

Glossary

The Absurd—a sense that the world is devoid of the purpose or meaning that human beings usually demand; also a key cultural aspect of existentialism in The Theatre of the Absurd (one example of which is Eugene Ionescu’s 1959 play “Rhinoceros”).

Absurdity—a function of the contradiction between two elements of a situation. For Camus the foremost absurdity is the clash between humanity’s desire for understanding and meaning and a world that is foreign to any such desire.

Agnostic Atheism--the philosophical view that encompasses both atheism and agnosticism. Due to definitional variance, an *agnostic*

atheist does not believe in God or gods and by extension holds true: 'the existence and nonexistence of deities is currently unknown and may be absolutely unknowable', or 'knowledge of the existence and nonexistence of deities is irrelevant or unimportant', or 'abstention from claims of knowledge of the existence and nonexistence of deities is optimal'.

Agnosticism--the philosophical view that the truth values of certain claims — particularly theological claims regarding the existence of God, gods, or deities — are unknown, inherently unknowable, or incoherent, and therefore, (some agnostics may go as far to say) irrelevant to **life**.

Agnosticism, in both its strong (explicit) and weak (implicit) forms, is necessarily a non-atheist and non-theist position, though an agnostic person may also be either an

atheist, a theist, or one who endorses neither position.

Agnostic Theism--the philosophical view that encompasses both theism and agnosticism. An agnostic theist is one who views that the truth value of claims regarding the existence of god(s) is unknown or inherently unknowable but chooses to believe in god(s) in spite of this.

Ambiguity—Simone de Beauvoir's term for the open-ended character of human existence. The meaning of human existence is not something that can ever be fully settled or determined.

Angst (angoisse)—a non-specific feeling of insecurity and anxiety brought about by the recognition of the fragility and temporary nature of human life.

Anguish—Awareness of one's freedom as radical possibility. For Sartre this is an inescapable feature of human existence connected with the responsibility for one's own existence and, by extension, 'all mankind'. This differs from 'fear', which has a specific object. Thus one might fear falling off a cliff but feel anguish before the possibility of throwing oneself over.

Atheism—the view that God does not exist. Atheism plays a prominent role in Sartre and de Beauvoir's conception of existentialism [of course, there are also Theistic existentialism like Buber and Kierkegaard]. While Camus never quite declares his atheism, he finds any appeal to God to be unacceptable to the 'absurd man', who relies only upon what he understands.

Authenticity—central to Heidegger's philosophy. To be authentic means to face

up to being a being whose being is an issue for it and so can choose its possibilities. The existentialist virtue of 'being oneself' and taking responsibility for one's actions, is contrasted and opposed to adopting a social mask or blindly obeying social norms; it is the state of acknowledging one's distinctive individuality. For Heidegger this involves resolutely embracing one's being-into-death; for Sartre it is owning one's radical freedom and responsibility. Each existentialist has his or her version of this 'virtue'.

Bad Faith (*mauvaise foie*)—Sartre's term for a situation or tactic in which one avoids personal authenticity and responsibility; the lack of coordination between the two dimensions of human existence: facticity and transcendence; the self-deception to which everyone is liable by virtue of the bivalent composition of the human situation, namely (again), its facticity and

transcendence. Authentic existence maintains this duality in a creative tension. Bad faith attempts to flee the tension (and its anguish) by either collapsing the transcendence into facticity or volatilizing the facticity into transcendence. Both attempts are a denial of our ontological make-up and for that reason futile. Sartre refers to bad faith as an escape in that someone in bad faith is not owning up fully to the complex character of human existence.

Being (sein/etre)—the human experience of ‘being-in-the-world’ (Heidegger’s term), as opposed to things, which merely ‘exist’. Human existence and self-understanding is always situated in terms of a meaningfully configured world. Heidegger’s insistence on the primacy of being-in-the-world can be understood as a rejection of Descartes’s idea of a self or soul whose essence is

entirely separable from any worldly existence.

Consciousness—that we are conscious, self-aware beings is integral to existentialism, as it champions a lucid awareness of oneself and one's situation while condemning more passive and oblivious forms of existence. For Sartre many of the key concepts associated with existentialism—freedom, anguish, etc.—follow from the structure of consciousness.

Contingent—used of any being that has a finite life, dependent upon other things and therefore liable to cease to exist, contributing to making human life 'absurd'.

