

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
 - Merleau-Ponty vs. Sartre [1953 letters]
 - current research: politics & existentialism
- care and hope: ideals without idealism

Some Resources:

Walter Kaufmann (ed.), Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, Meridian, New York, 1975.

Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals [tr. Kaufmann & Hollingsdale], Viking Press, New York, 1989. ISBN0-679-72462-1

Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, Vintage Books, New York, 1989. ISBN 0-679-72451-6

Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness [tr. H. Barnes], Pocket Books, New York, 1956. ISBN 0-671-83405-3-395

-----, Nausea [tr. L. Alexander], New Directions, Publishing, New York, 1964. ISBN 0-8112-0188-0

Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays [tr. J. O'Brien], Vintage Books, New York, 1983. ISBN 0-679-73373-6