

# PHIL103 Existentialism

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## Existentialism and Modernity

### 1.1 Introduction

The goal of this handout is to give a sketch of (i) the intellectual and cultural context out of which existentialism emerged and (ii) to contrast the existentialist's approach to philosophy with that of a more analytic, scientifically-based approach to philosophy. In the next handout, certain key ideas of the existentialists will be introduced.

### 1.2 The roots of existentialism in the modern worldview

Existentialism did not come out of nowhere. It emerged out of a cultural-historical-intellectual setting. According to Kevin Aho (*Existentialism: An Introduction*), it emerged out of modernist ways of thinking. In this handout, some key themes of modernism will be explored.

In broad terms, the modern view can be seen as a rejection that human beings have a purpose. To see this more clearly, we will look at three key features that mark the emergence of the modern worldview. These are:

1. The rise of modern science (scientific revolution)
2. The rise of protestantism
3. a new conception of the social order

The **first** feature involves the rise of modern science, viz., the scientific view of the world started in the scientific revolution (1500-1700) through the 19th century with the rise of evolution and into the 20th century with an increasingly scientized view of the world and human beings place in that world.

One distinctive feature of modern science is an increased emphasis on *causal*

*explanations* and the abandonment of *teleological explanations* of things. A **teleological explanation** is an explanation of why something does what it does in terms of that thing's function, ultimate goal, or purpose. In contrast, a **causal explanation** is an explanation of why something does what it does in terms of the things that caused (that which brought it about, the mechanism) it.

One problem with teleological explanations is that they are often thought to be subjective.

#### Example 1: white-tailed rabbits

Why do rabbits have white tails? We could give a genetic-evolutionary explanation or we could say that they have white tails to make them easier for hunters to shoot (this is the purpose of the white tails).

One effect of abandoning teleological explanations for causal explanations is that the world came to seem less *enchanted*, less *personal*, less *spiritualized* and more *impersonal*. Objects in the world aren't the way they are for some human purpose (or some greater purpose), they just are. Human beings too are not here for some greater purpose; they are just the products of evolution and bound by chemical-physical laws. All objects are just purposeless things obeying universal physical laws that could be measured, proven by experiment or rational argument, and obeyed precise mathematical laws.

The **second** feature concerns the rise of Protestantism. The key aspect here involves an increased focus on (i) one's inward (direct) relationship with God and (ii) the goodness of a person being dependent upon one's intentions, feelings, and attitudes. This focus marks a shift from placing the focus on (i) a relationship with God that is mediated by the Catholic Church and (ii) the goodness of a person being dependent upon their intention to do good (their inner state) and not dependent upon doing "good works"

The increased emphasis on the inner self allowed for individuals to view the world in a more detached way. That is, it facilitated a separation between human beings (who are inwardly good) and the world (which is full of hostile objects).

The **third** key feature of the modern worldview involves a reconfiguration of how people viewed *society*. The social world (how we come together as societies, communities, nations, etc.) began to be seen as

1. artificial, unnatural: the result of a engaging in a *contract* with others to avoid the unpleasantness of living an isolated existence
2. dehumanizing and mechanized: the rise of industry gave rise to repetitive, mind-numbing work where individuals were no longer owners of the products they helped to produce

The claim then is that changes in science, religion, and the social world (the

modern worldview) produced a feeling in people that existentialism was to (i) bring into clearer focus and (ii) react against. In broad terms, the feeling is that of *anxiety*, but it is an anxiety stemming from a lack of belonging to the world. This, as we've seen, is the result of

1. science's removal of purpose in the world (everything is an object that obeys mathematically precise physical laws)
2. Protestantism's focus on the inner self and detachment from the world (the external world is superficial and corrupting, what matters is our inner self)
3. the new social order rendering our contribution to the world and our connection with others superficial/artificial and mechanical (we have no real bonds purpose with others, they are only for convenience)

**Discussion 1.** *Consider the following questions in a group.* Three features of modernity have been provided. These features outline how people saw/see the world, their place in it, and their relation to others. What, if any, problems do you see with the modern view of the world? Assume that this is how the world really is, what *feelings* does it elicit in either you or others?

### 1.3 Two ways of doing philosophy

**Discussion 1.** *Consider the following questions in a group.* What is your understanding of philosophy?

In this section, two different conceptions of philosophy are contrasted. First, there is what I will call the **analytic way of doing philosophy**

#### DEFINITION – PHILOSOPHY IN THE ANALYTIC VEIN

Philosophy is a positive and critical science that draws upon both common experience and the results of science in order to make claims of a highly general and fundamental nature. In so doing, its principal aim is to better understand the world, its members, and their relations.

The results of this definition of philosophy might be presented as a set (or list) of truths or precisely formulated answers to abstract philosophical questions.

1. philosophy should be informative: it should inform us about the nature of reality, including things like space, time, freedom, causality, the nature of science, etc. Philosophy need not influence how we ought to live our lives, e.g. it should simply tell us what is true or false (skepticism about ethics and aesthetics).
2. philosophy should only be concerned with objective truth, e.g. what can be measured, proven by experiment or rational argument, and quantified
3. philosophy has a close alliance with the empirical sciences, logic, and mathematics.

The existentialist way of doing philosophy is not altogether different but it is

critical of doing philosophy in an overly analytic, scientific, or objectivist way. The existentialist approach to philosophy will, instead, insist that

1. philosophy should be **formative** rather than merely informative: it should give direction on the type of person we are, what we eat, how we feel, etc. Philosophy should influence how we live our lives, e.g. how we treat others (lack of skepticism about ethics).
2. philosophy should be concerned with subjective truth (not objective truth) – what is true for the individual.
3. philosophy has a closer alliance with literature, the humanities, and psychology than physics, math, and logic.

**Discussion 2.** *Consider the following questions in a group.* Which of the two approaches do you think is correct? Give at least two reasons for your view.

## Five key ideas of existentialism

Writers on existentialism characterized existentialism according to certain key ideas. This handout gives a brief summary of these ideas. We will use the texts we will read in this course to get a clearer and illustrative sense of what these ideas mean.

### 2.1 Idea 1: We have free will.

With the rise of modern science, it is tempting to think that the actions of every event in the universe can be explained according to causal-physical laws. That is, for any given event (action), this event is determined by (i) the current state of the world (the causal-physical situation) and (ii) the laws of physics, chemistry, biology, etc. This view is known as “physical determinism”.

#### DEFINITION – PHYSICAL DETERMINISM

Physical determinism is the theory that every event (including future events and human actions) is completely determined by the laws of nature.

Determinism seems to imply (i) there is no free will (that is, human actions are not determined by the free choice of human beings but the laws of nature and the prior state of the world) and (ii) human beings are not responsible for their actions (since they didn’t freely choose to do anything).

While not all existentialists flatly reject the laws of nature (that is, they don’t say that all of science is false), they do contend that we have free will and that we are responsible for our actions. So, one of the key themes of existentialism is (i) asserting that we are *free* (in some sense) and (ii) clarifying what it means

to be free.

**Discussion 1.** *Consider the following questions in a group.* Are we free or are all of our actions determined by prior events and the laws of nature? What does it mean to be free? To what degree are our actions determined by the laws of nature?

## 2.2 Idea 2: Existence precedes essence

The idea behind the claim that *existence precedes essence* is that before we determine *what* we are, the properties that make us up (our goals, aspirations, purposes, etc.), we must acknowledge *that* we are. This claim has a number of implications:

1. it implies that *how* we exist in the world is not already complete. We are not fully complete individuals but *becoming* ourselves. Who we are is in a state of formation, development, shaping.
2. with the notion of freedom (see idea 1), it also implies that we play a role in *making* ourselves. That is, who we are is not fully determined by our genetics, physical laws, etc.
3. it involves the denial that we are *mere* physical objects or free-floating souls (this would mean who we are is already fully determined)
4. it implies that one of the most important philosophical questions is *what it means to be human*.

