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experience



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Existentialism, philosophical movement or tendency, emphasizing individual existence, freedom, and choice, that influenced many diverse writers in the 19th and 20th centuries. Because of the diversity of positions associated with existentialism, the term is impossible to define precisely.

Certain themes common to virtually all existentialist writers can, however, be identified. The term itself suggests one major theme: the stress on concrete individual existence and, consequently, on subjectivity, individual freedom, and choice. Most philosophers since Plato have held that the highest ethical good is the same for everyone; insofar as one approaches moral perfection, one resembles other morally perfect individuals. The 19th-century Danish philosopher Sren Kierkegaard, who was the first writer to call himself existential, reacted against this tradition by insisting that the highest good for the individual is to find his or her own unique vocation. As he wrote in his journal, I must find a truth that is true for me . . .

the idea for which I can live or die. Other existentialist writers have echoed Kierkegaard's belief 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 judgment of right and wrong, existentialists have argued that no objective, rational basis can be found for moral decisions.

The 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche further contended that the individual must decide which situations are to count as moral situations. All existentialists have followed Kierkegaard in stressing the importance of passionate individual action in deciding questions of both morality and truth. They have insisted, accordingly, that personal experience

and acting on one's own convictions are essential in arriving at the truth. Thus, the understanding of a situation by someone involved in that situation is superior to that of a detached, objective observer. This emphasis on the perspective of the individual agent has also made existentialists suspicious of systematic reasoning. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and other existentialist writers have been deliberately unsystematic in the exposition of their philosophies, preferring to express themselves in aphorisms, dialogues, parables, and other literary forms. Despite their antirationalist position, however, most existentialists cannot be said to be irrationalists in the sense of denying all validity to rational thought.

They have held that rational clarity is desirable wherever possible, but that the most important questions in life are not accessible to reason or science. Furthermore, they have argued that even science is not as rational as is commonly supposed. Nietzsche, for instance, asserted that the scientific assumption of an orderly universe is for the most part a useful fiction.

Perhaps the most prominent theme in existentialist writing is that of choice. Humanity's primary distinction, in the view of most existentialists, is the freedom to choose. Existentialists have held that 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. In the formulation of the 20th-century French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, existence precedes essence. Choice is therefore central to human existence, and it is inescapable; even the refusal to choose is a choice. Freedom of choice entails commitment and responsibility.

Because individuals are free to choose their own path, existentialists have argued, they must accept the risk and responsibility of following their commitment wherever it leads. Kierkegaard held that it is spiritually crucial to recognize that one experiences not only a fear of specific objects but also a feeling of general apprehension, which he called dread. He interpreted it as God's way of calling each individual to make a commitment to a personally valid way of life.

The word anxiety (German Angst) has a similarly crucial role in the work of the 20th-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger; anxiety leads to the individual's confrontation with nothingness and with the impossibility of finding ultimate justification for the choices he or she must make. In the philosophy of Sartre, the word nausea is used for the individual's recognition of the pure contingency of the universe, and the word anguish is used for the recognition of the total freedom of choice that confronts the individual at every moment. Existentialism as a distinct philosophical and literary movement belongs to the 19th and 20th