involves an objective view of right and wrong, existentialists argue that no rational, objective basis can be found for moral decisions.
- **\*\*Existence precedes essence--**we first exist and then we must find our own unique vocation that will become our essence. We cannot be confined by other societal constructs of happiness, this would be our essence preceding our existence and limiting our own individual freedom to independently exist.

# Subjectivity

- the importance of passionate individual action in deciding questions of both morality and truth.
- 1. In reference to the above issue of moral choice, existentialists argue that personal experience and acting on one's own convictions are essential in arriving at the truth.
- 2. The understanding of a situation by someone involved in that situation is superior to that of a detached, objective observer. They argue that the most important questions in life are not accessible to reason or science.

- 3. To mess with your mind even more, they go so far as to say that science is not as rational as is commonly supposed. They asserted that the scientific assumption of an orderly universe is for the most part a useful fiction.
- \*\*Truth is unique for each individual, and it is important to use one's personal experiences to arrive at truth. Objectivity is a futile passion.



# Choice and Commitment

- Humanity's primary distinction is the freedom to choose. Human beings do not have a fixed nature, or essence, as other animals and plants do; each human being makes choices that create his or her own nature.

- Choice is central to human existence. It makes us unique from other life forms on earth. It is inescapable, even the refusal to choose is a choice. Freedom of choice, therefore, entails commitment and responsibility.
- *“Man is condemned to be free”* quotation. Because individuals are free to choose their own path (*FREE WILL*), they must accept the risk and responsibility of following their commitment wherever it leads.
- \*\*We must look at a character’s choices and see that they are committed to the responsibility of those choices. How does a character’s choices form their own essence?

# RECAP

Existence



Essence

- Subjectivity – we must subjectively decide to find an essence
- This essence/end goal must be personally valid for the individual
- Choice – We must make choices that help us to find our essence and keep us on the right path
- Commitment – if we do not commit to these choices, then we will never find our unique vocation (individual essence).
- If we do commit to these choices, we will eventually find the unique essence that we have determined to be personally valid.

# Dread and Anxiety

- this is the general notion that we are guided to make certain choices by a general feeling of apprehension, which is called dread.
- 1. Our dread will guide us in making choices that are morally justifiable by us. It is a calling for each of us to make a commitment to a personally valid way of life.

- 2. Along with dread, we also have anxiety about the choices that we make. We realize that at any moment in time, we have total freedom of choice. Since there are so many options open, we will feel anxiety about the things that we do. It keeps us on our toes, so to speak, in reference to the moral certainty of the choices that we make.
- \*\*Through choice and commitment, we will look at how a character goes about justifying the decisions that he/she makes and how that forms his/her own unique essence.

# Absurdity

- Anxiety will lead us to a realization that many existentialists have called the ABSURD.
- 1. Basically, we must, at some time, confront nothingness and realize the impossibility of finding ultimate justification for the choices that we must make. So we fret and fumble about the choices we make by our feelings of dread and anxiety, but in all reality our existence is so infinitely small in the scope of the whole universe that it really doesn't matter.

- 2. It is absurd to think that we were put on this planet to make these choices that cannot be justified by anyone or anything. Humans have constructed justification systems (general goodwill toward man, not breaking the law, etc.) but in all reality, these are futile efforts to establish truth with no real justification.
- *I am my own existence, but this existence is absurd. Each of us is simply here, thrown into this time and place--but why now? Why here?*
- *Human beings require a rational basis for their lives but are unable to achieve one, and thus human life is a “futile passion.”*

- **\*\***Through the idea of absurdity, we will look at how a character attempts to justify his/her own existence. If human existence is a futile passion, what has a certain character done to try to establish a concrete reason for existing? How does the idea of the absurd construct our view of a character?



# Alienation

- 1. If we are to find our own unique vocation in life, then we must alienate those around us, or see them as otherness.
- 2. We have sought to justify our existence through a world of material possessions that has served to alienate us from finding our true selves, and therefore, from nature and each other.