**Discussion 1.** *Consider the following questions in a group.* Are you a fully complete being; that is, is everything about you completely found in the here and now? Or, is something about you incomplete, developing, yet to appear? If you answered “yes” to the latter question, what about you is incomplete?

## 2.3 Idea 3: Being authentic is a struggle

Assuming we are free and that we play a role in making our selves, having an *authentic* existence (that is, true to one’s self) is a key concern for the existentialists. Social pressures, peer pressure, familial expectations, and so forth can shape who we are. It can do this in a way that makes us take on an inherited view of the world that is not true to ourselves (an *inauthentic existence*); that is, a life that is more in-line with how others want us to be rather than how we want to be (a life that is fulfilling for us).

Nevertheless, being authentic is no easy task. Part of what it means to be authentic is to come to terms with what existentialists call our “facticity” and our “transcendence”.

### DEFINITION – FACTICITY

Our facticity refers to various factors that we have no control



over, e.g. our physiology, our sexuality, our race, our sociohistorical situation.

#### DEFINITION – TRANSCENDENCE

Transcendence refers to the capacity of human beings to overcome these “limitations” (not necessarily by changing them) by self-consciously deciding what these “limitations” mean, e.g. what does it mean to be human, to be heterosexual, to be white or Hispanic, or to live in a certain time period.

Thus, the struggle to be authentic not only involves a consideration of overcoming (or accepting) societal expectations for us but also assigning meaning to our facticity.

**Discussion 1.** *Consider the following questions in a group.* What kinds of external factors hinder the development (or becoming) of your true self (e.g. there are social pressures to have a successful job and make money)? What control do you have over interpreting what it means to be [insert some feature of your facticity, e.g. your skin color, your age, your sexuality]?

## 2.4 Idea 4: Existentialism takes seriously what *moods* tell us

For the existentialists, what it means to be human is not merely to be a completely rational individual. Humans are also *emotional* and *creative* beings. Thus, for the existentialists, moods and feelings like *anxiety*, *absurdity*, *nausea*, *self-doubt*, *frustration*, and *guilt* are not uninformative subjective feelings or reactions. They are instead disclosive (informative) about who we are, what it means to be human more generally, and our relation to others and the world.

**Discussion 1.** *Consider the following questions in a group.* To illustrate how moods can be disclosive, consider a broken relationship (either with a friend or a former boyfriend/girlfriend). How do you feel about that relationship (that is, if you were to see them, what would you feel?) On the one hand, it might be said that those feelings are *how you feel* and they mean nothing more. But, if we take these feelings seriously, how might those feelings be informative about the quality of the relationship?

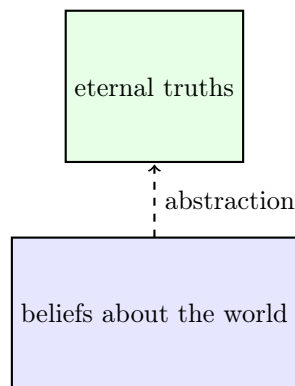
## 2.5 Idea 5: Existentialism takes lived, human experience as fundamental

Existentialism takes an individual’s first-person experience to be more fundamental than a detached, third-person perspective. Kevin Aho (in *Existentialism: An Introduction*) calls this the “insider’s perspective”. Concerning this perspective, he writes:

Because human existence is not a thing that can be studied from a perspective of detached objectivity, existentialists hold the view that we can understand ourselves only by taking what might be called the ‘insider’s perspective.’ That is, prior to any disinterested theorizing about who or what we are, we must first come to grips with the experience of being human *as it is lived* within the context of our own situation.

Consider one way of knowing the world that we’ll call “the objectivist model of knowledge”. On this view are said to be “eternal”, “unchanging”, “timeless”, mathematical in nature”, and “objectively determined”. How do we obtain such knowledge?

To obtain this sort of knowledge, it is necessary to abstract, detach, or transcend from anything about ourselves or the world that might make our understanding of things “subjective”. That is, we need to ignore (abstract away from) not only our prejudices (how we would like the world to be) but all other features of our existence that could also prevent us from knowing something with certainty. These include things like beliefs determined (or conditioned) by our sense perception, by our habits, by time-and-place, by habits, by passions, by feelings, and so forth. In ignoring everything that might be considered “subjective”, the model of objective requires we take a completely dispassionate view, one that might be called “the view from nowhere” or “God’s eye view”.



**Figure 2.1** – The objectivist model requires abstraction from our subjective conditions

Our knowledge of the world should be objective truth, e.g. what can be measured, proven by experiment or rational argument, and quantified. In contrast to this, the existentialist places a priority on how things appear to me, what is true for me, and what sorts of beliefs I would be willing to live and die for. To see this contrast a little more clearly, consider the following examples.

**Example 2: the sun**

Consider the sun. We experience the sun as a small, warm, reddish-yellow, circular object. But these experiences are largely due to subjective features about us, viz., we see it as small because of our position in relation to it, as warm because of our bodies, as yellow because of how our eyes and brain respond to light waves.

From the objectivist view, many of these features are subjective. In order to get at the unchanging essence (the eternal, unchanging form) of the sun, we need to abstract away from any of the ways that we experience the sun that is unique to us or any being in particular. What we get is an object that can be characterized in terms of physics and the use of precise mathematical laws.

For the existentialist, the objectivist view gives a picture of how the world is but it is an incomplete (and less important) picture of the way the world is. Equally, if not more important, is how the sun functions in my life and what it means for me.

**Example 3: clock time vs. lived time**

Not only can time be characterized in quantitative terms but it also has a qualitative dimension. When people discuss time, they refer to it as flying, as slowing down, as having it in your hands, as having too much of it, as it being of the essence, and so on. The idea behind many of these expressions is that the time is partly a function of our subjective attitudes, feelings, and situation in life. It seems to slow when we are anxiously waiting for something to occur, it flies when we are in an enjoyable situation, or it is seemingly endless if we are being punished (or imprisoned).

**Discussion 1.** *Consider the following questions in a group.* What sorts of beliefs do you have that you might consider to be fundamental, personal, yet subjective? Are these more or less important than so-called “objective” truths?

## Notes from the Underground

### 3.1 Introduction

Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821 – 1881) was a Russian author whose works explored aspects of the human condition in 19th-century Russia. His major works include *Notes from Underground* (1864), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869), and the *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground* is considered one of the first pieces of existential literature. The text consists of two parts. The **first** part (the *Underground*) is a piece of philosophical literature. This chaotic text explores a number of themes that are important to existentialists, including, but not limited to, the topics of *free will*, *scientific determinism*, *what it means to be human*, *ethics*, and *authenticity*.

The **second** part (*À Propos of the Wet Snow*) is a narrative of a sequence of events in the underground man's life. It can be thought of how the underground man got to his current state. The text describes the underground man's descent into madness and offers its reader a picture of an *anti-hero*. In reading this part of the text, you ought to keep in mind one of the key claims made toward the end of the text. This claim is that human beings share some features of the narrator to some lesser degree. Thus, while the narrator paints himself in a rather extreme way, the narrator is making a claim about human beings in general. That is, to be human is to be like the narrator (although to some lesser degree).

### 3.2 Reading Questions for *Underground*

#### Chapter I

1. Is the underground man (UM) sick? If so, what is wrong with him? (p.1)
2. Is the UM's diary real or fictitious? (p.1, footnote)

3. What did the UM do for a living? (p.2)
4. What is the UM's living situation? (p.3)

### Chapter II

5. Does the UM think that consciousness is a blessing or an illness? (pp.3-4)
6. What does the word "magnanimous" mean? (pp.5-6, see dictionary)

### Chapter III

7. How do gentlemen (direct people) get their revenge? (p.6)
8. Does the UM think direct people are intelligent or stupid? (p.6)
9. For direct people, is revenge a kind of justice? (p.7)
10. What does the UM say is the "stone wall" against which direct people subside? (p.8)

### Chapter IV

11. Does the UM think that enjoyment can be found in a toothache? (pp.9-10)

### Chapter IV

12. Does the UM think that enjoyment can be found in a toothache? (pp.9-10)

### Chapter V

13. What offends the UM more than anything but which (at the same time) he cannot blame it for offending him? (p.11)
14. What does *ennui* mean? (p.11, see dictionary)
15. In contrast to the the direct person who sees revenge as justice, how does the UM see revenge? (p.12)

### Chapter VI

16. At the beginning of chapter VI, the UM says that if he would respect himself if he had "at least have one quality [...] positive in me". What quality does the UM wish he had (p.13, at the beginning)

### Chapter VII

17. At the beginning of chapter VII, the UM articulates a view on why people do bad ("nasty") things. What is this view? (p.14)
18. What is the enlightened view on how individuals overcome their evil ("nasty") ways? (p.14)
19. Does the UM take human beings to become more or less bloodthirsty (violent)? (see pp.15-16).
20. What does the UM say that man really wants?

