

## Existentialist Beliefs: Brave New World

1. Martin Heidegger, German philosopher: **“Existence precedes essence.”**
  - The existentialist starts with experience first: he exists; because he exists, he thinks; he feels; he perceives. The existentialist denies that there are absolute truths in religion. The existentialist denies that there are absolute truths in ethics. The existentialist starts with his own personal philosophy; he ends with his own personal philosophy. Things exist without meaning; no God created them; whatever significance existence will have, we have to furnish by ourselves. First life exists; secondly, we have to make something of it. Man is different from things because he may become or develop into something other than just being a man. Man does not have a universal or permanent nature as does a stone. He can't be measured, classified, or placed in a situation that will adequately predict his behavior. Of all the objects in the universe, man alone is capable of choosing his own future. “I think, therefore, I am” (Descartes).
2. Jean Paul Sartre: **Man leads a life of “dreadful freedom.” Man is actually “condemned to be free.”** No God or universal meaning controls us.
  - When the existentialist is not conscious of himself as a being, he feels that he is nothing.
  - The concept of freedom is the root principle of existential thought. Freedom is not economic freedom or rugged individualism, but rather the responsibility of living the right life with relying on ethical guidelines. In other words, making something out of nothing.
  - Comfort and freedom are incompatible. The easy life is the privilege of slaves for whom all the painful decisions are made by others. Freedom is a “terrible gift.”
  - Nearly all people try to deny their own freedom. They make believe that they are not free; therefore, they bind themselves with moral bonds and bounds which they claim are higher than their wills.
  - Death is the one certainty in life. Death clarifies the absurdity of life. The existentialists look upon it as a great “nothingness,” and it's when you wake up, realize it's going to happen and ask yourself in terror, “What am I failing to do that I need to do to give my life meaning?” that you begin to have purpose. This freedom to choose is essential to the existentialist. Choice is always possible, but what is not possible is not to choose. “I can always choose, but I ought to know that if I do not choose, I am still choosing—in terms of my own consciousness.” [Sartre].
3. It's a fact that **the universe is meaningless or “absurd,”** a favorite word with the Existentialists. However, this should not be used as an excuse to give up and do nothing. Indeed, according to Sartre, an absurd and totally unresponsive cosmos is all the more reason to make our own meanings in our lives, even if we have to make them under circumstances that are absurd. A prime example of this is described in Albert Camus' “The Myth of Sisyphus.” Sisyphus becomes the mythic symbol for man.
  - Many in life live as the “absurd” hero, unaware that life is meaningless. The existential hero is the person who recognizes the absurdity and acts upon it. This discovery that life is initially without meaning is actually good news because it gives us the opportunity to make choices and to be free.
  - Recognition of the absurd create anxiety about the emptiness around us. After we have confronted our anxiety we are ready to go on and make some significance in our lives. Failure to act is to place one's self in hell, as Sartre tried to show in his play, *No Exit*. Though life is meaningless, we must fight against death.
  - In the mid twentieth century, Paul Tillich of the University of Chicago recognized God with Existentialism by arguing that there is, as he expressed it, “God above God.” The visible trappings of religion—the church building, the clergy and their costumes, the ceremonies, Bibles, and crosses—were merely window dressing and not the real thing. The real thing—the “authentic” (another word popular with the existentialists)—was God as he existed above all these trappings, and it would take plenty of effort to get to him. God was not dead, just quite unavailable.

Sources: *The Philosophy and Literature of Existentialism*, Wesley Barnes, Ph.D. Barron's.  
*Thirty-five Literary Ideas: A Manual*. Peter Thorpe. Ginn Press.  
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