- 3. Even if we seek to alienate ourselves from the social system, a world of material possessions and bureaucracies, we do not know that our desires are system-determined and system-determining. We are alienated because we are a paradox. We are defined in reference to a system that we seek to avoid. Even people that try to be unique are still adhering to the social system that has guided their life up to the point that they made the choice to “be different.”

- **\*\***How has a character tried to alienate himself/herself from the social system? Has a character really and truly made a choice that allow him/her a unique vocation in life? How does the alienation from self, society, and nature affect an individual's choices?

# Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)



- Born in Copenhagen, Denmark.
- Generally thought to be founder of existentialism.
- Kierkegaard thought that the individual, the personal, the subjective aspects of human life are the most important.



# Kierkegaard (cont.):

- Most important human activity is decision-making: through our choices, we create our lives and become ourselves.
- Scientific objectivity is dangerous: reveals facts and truths but not *the truth*. Felt people were too dependent on experts to point out way to salvation or personal growth.
- **Authenticity** results when an individual lives honestly and courageously in the moment without refuge in excuses, and without reliance on groups or institutions for meaning or purpose.
- **In-authenticity** results when the nature and needs of the individual are ignored, denied or made less important than institutions, abstractions, or groups.

# Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980):



- Born in Paris; internationally known philosopher, novelist, playwright. Awarded Nobel Prize in literature in 1964; turned it down.
- **Existence precedes essence:** We have no “given nature;” we become who we are through freedom of choice and moral responsibility.
- We are born into existence that has no divine purpose; life is often absurd or horrible and the only true values are the ones we create for ourselves.
- **“Bad faith”:** when people are too terrified to face the freedom and responsibility of choice and revert to old existing norms and rules (religious).
- **“Commitment”:** Choosing and living in accord with the choice.



# Jean-Paul Sartre (cont.):

- WWII: Joined the French army in 1939. Captured and imprisoned by Germans for nine months. Released for poor health; contributed to Sartre's belief that evil is not an abstraction; it is real and concrete.
- Any attempt to rationalize or deny evil fails: an ordered universe governed by a loving, powerful God is not possible; the universe is indifferent to us. Science is not a certainty given that concentration camps were both "scientific" and "rationally ordered." Even the order of Nature is a delusion; nature does not care about us.
- Belief in these ideas are attempts to evade the awesomeness of choice.

# Albert Camus (1913-1960)

- Author of “existential” or “absurdist” novels: *The Stranger* (1942), *The Plague* (1947), *The Fall* (1956).
- Coined description “absurd”: the situation in which human beings demand that their lives should have significance in an indifferent universe which is itself totally without meaning or purpose.
- Believed we must respond to the absurd by refusing to give into the despair caused by the realization of life’s meaninglessness; instead, we must rebel against our cosmic circumstances by choosing to live life to the fullest.







# Camus (cont.):

- Born in Algeria to working-class parents. Father was killed in WWI.
- Studied at the University of Algeria until diagnosed with tuberculosis. Later completed studies.
- Joined French Communist Party in 1935 to fight inequities he saw in treatment of native Algerians and French colonists. Later criticized communism, which led to break with Sartre.
- In Paris during WWII, joined French Resistance cell called *Combat*; wrote for underground publication.
- Awarded Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957.
- died in car accident in 1960.

# *The Myth of Sisyphus*

- Camus' 1942 essay which introduces the idea of the absurd.
- The myth: As punishment from the gods for trickery, Sisyphus was forced to roll a huge boulder up a steep hill, but just before he reached the top, the rock would roll back down the hill, forcing him to begin again.
- The punishment is both frustrating and pointless; to Camus, life is similarly absurd in that it, too, is pointless.
- In the essay, he offers his solution to this situation.



# *The Plague* (1947)

- Novel set in North African city of Oran.
- A plague hits the city, which is eventually quarantined.
- Thought to be based on cholera epidemic that hit Oran in 1849.



- Existential themes presented in novel. Represents humanity's response to the "absurd."
- Also read as metaphorical treatment of French Resistance to Nazi Occupation in WWII.