**Chapter VIII**

21. If there is a way to calculate (by science) what humans desires, then what will human beings cease to feel? (p.18)
22. According to the UM, is human life completely described by its rational nature? (p.19)
23. What does the UM say is the thing that “preserves for us what is most precious and most important—that is, our personality, our individuality”? (p.20)
24. According to the UM, what would human beings do even if they were shown to be a mere “piano key”? (p.21)

**Chapter IX**

25. What question does the UM raise concerning the reformation of human beings (that is, to make them more rational)? (p.22)
26. According to the UM, what is the difference between ants and human beings? (pp.22-23)

**Chapter X**

27. What is the sole reason that the UM rejects the crystal palace? (p.25)

**Chapter XI**

28. Does the UM think that the underground is better, worse, or different than the life lived by the ordinary man? (pp.25-26)
29. The UM says there are three sorts of secrets: (i) ones that you would tell only to friends, (ii) ones that you would only keep to yourself, and a third. What is that third kind of secret? (p.27)
30. Why does the UM say that a true biography (an account of one’s life) is impossible? (p.27)

**3.3 Reading Questions for *À Propos of the Wet Snow*****Chapter I**

1. Be able to describe the basic sequence of events

**Chapters II-IV**

2. Be able to describe the basic sequence of events

**Chapters V-VII**

3. Be able to describe the basic sequence of events

### Chapters VIII-X

4. Be able to describe the basic sequence of events

## 3.4 Discussion Questions for *Underground*

### Chapter I

1. Go through the first chapter and list all of the characteristics of the UM. Once you've completed this list, what type of person would you say he is?
2. The UM characterizes himself as spiteful? Who does he desire to hurt? What is the "chief point" (the cause) of his spite? Who is he actually hurting? How do you think spiteful people emerge in society? What would help someone who is spiteful?
3. The UM says he is both spiteful and not spiteful and that he could feel "opposite elements" "swarming in me". He seems to be stricken by contradictions in his life (in his desires) and notes that he "purposely would not let them come out". What sort of effect does having opposing desires, wants, or hopes have on someone? Come up with a scenario where someone is stricken by contradictory desires. How does this person feel? Is this feeling natural? What does it tell us about the individual? Does this apply to people in general? Is there any general method for determining how to fix situations where you want something an equal amount?
4. The UM seems to struggle with knowing what to do with his life? He says that he "did not know how to become anything" (see bottom of p.2), that he "cannot become anything seriously" (p.2), and that he is "characterless" (p.3). He seems to indicate that he has the freedom to do what he wants but no idea (direction) of what to do with this freedom. Assuming people are free, what does this freedom imply? How do people find their own purpose in life?

### Chapter II

1. The UM says that to be "too conscious" is a *disease* (pp.3-4) and that a human being's everyday needs are satisfied by "ordinary human consciousness." What does it mean to be conscious? What does it mean to be "too conscious"?
2. The UM seems to recognize that he be guilty of continual self-sabotage. That is, he notes that whenever he recognizes the good of something that is sublime and beautiful, he would do something ugly. In a sort of surprising reflection, the UM says that he ultimately was able to take enjoyment in this feature of himself by recognizing that he could not be any other way (that is, that this was his normal way of being). In short, the UM was consciously aware of his despicable state and that there was nothing he could do to fix it.  
The UM seems then to deny he is free to change himself but capable of *self-acceptance*. Even if we recognize certain serious shortcomings in our own self, and, even if we recognize that there is nothing we can do to

change this, (i) what benefit is there for the *individual* to accept who s/he is, (ii) should this be something we all strive for, and (iii) are there any larger problems that might result from individuals trying to accept who they are?

### Chapter III

1. The UM characterizes the direct man (human) as normal, as what nature intended, and as stupid. He contrasts the normal direct man with the person of “acute consciousness”, characterizing this person as the *antithesis* of the normal man, as a mouse, and aware of his own existence as a mouse. To illustrate the difference between the normal man and the antithesis of the normal man, the UM considers how each reacts to the *feeling of being insulated* (revenge). Explain how each person responds to the feeling of being insulted. Which of the two responses do you think is the better (more appropriate) one? What does this say about each individual more generally?
2. In the last few paragraphs of ch.3, the UM considers two different reactions to what he calls “the wall” (the laws of nature, mathematical deductions, knock-down arguments). For the UM, he contends that when faced with these unchangeable forces, the “normal man” simply subsides. That is, s/he accepts these laws and adjusts his or her life in accordance with them (learns to live with them harmoniously). In contrast, the antithesis of man (the UM) says that although we cannot break these laws, we don’t have to accept them: “I am not going to be reconciled to it simply because it is a stone wall and I have not the strength”. The UM says that one can simply be disgusted by it or be spiteful. Which of the two reactions to the laws of nature do you think is the right one? For example, suppose someone you love (or you, yourself) is diagnosed with a terminal and incurable disease, should you try to calmly accept this or ought you feel disgusted by the fact that this is the way the world is?

### Some themes from chs.I-III

One of the main philosophical claims that we might take away from chs.I-III involves a contrast of what it means to be human. There are two extremes:

**the normal man:** the stupid, instinctive, normal individual (the real human) who acts unconsciously (guided by nature) but who (i) does not consciously recognize who he/she is and (ii) can accept the world.

**antithesis of the normal man:** the hyper-conscious, skeptical, characterless individual (mouse) plagued by doubt but who (i) can obtain enjoyment in self-acceptance yet (ii) is plagued by a kind of hate toward the way of the world (laws of nature)



## Chapter IV

1. The idea that self-acceptance of our own shortcomings can be a benefit to us is controversial. One reason is because these shortcomings are thought to be *painful* to us as human beings. The UM, however, contends that we can obtain a certain kind of pleasure in this self-acceptance just as we can take pleasure in other forms of pain.

The UM argues for this claim by drawing a parallel between the (i) the **enjoyment** one can have in self-acceptance even when one's life is hated by one's self<sup>1</sup> and (ii) the **enjoyment** one can have in complaining (moaning) about a tooth ache.

The idea here is that

- that having a toothache is pointless, aimless.
- that there is no one to blame in our having a tooth ache (“they express the consciousness that you have no enemy to punish”), and
- if we are “contumacious” (disobedient with respect to authority, e.g. laws of physiology), the only thing we can do is “thrash yourself or beat your wall with your fist as hard as you can, and absolutely nothing more” (p.9)

Nevertheless, the UM says that we take joy in this pain (these “mortal insults”) since we often moan and complain even when we know that this moaning and complaining does no good. According to the UM, we take joy in harassing ourselves and others with our toothache. The UM says that the same is true when individuals take joy (pleasure) in their self-acceptance. Even if they complain about who they are (making no effort to fix themselves), they are taking a certain joy in having this problem. Is what the UM says about taking pleasure in complaining about physical pain true? Does this apply more generally when people complain about things that they themselves cannot change and make no effort to change (e.g. the current state of the world)? Does this apply more generally to the pain that is the result of accepting certain character flaws within one's self?