Dasein (being there)—a being that has an understanding of being (the kind of beings we are as humans). Heidegger's term for the properly human way of being, engaged

within (and therefore not separable from) his or her world. By using this term rather than 'human', he avoids the traditional humanism that unwittingly limits a human's distinctiveness by focusing on the claim that man or woman is a 'rational animal'.

Death—the finite character of human existence. For Heidegger awareness of death is part of what makes life meaningful; for Camus awareness of death brings home life's absurdity

Defiance—Camus' recommended response to the realization of life's absurdity. To be defiant is to press ahead wholeheartedly in one's projects while fully recognizing their futility (e.g. as does the main character in Camus' essay "The Myth of Sisyphus").

Despair—a central concept in Kierkegaard's philosophy which refers to a

failure to be a self. Despair involves an imbalance between the two factors that make up human existence: freedom and necessity; the temporal and the eternal; the finite and the infinite.

Essence—in Aristotle's philosophy an essence is what makes a thing what it is, implying that it has an established, fixed nature. Sartre rejects this claiming that existence precedes essence.

Eternal recurrence—the idea that you will have to live your life in exactly the same way for all eternity. Nietzsche appeals to this idea as a way of measuring one's commitments to goals or purposes beyond this earthly life.

Existence (Existenz)—used by existentialist thinkers to describe the engagement of a human being within the world, as opposed

to the mere existence of inanimate objects. For existentialists it is existence that makes us what we are, not some fixed essence. Etymologically, it means to 'stand out'. Humans exist; things simply are. The existentialists link it with 'ecstatic temporality', especially with the future as possibility. It is best captured by similes such as Kierkegaard's: "What does it mean to exist? To exist is to stand in a very long line and then not buy a ticket when you reach the window. No, to exist is to be desperately grasping the mane of a horse as it races across the plane. No, to exist is like being in the greatest possible hurry as you ride on the back of a poky pony."

Existence precedes essence—for Sartre this is one way of describing the starting point of existentialism, which claims that there is no answer to the question of what I am (essence) prior to how I am (existence).

Existentialism--the philosophical movement that views human existence as having a set of underlying themes and characteristics, such as anxiety, dread, freedom, awareness of death, and consciousness of existing, that are primary. That is, they cannot be reduced to or explained by a natural-scientific approach or any approach that attempts to detach itself from or rise above these themes.

Ekstatic temporality—Developed by Heidegger, adapted by Sartre and others, but anticipated by Kierkegaard, this refers to the threefold dimension of lived time as distinct from quantitative ‘clock’ time, namely the past as ‘thrownness’ or facticity, the future as ‘projection’ or ekstasis, and the present as ‘fallenness’ or immersion in the average everyday. It elaborates the existentialist view that we are fundamentally time-bound but emphasizes the dimension of the future as possibility and, above all,

our most proper possibility, our being-unto-death.

Facticity—the already-determined aspect of one's existence, which includes one's bodily make-up and the facts on one's past; the given embodiment and circumstances that shape every human being's initial position in life. Human existence always includes a sense of having-been.

For-itself (*pour-soi*)—used by Sartre to describe a human life deliberately engaged with its environment, taking decisions and establishing norms. For-itself refers to the structures of consciousness as present to or for itself. Sartre argues that the principle of identity does not pertain to the for-itself, which is why conscious beings are beings for whom existence precedes essence. Human beings are an unstable combination of the in-itself (facticity, things which are

just as they are--see definition below) and for-itself (transcendence).

Freedom—a fundamental aspect of human existence as oriented toward the future as an open set of possibilities. As Sartre puts it, we are condemned to be free in that we find ourselves as beings who have to choose who we are, but without having a choice about being that.

God—Unlike human beings for God all things are possible. Recognizing and accepting this is required for balancing the finite and infinite aspects of existence. For Kierkegaard faith in God is crucial to overcoming despair.

“God is dead”—Nietzsche’s pronouncement regarding the modern age, where the idea of an absolute and external standard by

which life might be measured is becoming less and less believable.

Humanism—The philosophical theory that places the human at the center of the universe. Its forms—for example atheistic, religious, Marxist, Renaissance, Classical Greek, etc.—depend on what they take to be the greatest perfection attainable by a human being.

Indirect communication—the oblique way of gaining the sympathetic attention of the audience in order to convey values and feelings that otherwise might be intellectualized or simply rejected out of hand. The fine arts are particularly effective at this form of ‘concrete’ thinking.

