Existentialism
Definition

• Existentialism = a philosophical movement which holds that individual human beings alone are responsible for creating meaning in their lives

• Since it focuses so much attention on individual choice, this movement is understandably rather eclectic in character (some existentialists seem to differ greatly from one another)

• This movement began in the 19th century and still is popular today
Major themes in existentialism

- Dread
- Boredom
- Anxiety
- Alienation
- The Absurd
- Nothingness
- Freedom
- Authenticity
- Commitment
Noted existentialists

- Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)
- Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)
- Albert Camus (1913-1960)
- Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)
- Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)

Related figures:
Feodor Dostoevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche, Franz Kafka
Note the contrast with Rene Descartes’ thought

- **Descartes**: Humans can doubt all existence but cannot will away or doubt the thinking consciousness; this is more real than anything else in the world.

- **An existentialist**: Descartes is wrong. As human beings, we find ourselves in a world initially not of our own making. It is a given, something that we cannot will away. We are, according to Heidegger, “thrown” into the world. The ultimate reality is thus not a thinking consciousness but “being in the world.”

- In this indifferent if not hostile world, a meaningless or even absurd place, we are alone. The solitude of human existence is a fundamental feature of reality.
Existence precedes essence

• A human being’s existence comes before any meaning which can be given to our existence. Later, we can define our own reality, create meaning out of nothingness, but at first we don’t choose our reality.

• Note the contrast with most other thinkers (e.g., Aristotle: man is a rational animal)
Soren Kierkegaard: an important early voice

• Kierkegaard was a 19th-century Danish thinker
• He was raised as a Lutheran
• He especially drew attention to the state of nothingness that we are thrown into or encounter. This causes a sense of anxiety or dread within us, a feeling that there is no purpose to existence. Kierkegaard found this feeling difficult to reconcile with his belief in God.
More on Kierkegaard

- Kierkegaard rejects the use of reason to deal with this anxiety, this dread.
- In his view, people should make decisions and organize their lives based on what has meaning for them.
- Giving meaning to existence is something subjective, not objective.
- We should embrace our freedom and uniqueness.
Position regarding God?

• Like many existentialists, Kierkegaard maintains that belief in God is a personal choice made on the basis of one’s life experiences, observations, reflections, intuitions and faith

• Whether one believes in God or not, we have to accept the consequences of that choice

• Responsibility for one’s actions will become a basic principle in Existentialism
Some existentialists will emphasize the need to create one’s own values

- Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) had a major influence on some of these thinkers
- He criticized Christianity and its “slave morality,” wrote instead about the trans-valuation of values
- In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1891), claimed that “God is dead”
- He reintroduced the theme of the eternal recurrence, or repetition, the lack of a new direction or meaning in life
- Allusion to Greek myths, Sisyphus as the archetypal absurd hero
Along with traditional religion, Existentialists will also have some doubts about science and technology.

- Many existentialists like Martin Heidegger felt that science and technology have alienated mankind from nature and his fellow man.
- They thought that man is generally unable to control science and technology.
Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)

- French existentialist
- Longtime companion of Simone de Beauvoir
- Father died when he was two; after his mother remarried when he was 12 and he had to move to a new town, he was frequently bullied at school
- This caused him to develop an independent spirit
- He studied philosophy in college, taught high school in the late 1920s and 1930s
- He was called up for military duty at the start of WWII, then captured
- After he was released from captivity, he joined the French resistance
- Wrote *Being and Nothingness* (1943), many plays (Dirty Hands and No Exit, e.g.), some novels also (see his book Nausea)
- “Hell is other people”
- After WWII, he became a Marxist; he never joined the French Communist Party, though
- Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964 but refused to accept it
Influence of Sartre?

• In the long term, Sartre’s influence has probably not been as great as other Existentialist philosophers.

• However, it is worth noting that Sartre’s opposition to colonialism after WWII won him many admirers in the Third World (see for instance Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist and political theorist from the French Caribbean).
Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1996)

- French existentialist and feminist
- Wrote nonfiction (*The Second Sex* (1949), e.g.) and fiction
- Characteristic quote: “One is not born, but rather one becomes, a woman” (*On ne nait pas femme; on le devient*)
- Challenged preconceived roles, especially for females
- She felt that society conditions females to behave in a certain way, telling them what they can and cannot do; de Beauvoir rebelled against these expectations; she felt they forced women to be too submissive
De Beauvoir had much influence on later feminists, including those who did not consider themselves existentialists

- See e.g. the American writer bell hooks (2012): “Simone de Beauvoir, as intellectual, philosopher, culture critic, and as a politically radical leftist woman charted a path that was vital to me throughout the process of my intellectual growth.”
Albert Camus (1913-1960)

- Another famous French existentialist
- Born in Algeria, he did not move to the French mainland until the late 1930s
- His father was killed in action in WWI when Camus was one
- Like Sartre, he was active in the French Resistance during WWII
- Wrote novels (*The Stranger*, *The Plague*, and *The Fall*) as well as book-length philosophical essays (see *The Myth of Sisyphus*) and plays (*Caligula*, e.g.)
- Won Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957
- Died in a car crash in 1960
Major ideas in Camus’s work

- **The Absurd** – what is absurd is the gap between the meaning that individuals seek in their lives and the downright indifference and hostility of the world that surrounds them.

- **The Idea of Revolt** – Camus believed that we must fight back and rebel against life’s absurdities.

- **The Role of the Outsider or Stranger** – Camus focused more on the common good than is the case with some other existentialists. He nonetheless identified with outsiders (he himself was a European in Africa, an African in Europe, an infidel among Muslims, a lapsed Catholic, and so on).