## Chapter V

1. The UM again characterizes direct persons as active and “at ease” yet says they are stupid and limited. He explains that they are this way because they simply accept things at face value without questioning them (they don't question or doubt customs, tradition, the foundation of things). He illustrates this by noting that when a direct person acts out of revenge, they recognize “justice” as the cause of their action (they enact revenge because it is just). In contrast, the UM is characterized as unable to act and

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<sup>1</sup>Recall that in chapter II, the UM notes that we can take **enjoyment** in accepting *who we are* even if *who we are* is *not who we want to be*. The claim that we can find enjoyment in this somewhat agonizing situation (that is, we desire to be something else but can't change who we are) implies that we can take enjoyment in suffering. Chapter IV seemingly tests this claim by considering whether we can find enjoyment in the accepting of other kinds of suffering. In particular, chapter IV suggests that we can find enjoyment even in a tooth ache.

in a state of turmoil (yet self-conscious and reflective). He explains that he is this way because he cannot accept things at face value, everything is subject to doubt, and there is no foundation to knowledge or justification for one's action (he argues that if we say that X is the cause/reason of Y, then we can ask what the cause/reason for Y is, and keep going endlessly).

- are their foundations to our knowledge; if so, what are they?
  - assuming there is no indubitable, certain, infallible foundation to knowledge, what does this mean for how we get along in the world? That is, if we cannot be certain, how can any of our actions be the right one?
2. Assuming that consciousness is a disease that does effect people (that is, to reflect too much on things produces the antithesis of man), why (according to the UM) cannot we simply escape this disease by ignoring it? Do you agree that we cannot simply escape our consciousness? Similarly, if we know something is wrong, can we *genuinely* choose to ignore that it is wrong, do it anyway, and think that it is acceptable? Is genuine self-deception possible?

## Chapter VI

The section contends a discussion of the UM wishing there was one positive quality in himself. He considers (wishes) that he was a sluggard / lazy, then he could live "at ease" as a direct person since his whole life would be focused around drinking, eating, etc.

## Chapter VII

1. The chapter begins with an account of the following Enlightenment premises:
  - individuals do evil ("nasty") things not because they actually desire to do evil but because they do not know what they really desire.
  - If that individual were awakened to his/her real ("normal") interests, then s/he would no longer do those evil ("nasty") things. S/he would do what is good or noble.

In short, doing what is good (right) is in our own best interest (what is in our advantage). Any cases where we don't do what is good (right) is simply the product of not doing what is in our own interests. The UM raises the following objections to this: (1) that it is unlikely that anyone has ever acted in this way (in their own interest), (2) that sometimes people, even when they recognize what they really desire, do the opposite, and (3) it may be the case that it is in our own best interest to do things that are harmful to ourselves (not in our own self interest). Do you agree with the three objections raised by the UM? Think of a concrete example that helps to illustrate your view.

2. In addition to the Enlightenment claims, the UM considers the claim that "science itself will teach man [...] that he never has really had any caprice or will of his own, and that he himself is something of the nature of a piano-key or the stop of an organ" (p.16). That is, considers the claim that science will ultimately show that human beings really what is in their best interests (what they need to do to get what they want). The UM

characterizes life where everything is calculated by the laws of nature as having the following consequences: (1) people won't have to answer for their actions, (2) life will be easy, and (3) everything will be extraordinarily dull. What is the UM's reaction to this state of the world? What does he think people will do? What conclusion does he draw about the nature of human beings? Do you agree with him?

3. If society were designed to enlighten individuals, then the UM says that this would imply that society has become less and less violent. But, contrary to fact, the UM says that society has become more bloodthirsty. He contends that in recognition of this fact suggests that what society ("civilization") does for mankind is offers people a "greater capacity for variety of sensations—and absolutely nothing more" (p.16). Does society provide human beings a greater variety of experiences? Does it have any further function (e.g. to make individuals good)?

## Chapter VIII

1. The UM suggests that even if we were given the exact steps needed to act in our own interest (and therefore rationally), individuals would sometimes "choose absolute nonsense" (p.18), "consciously, purposively, desire what is injurious to [ourselves], what is stupid, very stupid" (p.19), and even resort to something "perverse" like "cannibalism" (p.21). We would make this choice because it would, as the UM notes, "preserve for us what is most precious and most important—that is, our personality, our individuality" (p.20). Do you think human beings if given a book outlining exactly what they need to do to achieve what they want would do something contrary to what the book says? Would it be rational to do something contrary to the book? What would it say about human beings?

## Chapter IX

1. Chapter IX begins with the question of whether making human beings fully rational would be beneficial (desirable) for them. He indicates that there might be a logical argument for this, but it is against the "law of humanity". He goes on to emphasize that a key feature of the human being is his/her creativity. According to the UM, what about creative endeavors to human beings love so much? (pp.22-23) What downside of this does the UM explore? (p.22-23) Do you think that the defining feature of human beings is creativity? If so, what does this imply for the proposal that human life can one day be scientifically determined?

## Chapter X

1. What does the crystal palace symbolize for the UM? What does the UM not like about it? The UM says that there is no difference between a chicken coop and a mansion. In what way is that so?
2. How do you think the crystal palace could conflict with man's desires?
3. Why do you think being able to "stick one's tongue out" is important for

the UM? What do you think is the meaning of that gesture? What does it mean to stuck one's tongue at someone or something.

## Chapter XI

1. The UM says there are three kinds of secrets, ones we tell to only our friends, ones we keep only to ourselves, and ones we cannot even tell our self (p.27). He goes on to say that an autobiography is impossible because individuals always manifest a kind of vanity whenever they say something publicly. Is this true?
2. The UM says he plans to perform an experiment where he will write down an experience in which he will “be perfectly open and not take fright at the whole truth” (p.27). The problem, as he notes, is that vanity gets in the way of this and leads individuals to lie. In order to ensure the success of this experiment he says (i) that he will write his thoughts with no intended readers and (ii) no future readers. But, he

## 3.5 Discussion Questions for *À Propos of the Wet Snow*

### Chapter I

1. What are the key events of this chapter?
2. What event led to the UM being so upset at the officer? Why was the UM so upset by this? The UM explains that he did not immediately react to the officer because he lacks “moral courage” and that he is a “coward in action” but not “in heart” (p.34). What does he mean by this? Has there ever been a case in your life where you lacked courage in action? How did the UM consider enacting his revenge?
3. The UM man ultimately plans to enact his revenge by bumping into him on the Nevsky (the main street in St. Petersburg). What does the UM notice about how people pass each other on the Nevsky? What about this custom upsets the UM? (see p.36). What other examples can you think of where there are unwritten rules about how certain kinds of people should interact with other people? Do you agree with the UM's view on this custom? In bumping into the officer, what does the UM achieve?

### Chapters II-IV

4. What are the key events of these chapters?
5. In chapter II, the UM seems to express a tension between being alone and detached from society where he can imagine himself living a sublime/ideal life and socializing with people in the actual world where he is often treated disrespectfully. For example, consider the *ideal* of love, friendship, or human life. How does it contrast with how relationships and people are in the real world? What sort of feeling does this contrast evoke in the UM? What sort of feelings does this contrast evoke in you?
6. In chapter III, the UM expresses frustration about individuals who respect

“success”, mistake things like social rank with intelligence (that is, if you have a high social, economic rank, then you must be intelligent), and those who have “been favoured by the gifts of nature”. This is exemplified by the respect UM’s friends (Simone, Ferfitchkin, and Trudolyubov) have for Zverkov. What is view do UM’s friends hold of Zverkov? How does this contrast with UM’s view of Zverkov and his friends?

7. Consider the response of the UM to being disrespected in chapter 1. There UM’s response is being treated like a fly in a physical way (being moved aside by the officer) is to ultimately regain his dignity by bumping the officer while walking down the Nevsky. What kinds of insults do the UM’s “friends” direct at him while he is attending the dinner? What is his response? What sorts of responses does he consider? What type of response would be the correct one?