In-itself (en soi)—things which are just as they are (facticity); used by Sartre to describe the

life of inanimate objects, lacking personal engagement with their surroundings and having a known, fixed nature.

Intentionality—The defining characteristic of consciousness for Husserl, whereby it aims at (intends) an object in the world. This frees the phenomenologist from the problem of the ‘bridge’ between mind and external reality bequeathed modern philosophy by the ‘inside/outside’ epistemology of Rene Descartes (1596-1650).

Knight of faith—Kierkegaard’s name for the highest kind of individual. The knight of faith lives by virtue of the absurd in that he lives fully committed to a project whose realization is beyond his power alone.

Leap of faith—used by Kierkegaard to describe the act of existential religious commitment by the knight of faith, going beyond the security of knowledge.

Nihilation—a key feature of Sartre’s conception of human existence. Human existence is nihilating in that it is experienced as situated between a past it no longer is and a future it does not yet inhabit.

Nihilism—the view that nothing has inherent value; the felt loss or absence of any meaning or purpose to life and the world; the belief that there are no objective values, that truth is purely subjective, and that human existence is meaningless. Nietzsche believed that the ‘herd’ would succumb to a certain kind of nihilism following its loss of faith in God, but that ‘free

spirits' would survive this plague by embracing this situation and creating their own truths and values, thereby foreshadowing Existentialism. Overcoming nihilism is a principal aim of Nietzsche's philosophy.

Nothingness (le neant, das Nichts)—for Pascal simple nonexistence; for Heidegger the nothing which reveals itself in objectless Angst is central to our existence, which itself arises from the abyss of Nothing; for Sartre that aspect of life that does not (or not yet) exist, seen in hopes and plans for the future. So for both Heidegger and Sartre humanity's radical freedom is rooted in nothingness.

Phenomenology—a philosophy based on a consideration of the phenomena of human experience. One of the leading philosophical

movements of the 20th c., it was founded by Edmund Husserl. As a method of rigorously describing the objects of consciousness, it was employed by existentialists like Heidegger and Sartre.

Resoluteness—a key aspect of Heidegger's conception of authenticity. To be resolute is to choose one's own existence with a full awareness of its finitude.

Responsibility—a key existentialist virtue, especially in terms of acknowledging one's own norms and decisions.

Ressentiment (resentment)—used by Nietzsche to describe the envy that motivates slave morality, opposing the noble values of his master morality.

Sisyphus—a figure in Greek mythology condemned in the underworld to roll a rock up a hill for all eternity. For Camus Sisyphus represents both the absurdity of human life and its heroic defiance.

Situation—the meaningful context in which a subject finds itself and in relation to which he or she must choose. Human existence is always situated—there is no external or neutral position from which to choose who one is. Humans exist ‘in-situation’, meaning that they are immersed in the givens of their conscious lives such as their parentage, nationality, gender, social identity, and previous choices. This is their ‘facticity’. But they also ‘transcend’ those givens by the manner in which they relate to their facticity; for example, with

shame or pride, with resignation or refusal, in hope or despair. The human situation is an inherently ambiguous mixture of these two components, facticity and transcendence, the given and the taken.

Strong Agnosticism--also referred to as *explicit agnosticism* and *positive agnosticism*, it is the view that the evidence in the universe is such that it is impossible for humans to know whether or not any deities exist.

Subjectivity—for Sartre the starting point of existentialism. The fact that human beings are self-aware beings implies that we are beings for whom existence precedes essence.

Thrownness (Entworfenheit)—Heidegger's term to express the fact that we are born

into a particular set of circumstances, not of our choosing. Human nature is already situated in an ongoing world. Thrownness refers to the way we find ourselves living lives we did not get to choose from the start.

Transcendence—the idea that we are future-directed beings; the crucial ability to ‘go beyond’ oneself, used as a balance to human ‘facticity’. As Sartre puts it a human being projects itself into a future and is conscious of doing so.

Übermensch—Nietzsche’s view of the ‘over-man’ or superman; a higher form of humanity, seen as giving direction and meaning to human existence, an ideal to which to aspire.

Weak Agnosticism--the position that the evidence is such that the existence or nonexistence of deities is

currently unknown, but is not necessarily unknowable. Also called *implicit agnosticism*, *empirical agnosticism*, and *negative agnosticism*.