Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophical movement emphasizing individual existence, choice and freedom. It was given birth to in Europe by writers in the 19th and 20th centuries. The themes that most existentialist writers subscribe to include the individual’s subjective experience and freedom in the world. Essentially, existentialists assert we are what we consciously have chosen to be. The founding of modern existentialism in the late 19th century is generally attributed to a Danish philosopher named Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Kierkegaard’s existentialist philosophy was a reaction to Plato’s writings on the highest ethical good being the same for everyone—that all needed to strive for moral perfection. Kierkegaard, in contrast insisted that each individual needed to define for himself the highest moral good, to pursue and define his truth leading to a liberated, meaningful life. For Kierkegaard, honoring objective, universal truths based on absolute morality was a contradiction to the major existential premise of denying a rational basis for moral decisions. Kierkegaard objected to the reigning absolute, idealistic German philosophy of the time being promoted by Hegel. Hegel proposed a total, well reasoned rational and systematic explication of humanity and history. Kierkegaard’s thinking deemphasized the rational basis of understanding the human condition, and in contrast, focused on the absurdity and ambiguity of life. Kierkegaard professed it was each individual’s responsibility to commit to leading a life of truth which may require one to defy the norms of society, thereby transcending what might be the good for all and honoring what is the good for me. In this situation, Kierkegaard proposes one take a “leap of faith” to avoid experiencing further despair.

The majority of existential writers stress that one must be passionate and maximize individual choice leading to individual action. It is only when one acts on their freely chosen desires that they arrive at truth—or approximate truth. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche stressed that there exists no rational or logical premises which derive from a systematic analysis of nature. They and other existentialist writers explicate this existential principle in many of their parables and aphorisms. The denial of rationality is not absolute though, for they understand that under certain conditions rationality is necessary to deepen our understanding. In the final analysis, the existentialists will claim that to answer the most compelling, significant questions in life, reason and science are insufficient. The bold Nietzsche asserted that no order exists in the universe and that the assumption that it does is an illusion.

Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980), considered the leading existentialist philosopher of the 20th century, lived and worked in France. In his classic work Being and Nothingness (1943) he expounded his premise that existence precedes essence, meaning that one’s biological, physiological or material being exists before one’s awareness of innate factors such as reason and consciousness. Sartre, an atheist further asserted that life is not sacred theologically; that human beings were not created in the image of G-d or any other supreme deity. For Sartre, human beings enter a materialistic world and are condemned to make choices which define their true nature. Thus, each individual represents the sum of their choices and actions, and all human beings are “condemned to be free.”

One of the most prominent themes in existentialism is choice. Choice means that each unique individual can create his own nature. For Sartre, existence precedes essence and choice is inexplicably part of humanity. It defines and validates one’s existence. Choice is inescapable and in every moment of existence, we make choices. Invariably, the refusal to choose represents a choice and with this choice comes responsibility. Individuals then come to accept responsibility for the consequences of their choices.

Additional themes in existential philosophy emphasized by Kierkegaard are dread and anxiety. Dread characterizes a general apprehension, a conscious knowing that G-d obligates each of us to define and lead a meaningful life. Anxiety naturally leads one to confront awareness of his nothingness and that he may discover emptiness when searching to justify the choices he makes. Sartre uses nausea to refer to the individual’s awareness of how the universe is devoid of moral absolutes, and the word anguish refers to the absolute freedom of choice all of us are presented with in life and which is a burden for human beings.

Sartre’s model is atheistic, suggesting that there exists in the universe no compass for moral guidance, a G-d for divine inspiration and no moral absolutes. For some individuals, this recognition creates despair, acknowledging that one lives in a meaningless world, and that it is each individual’s responsibility to impose meaning in a meaningless world. It is in this condition of pure nothingness that generates anxiety and awareness of the inescapable inevitability of death.