### Chapters V-X

8. What are the key events of these chapters?
9. Chapters V-X are about the nature of love. He contrasts the situation they find themselves in (as well as bad families) with that of *real* love and with how he actually views real love?
  - How does the UM describe each of the three views on love (what does he explicitly say about each)? Find at least one place in the text where he says something about each one.
  - What types of familial and romantic relationships are necessary for the healthy human development (that is, becoming who you really are)?
10. The UM suggests that “to a woman all reformation, all salvation from any sort of ruin, and all moral renewal is included in love and can only show itself in that form” (p.88). Given the UM’s degraded state, could he be redeemed by finding love? Does this apply more generally to people who have been corrupted?
11. At the end of the text (see pp.90-91) the UM characterizes himself as the “anti-hero” and that his account should produce an “unpleasant impression” on the reader. Nevertheless, he contends that all people are, to a degree, like him. Read this paragraph carefully, try to state what the UM is saying, and then evaluate whether or not it is true.

## The Seducer's Diary

### 4.1 Introduction

The *Seducer's Diary* forms a part of *Either/Or*, a two part book written by Søren Kierkegaard. The book was a sensation and is still wildly read. The book was written various pseudonyms and Kierkegaard took various measures to prevent his authorship from discovery. *Either/Or* is split into two parts. Part I focuses on the *aesthetic*: sensory experience while Part II focuses on ethics (Kierkegaard would later develop a kind of part III that focused on religious experience).

In Part I, Kierkegaard portrays the aesthete (the person who thinks that sensory experience is the highest form of experience, the ultimate goal of life) as finding the greatest expression of aesthetic experience in the arts (music, theatre, etc.) and love. In Part II, Kierkegaard argues that the aesthetic life is insufficient and that a commitment to the ethical life is necessary for the further development of human life. Nevertheless, a strong contrast between the aesthetic and the ethical life is not proposed. Rather, Kierkegaard argues that a commitment to the ethical life need not exclude aesthetic experience.

In other works, Kierkegaard will suggest that a further sphere or stage of life is required, this being that of the religious stage. Thus, Kierkegaard proposes an account of how human beings *become* an individual by proposing that there are three spheres (stages) of existence, viz., three stages of becoming an individual. The stages are as follows:

1. the aesthetic stage
2. the ethical stage
3. the religious stage

The *Seducer's Diary* offers an account of the aesthetic stage/sphere through the diary (and letters) of a seducer by the name of Johannes. Johannes offers an account of the aesthetic by way of the seduction of, engagement to, and break-

up with a young girl named Cordelia. In Johannes' account of this seduction, he claims that his goal is to have aesthetic or erotic experiences. These experiences, however, are not base pleasures nor are they to be associated with simple sexual gratification, nor are they devoid of any consideration of morals. Johannes' concern is with cultivating a kind of passionate experience and interaction with Cordelia that requires her freedom and cultivates the aesthetic part of her being.

In reading the *Seducer's Diary*, there are a couple themes, pay attention to some of the following themes:

1. *Meaning of aesthetic experience*: What does Johannes mean by "aesthetic" or "erotic" experience?
2. *Feelings as informative*: What do aesthetic experiences (feelings) tell us about our relationships with others? How are they informative about the world at large?
3. *Freedom*: To what extent are our aesthetic experiences (e.g. feeling that one is in love) freely chosen as opposed to being determined by outside factors? What role do other people play (either consciously or unconsciously) in determining whether we love them?
4. *Existence precedes essence*: Insofar as we are free individuals and play a role in shaping what we are, how calculated, conscious, or deliberate should we be concerning aesthetic experience in romantic relationships?

**Discussion 1. Consider the following questions in a group.** What benefit is there to living one's life completely in the stage of the aesthetic? What are its shortcomings? What do you lose if you solely "live for today" or "focus on sensual pleasure" and "have no regrets"?

**Discussion 2. Consider the following questions in a group.** What percentage of people live primarily in the aesthetic sphere? What types of things need to happen to them or what do they need to recognize in order to move to a different sphere?

## 4.2 Reading Questions for *The Seducer's Diary*

**pp.303-4** What has the narrator discovered?

**pp.304-5** According to the narrator, the diary accounts a person who has tried to live his life in what way?

**pp.308** The narrator says that the author of the diary led others astray, not in the internal sense, but in what other sense?

**pp.309-310, 312** Does Cordelia feel at peace with her relationship with the author of the diary?

**pp.312-313** In looking over the letters that Cordelia sends the author of the diary (Johannes), does Cordelia want to rekindle her relationship with Johannes?

**pp.313-314** Where does Johannes first catch sight of Cordelia (what is she doing)?

**pp.315** Does Cordelia see Johannes when he first catches sight of her (does he introduce himself at first)?

- pp.316 Does Johannes find Cordelia beautiful?
- pp.316 Johannes has the opportunity to hear Cordelia's address, but does not want to hear it? Why does he not want this information?
- pp.317 How old is Cordelia?
- pp.319 After Cordelia's servant falls in the mud, Johannes approaches her. How does Johannes behave toward Cordelia and how does this (according to Johannes) make her feel?
- pp.328-334. Be able to articulate the basic sequence of events that happen on these pages (the 12th)
- pp.334-5 Does Johannes wish to rush into love (by getting engaged) or want to coddle and nurture his love?
- pp.336-7 What is the first and last name of the girl that Johannes is pursuing?
- pp.338 Did Cordelia pay much attention to Johannes when they were introduced at Mrs. Jansen's?
- pp.338 Johannes has the opportunity to escort Cordelia (and some girls) to a kitchen, but decides not to. What reason does he give for declining?
- pp.340 Johannes says the most corrupting thing for a young girl is what?
- pp.340 Johannes says that a woman's primary role in life (her fundamental qualification) is to do what?
- pp.341-342 How do "the majority enjoy a young girl"?
- pp.346-347 Who is Edward? What is his relationship to Cordelia?
- pp.353 On p.351, Johannes says that he hopes that Cordelia will soon hate him; what method does he say he uses to outrage her?
- pp.354-359 Skip these pages
- pp.361 Does Johannes want Cordelia to fall in love with Edward?
- pp.364 Why does Johannes lend books to Edward?
- pp.366 What example does Johannes give of surprising an aristocratic woman?
- pp.367 Does Johannes say he has any respect for marriage? Has he ever promised to marry anyone?
- pp.375 Does Johannes get engaged to Cordelia?
- pp.391-392 What is the Maiden's leap?
- pp.405 According to Johannes, when in love, does one "take the highway"?
- pp.410 At the party, even though Johannes does not have an opportunity to talk with Cordelia, what does he do so that he is in her thoughts?
- pp.416 For Johannes, what are the features of a perfect kiss?
- pp.421-423 Johannes attends a gathering of girls, what topic of conversation does he bring up (see pp.422-423 especially)
- pp.434-435 Johannes says that a married woman has "two periods of her life in which she is interesting" (although he mentions a third). What are these three periods or moments?
- pp.438 What is the status of the engagement between Johannes and Cordelia by this time in the book?
- pp.445 After Cordelia has "given away everything", does Johannes want to see her again?

### 4.3 Discussion Questions for *The Seducer's Diary*

- pp.303-6 The *Seducer's Diary* begins with the narrator discovering a diary containing "impressions of erotic situations" and of an individual who aimed



to live “poetically”, have “truly esthetic, objective mastery of himself and of the situation” (p.304), and whose “whole life was intended for enjoyment” (p.305). The narrator notes that the author of the diary suffered from **a kind of sickness**. For the author, the sickness is that he is understimulated by the world (the actual world is never enough) and so sought out more stimulating (interesting) experiences.

1. Do you ever feel this way? Describe the circumstances and conditions that might lead someone to feel this way?
2. What does this feeling tell us about ourselves and about the world?
3. The seducer's response to feeling this way is to seek out more stimulating (interesting) experiences. Before getting into the specifics of the seducer, is there anything wrong with this response in general?

**pp.306-308** The narrator notes that the author was not a seducer in the “ordinary sense”. What image comes to mind when you think of an individual who seduces another? In what ways does the narrator articulate that the author is a seducer in a different sense?

**pp.308** The narrator notes that one of the effects the seducer has on people is to make them go astray within themselves. To illustrate, the author uses an analogy, comparing how getting lost in the woods (as a hiker) is much different than going astray in one's self. Explain this analogy. Once this is explained, what do you think it means to go astray within one's self? Have you ever felt “lost within yourself?”

**pp.321** After an introduction to the discovery of the *Seducer's Diary* and some letters from Cordelia to Johannes, the text begins with Johannes spotting Cordelia. Eventually, Johannes attends an exhibition in which he hopes to see Cordelia. She attends and perceives she's there to meet someone (a rendezvous). In reflecting on her eagerness, Johannes contrasts the perception of a rendezvous by lovers who take it to be a “beautiful moment” with the perception of a neutral third party. He writes that although the lovers themselves were lovely, the rendezvous itself was “revolting” and “far from beautiful” even though it must have seemed beautiful to the lovers.

1. From your aesthetic perspective, is Johannes right about this?
2. Should lovers try to make an effort to make their interactions objectively beautiful?

**pp.334-5** Johannes wishes to coddle the *erotic love* he has for Cordelia. He wishes to “see how long it can be sustained” and contrasts this approach to those who simply “rush ahead.” How does Johannes love differ from how normally people approach romantic relationships? In terms of Johannes's commitment to the aesthetic life, what does Johannes gain by simply focusing on this aesthetic life? Focusing only on the aesthetic, what does Johannes miss out on by not taking the next step that people would normally take?

**pp.335** Johannes contends that a person who evokes love at first sight “awakens the ideal”. With the ideal awakened, Johannes contends that people often feel “overwhelmed”. In saying this, he seems to suggest that real aesthetic pleasure is found in abandoning one's self to this feeling of being overwhelmed by the ideal (a perfect picture of them) and *not* trying to possess the *actual* person.

1. Describe the moment of initial attraction. Is it built on a distorted image of the other person? What is the nature of that distortion?

2. Assuming people do distort their image of others, what benefits and shortcomings are there to ignoring who people really are and focusing instead on who we'd like to see them as? For example, what do we gain and/or lose when we actually get to know someone?

## pp.327-342 NOTES

- After the meeting at the gallery, Johannes loses track of Cordelia. Eventually, he sees her on the street and follows her.
  - passes her on the street, stops in someone's house he knows to see her as she passes
  - loses track of her.
  - Johannes's interest in Cordelia is an initial attraction. His attraction might be characterized as "love at first sight". Concerning this love at first sight, Johannes contends that it awakens the *ideal* (all that is good, perfect, beautiful). It also produces a feeling of being overwhelmed and we have aesthetic pleasure in abandoning ourselves to this feeling.
- Q1** Describe the moment of initial attraction. Is it built on a distortion? If so, in what ways do we distort the other person? Is this distortion done freely?
- Q2** Assume we do distort the image of someone we are initially attracted to, what is the benefit of this distortion? What are its disadvantages? What does it tell us about who we are trying to become?

## pp.327-342 NOTES

- Johannes sees Cordelia again on the street with two girlfriends.
  - Discovers her name is *Cordelia Wahl* (parents dead, lives with aunt)
  - Goes to visit Mrs. Jansen; is introduced to her; not love at first sight; later on passes her in the street
  - perplexed because he cannot find a way into her family (no brothers, no sisters, no cousins)
  - Stated goal of Johannes is seduction of Cordelia.
  - **Method of seduction** is to try to have her notice him. Create repeated encounters with him see him busy doing things). His plan is patient and plotting.
  - Johannes says that the majority of people enjoy their relationships like they do a glass of champagne – all in one gulp. He contends that doing this is tantamount to **rape** or a **stolen kiss**. The idea here is that individuals grab/acquire pleasure without the concern or consent of the other person involved. That is, there isn't a real consideration of their freedom, desires, wants, etc.
  - In contrast, Johannes contends that true love / aesthetic pleasure involves a devotedness to the other, and this devotedness involves the other person *freely* giving themselves to us. In short, aesthetic pleasure involves freedom/consent/devotion from the other.
- Q1** Johannes contends that aesthetic enjoyment requires freedom, but he plans on seducing Cordelia. Is this paradoxical? That is, is seduction inconsistent with the the type of aesthetic pleasure that Johannes envisions? Does this reveal something wrong with "getting someone to like you"?

pp.339-341 List all of the features of Johannes's "ideal girl". Do you agree

with this list? Does it make sense from an aesthetic perspective? Are any of these features true?

**pp.342-354** NOTES

- Johannes visits Cordelia's home
- Watches Cordelia play piano; a Swedish melody; wonders if it has some special meaning for her. *Excited by not knowing.*
- Method of seduction involves *tangential contact*. Tries to always appear *engaged* in various activities but in view of Cordelia. This is done to make her wonder about him.
- Cordelia visits Mr. Baxter's (sells good). His son *Edward* is in love with Cordelia (He is shy, bashful, not assertive, nervous)
- Johannes aims to use Edward to have more direct contact with Cordelia. He befriends Edward. Convinces him to go to the aunt's and ask her on a date, *and to take Johannes along.*
- Johannes chats with the aunt. Conversation is largely about the price of butter, chickens, land, food, fuel. Aims to over-excite the aunt to a point where Cordelia smiles at how worked up Johannes has made her. In addition, he listens to the conversation between Edward and Cordelia.
- Strangely, Johannes's goal is to get Cordelia to *hate him* (p.351). This is done by
  - portraying himself as a bachelor - easy living, servants, always socializing
  - chatting with the aunt about things "beyond" Cordelia (fuel, etc.); treating her as if she were a child.
  - remaining a mystery by his constant comings and goings
- Johannes also uses Edward to contrast himself against him. Edward is shy, bashful, easy-to-read, uninteresting, unassertive, mildly good-looking. In contrast, Johannes is assertive, worldly, mysterious, condescending, confidant, interesting.
 

**Q1** Johannes has a method of seduction. Given this method (and just the idea of seduction in general), do we choose who we are attracted to? Is this a free choice?

**Q2** Is the choice of who we are attracted to governed by reason (is it rational)? Is it rational?

**pp.341-342** Johannes contrasts how the majority enjoy romantic relationships with how the aesthete enjoys them. He contends that most people tend to enjoy others momentarily, all in one go, and all in one gulp. He says, however, that this kind of love is only "imagined" and even goes so far as to say that this is a kind of "rape" (p.342). He contrasts this with how the aesthete (one truly committed to erotic love) enjoys it by saying that true erotic love requires a "devotedness".

- What does he mean when he says that real love requires devotedness (see p.342)?
- In what sense is this true?
- This devotedness seems to imply that an individual is both free and not free. Is this contradictory? What does it imply about the nature of love?

**pp.359-376** NOTES

- Johannes transitions from a method of seduction that primarily worked

by circling the periphery of Cordelia to one that involves more direct engagement (e.g. by speaking to her). His aim is still to get her to fall for him but he contends that she needs the requisite strength to approach him.

- Johannes wants Cordelia to fall in love with Edward! His plan is to find someone dull, to give her the taste of a kind of love that is plain and simple so that she grows tired of him. In addition, he also uses Edward to sow the seeds of replacing Edward with himself (e.g. giving Edward a book to take to Cordelia, then picking it up and reading it).
- Johannes plans to get rid of Edward and engage Cordelia. There is a long discussion of exactly how he will do this, but he ultimately decides that the best option is just to ask her (to propose).
- Even though Johannes plans to engage Cordelia, he does not want to marry him. According to Johannes, breaking off a marriage is unethical since one has made a promise, but there is no promise made when one is engaged.
- Johannes says that he does not want to do anything *unethical* in his seduction of Cordelia. Some things might be *rude* or looked down upon but his seduction of Cordelia ought not involve anything that is morally wrong.
- This restriction signifies a *restriction* or *limitation* on the pursuit of the *aesthetic life* (a life of pleasure).

**Q1** Existentialists claim that we are free (not determined). If this is the case, then it might seem to imply that *anything goes*. But Johannes contends that even if we pursue the life of pleasure, anything does not go; there are certain moral restrictions. What reasons does Johannes give for why anything does not go? What reasons can you think of for why even a life of pleasure involves ethics?

- The Wahl house is expecting an engagement (from Edward)
- Johannes creates a rumor that he is in love / engaged
- Reveals to his diary why he befriended the Aunt (he uses her so that when he asks Cordelia, the aunt will approve)
- Johannes reflects on the best way to propose (he suggests that the best way is to ask in a nebulous, insignificant, curious fashion such that the individual says “yes” but isn’t exactly sure what has happened after the fact)
- *The proposal*. Johannes finds Cordelia at home alone. He proposes to her in a highly formulaic fashion. Cordelia tells him to talk to her aunt. The aunt approves, and now they are engaged.
- Edward is furious
- Johannes now sets conditions on when to break the engagement, namely when Cordelia ultimately knows what it is to love.

**pp.360** Johannes says he wants Cordelia to freely fall for him. In his explanation, he says that “only in freedom is there love; only in freedom are there diversion and everlasting amusement” (p.360). In addition, he says that he doesn’t want her to simply “fall like a heavy body” for him but wants her mind to gravitate to his. One stumbling block to this, however, is that she lacks the confidence necessary to love Johannes. He says that

“she must be strengthened within herself before I let her find support from me” (p.360).

- what role does confidence have in romantic relationships?
- There is the cliché that you need to be able to love yourself before you can love someone else; what does this mean?
- why is it so important for the aesthete to ensure that she is confident enough to give herself to him?

**pp.362** Johannes has several things to say about the differences between men and women. He suggests that each individual has their own distinct strengths (p.363), but there are certain characteristics that men embody more so than women, and women more so than men. Men he contends are characterized by their *intellect*. While women are characterized by their *beauty*.

- If existence precedes essence, and we are not fully determined, then it is an open question whether our sex (male/female) plays a determinative role in who we can become. So, what, if anything, distinguishes men and women?

**pp.410** When we are in love, we often think of the person that we love. In addition, we appreciate gestures (let's call them “loving gestures”) made by others to show their affection, e.g. a love letter. On the one hand, we might measure how strongly we love another by how often we think about them. But, on the other hand, these thoughts might be thought of as all-consuming; that is, we cannot think of anything else. Johannes makes an effort to keep himself in Cordelia's thoughts, e.g. putting a *note* in her knitting supplies. On the one hand, this might be seen as a sweet gesture. On the other hand, it might be construed as an effort to control her thoughts so that they always are focused on him. The “loving gesture” then might be thought as paradoxical. On the one hand, they seem to be a necessary part of relationships. But, on the other hand, they seem to take away our freedom by directing our thoughts toward the beloved. Are these gestures problematic? Do they take away our freedom?

**pp.410-412, 416-418, 420-423** NOTES

- Johannes and Cordelia are spending a lot of time together now that they are engaged, e.g. going to Johannes's uncle, making fun of people together, thinking they are special / distinct from other couples, going to parties.
- Johannes adds another step to his method of seduction, namely he aims to have her *always think of him*.
- An example is when he writes her a letter, has her find it at her aunt's party, but then is unavailable to her so she can't talk to him about it.
- In addition, Johannes and Cordelia are getting closer, e.g. she is sitting on his lap, has her arm around his neck, kissing.
- Johannes contends that all of this physical closeness is affection but not the erotic (aesthetic) experience he aims for. That is, it is not this all-consuming, energetic, passionate, totalizing feeling.
- Johannes aims to break off the engagement and attain this feeling in himself and her by engaging in this hot-and-cold strategy, e.g. writing her poetry, love letters, etc., but then remaining highly aloof (seeming to be occupied in thought, cold, distant, no love letters,

etc.).

- He thinks that this will lead her to break off the engagement but then regret her decision and then profess her love.
- Cordelia breaks off the engagement and leaves the country.
- Johannes sets the stage for meeting again: has his servants pick her up when she returns, has her arrive in a place that reminds her of him (e.g. room arrangement, piano with Swedish melody she loves, book of poetry that he read).
- They reunite, have sex, and then he leaves.

**pp.411-412** Johannes characterizes Cordelia's passion as a "naive passion" (p.411) and aims to develop in her a "higher form of the erotic" (p.411). He says that he has the goal of making her passion "definite, energetic, determined, dialectical" (p.412). The manner in which he proposes to do this is to confess his love to her in various ways (e.g. love letters, notes, verbal expressions of love, poetry, etc.) but then to retreat from her by being cold (p.411) so that she will "summon up everything in order really to take me captive" (p.411).

- Does this type of back-and-forth (hot-and-cold) truly summon up passionate experiences? Even if this type of hot-and-cold interaction isn't particularly healthy in the long-term, does it accomplish the goal of creating heightened passion? Johannes says that doing it can create a love that is that found in "mythology and fairy tales" (p.412)
- Johannes says that this hot-and-cold interaction doesn't force Cordelia to love him. Instead, she freely engages him in a passionate way. Is this really the case?

**pp.416-417** Assuming we are free, we seemingly have a choice about how we engage in our aesthetic interactions with romantic partners. For Johannes, these interactions can be *meaningful* or *meaningless*. For example, consider the act of kissing. Johannes contends that kissing someone is not merely a physical interaction (not two billiard balls colliding) but instead "[a] kiss is a symbolic act that is meaningless if devoid of the feeling it is supposed to signify, and this feeling can be present only under specific conditions" (pp.416-417).

- What are the specific conditions that Johannes says are necessary for a kiss to be meaningful? Do you agree with all of the conditions he lists. What would you add or remove?
- Johannes says without feeling, two people physically kissing are not really kissing (their "kiss" is meaningless). Johannes focuses a lot on the objective conditions (e.g. people, age, place, etc.) necessary for a kiss to have feeling and less on the type of feeling required for the kiss to be meaningful. What type of feeling do you think is necessary for a kiss to be meaningful? How is this feeling informative about the world?
- Feelings aren't usually characterized in terms of creating new entities (that is, if A and B feel x about physical interaction y, then  $y = \text{kissing}$ , but if they don't feel x about y, then  $y \neq \text{kissing}$ ). Is this the right way to think about kissing or romantic interactions in general? Can you think of any other feelings that bring about new realities?

**p.421** Johannes changes his approach to Cordelia in a way that he stops sending her love letters and doing various acts that indicate his affection for her.

He pretends (or actually is) occupied in thought and says that “disquietude mounts, the letters stop coming, the erotic rations are diminished, erotic love is mocked as something ludicrous” (p.421). This shift in character is supposed to ultimately lead Cordelia to pull away from him but then she is to want to recapture Johannes. As he puts it “she will want to make me captive with the same means I have employed against her—with the erotic” (p.421).

In general, however, this raises the question of what are the proper grounds for breaking an engagement. Johannes considers this question in the context of a scene where he attends a gathering of young girls. In considering this question, he offers several examples:

- a relationship where the parents of one of the parties forced them to break an engagement (presumably because the parents hated and were cruel to the man or woman). Here is an example where the relationship is broken due to outside (external) forces.
- a man who broke off an engagement because the (i) girl was too big and (ii) he did kneel before her when he confessed his love. When Johannes said that these cannot be considered good reasons, the man responded that “they are quite adequate to achieve what I want, for no one can give a reasonably reply to them” – implying that reasons for breaking off a relationship cannot be objectively good or bad (they are always personal in nature and always determined to what an individual personally finds important).
- a case where a young girl broke off the engagement because she and her potential partner were not compatible.

Johannes’ general point in bringing up this topic is to argue that every young girl is a born casuist (someone who uses clever but unsound reasoning). He even writes that “I really do believe it would be easier for me to argue with the devil himself than with a young girl when the topic is: under what circumstances should an engagement be broken” (p.423). Regardless of this, we might consider the existentialist idea of how *being authentic is a struggle* in the context of deciding the conditions in which an engagement should be broken.

1. Consider all of the cases that you know of where people have “broken up”. What reasons did people give? Do you think those reasons are good or bad?
2. Are the circumstances, considers, or factors that go into the decision to break an engagement always *personal / subjective* and align with what we really want (similar to the man who broke it off with a girl because she was too big and because he didn’t kneel when he proposed) OR are they to some extent determined by outside forces, e.g. parents, money, etc.?

## The Myth of Sisyphus

### 5.1 Introduction

*The Myth of Sisyphus* is a work by Albert Camus about whether the absurdity of life (its lack of purpose, meaning, reason) requires suicide. Camus's answer is "no" and the book is an exploration into both life's absurdity and what this requires of us as human beings.

### 5.2 Discussion Questions for *The Myth of Sisyphus*

**pp.3-6** Camus offers several causes of suicide (e.g. personal sorrows, incurable illness, recognizing the absence of any reason for living, suffering). Why do you think people commit suicide?

**pp.8-9** Camus says that suicide is the only truly serious philosophical problem. He argues for this claim on the basis of how people act. For example, he contrasts Galileo's unwillingness to die for scientific truth to (i) individuals who commit suicide because they think life isn't worth living and (ii) individuals willing to die for that which gives their life meaning.

He plans to explore this philosophical problem (suicide) by investigating the relationship between the **absurd** (the feeling of being divorced (or alien to) from the world), **suicide**, and **hope**. This leads to the following suggestion: *If life is absurd (has no meaning), then there are two possible solutions. First, one can commit suicide. Second, one can hope that ultimately this life will have some meaning in the afterlife (see Figure 5.1).*

**Q1** Are these the only alternatives if life has no meaning?

**pp.16-28** The dilemma that the only practical options available to us are suicide or hope in divine providence is only persuasive if life is absurd.

Camus must show us then that life really is absurd. His case for the absurdity of life has a couple parts. The general argument can be found



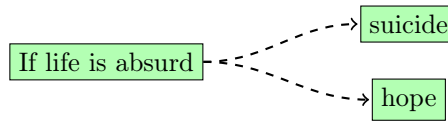


Figure 5.1

in Table 5.1.

- P1 If life is absurd, then suicide or hope.
- P2 If life is not absurd, then the world is rational.
- P3 The world is **not** rational.
- C1 Life is absurd.

Table 5.1 – Camus’ argument for the absurd

The controversial premise in Table 5.1 is **P3**. Camus’ argument for **P3** is summarized in Table 5.2.

- P3.1 The world is rational iff we can distinguish truth and falsity (if it is knowable)
- P3.2 The world is knowable iff it is familiar, clear, unified, anthropomorphic.
- P3.3 Life is not familiar, clear, unified, or anthropomorphic.
- P3 The world is not rational.

Table 5.2 – Camus’ argument for the irrationality of the world

If life is not absurd, then the world must be rational. Life is rational if and only if we can distinguish truth from falsity (Camus says that this is a goal of the mind). However, Camus suggests that the only kind of truth we would be willing to accept is one that (i) brings **unity** to the many diverse truths that we accept (make them all fit together in one grand picture), (ii) is familiar, (iii) is clear, and (iv) is anthropomorphic (both understandable to the human mind and/or have human-like traits, emotions, or intentions). This makes the controversial premise in Table 5.2 is **P3.3**. Camus argues for **P3.3** as follows:

- first, note that our *desire for the truth to have these characteristics* is distinct from the *reality of how things are*. Camus thus contends that there are strong reasons to think that reality of things is **in conflict** with our desire for how things are. He offers some examples, including:
  - We lack absolute knowledge of only a few propositions (see p.19). Presumably, this refers to a kind of hyper-skeptical attitude we could take about every truth.
  - Even if we accept scientific truths and that all truths reduce down to the truths of physics, these truths rest on propositions that are metaphorical in nature (see pp.20)
  - a number of philosophies of the day have argued against reason (the rationality of the world): Nietzsche (pp.23), Heidegger (pp.23-24), Jaspers (pp.24-25), Chestov (pp.25), Kierkegaard

(pp.25-26), Husserl (pp.26-27). These philosophers agree that “nothing is clear, all is chaos, that all man has is his lucidity and his definite knowledge of the walls around him” (p.27)

– we might also add that the world is not sympathetic in that evil, death, genocide (horrible things) are a part of it.

- Given this conflict, Camus thus gives us a clearer sense of what he means when he says that **it isn't the world that is absurd**; instead, it is **our relationship with the world that is absurd**. He writes that “I said that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. The world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world.”

**Q1** Can you think of any examples of some basic expectations of how the world ought to be conflicts with how the world really is?

**Q2** What do you think of Camus' argument?

**pp.28-32** After noting that **the absurd** is a **relational notion** between human beings and the world, Camus further elaborates the notion of the absurd.

- **the absurd** is not limited to **the feeling of the absurd** (although the feeling of the absurd is foundational to the notion of the absurd).
- **the absurd** is a **comparative notion**, namely it is one where two things are **divorced** from each other, viz., they are in confrontation with each other.
  - involves a seeming **contradiction** between the two items (trying to put two things together that don't belong together), e.g. that a virtuous man covets his sister.
  - involves a putting together of two things that are **disproportional**, e.g. a man with a sword trying to attack a group of well-prepared soldiers with machine guns aimed at him.
  - not only is our relation to the world absurd, but absurdity is found in “marriages, challenges, rancors, silences, wars, and even peace treaties”.
  - our reaction to the absurd involves (i) “a total absence of hope”, (ii) “a continual rejection”, and (iii) “a conscious dissatisfaction” (p.31)
- Finally, Camus says that **the absurd** is “a confrontation and an unceasing struggle” (p.31) between human beings and the world.

**Q1:** Given the above clarification of the absurd, come up with your own example of something absurd. Be able to explain how it fits all of the requirements that Camus lays out.

**Q2:** Given the above clarification of the absurd, try to characterize what Camus means when he says that our relational with the world is absurd?

**pp.32-41** Camus characterizes a number of possible solutions to the absurd, but he is critical of other analyses insofar as they don't take the notion of the absurd to be fundamental. He characterizes them as suggesting some kind of **escape** from dealing with the absurd (p.33). As he writes, “[f]or me the sole datum is the absurd. The first and, after all, the only condition of my inquiry is to preserve the very thing that crushes me,

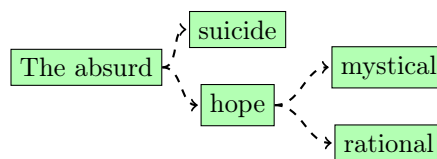
consequently to respect what I consider essential in it. I have just defined it as a confrontation and an unceasing struggle” (p.31).

- One approach to the absurd is to treat it as evidence that we must rely upon God. Since the absurd is the incomprehensible, the inchoate, the unrationalizable, or the divorce between human beings and the world, one might say that the only way to bridge the gap is to rely upon God in the here and now (see pp.33-35). The idea here is that we should simply **accept the irrational nature of the absurd**, give ourselves over to a kind of faith, and sacrifice any attempt to rationally deal with the absurd (see p.37). Part of this requires we attach some negative traits to God, including inhuman and “hideous” (p.34), “unjust”, “incoherent”, and “incomprehensible” (p.39).
- Camus’s response, however, is to say that this is a kind of **escape** into the divine and (i) it ignores (or negates) the real effects that the absurd has upon us, e.g. “opposition, laceration, divorce” (p.35), and (ii) it ignores the real problem of the absurd, whether “I can live with what I know and with that alone” (p.40). That is, these mystical philosophies simply ignore or deny the absurd rather than answer whether one can live with it.

**Q1** Do you agree with Camus’s evaluation that mystical philosophies or religions don’t give us a real answer of how to live our lives if we acknowledge the reality of the absurd?

**pp.51-65** Camus has considered two different responses to the dilemma posed by the absurd: (i) the **mystical response** where one contends that the irrationality of the world is evidence for the divine (here one sacrifices the intellect) and (ii) the **phenomenological rationalist** response where one denies the irrationality of the world and instead claim that it is fully rational (reasonable).<sup>1</sup> Both responses, he contends are efforts to escape, negate, deny the reality of the absurd. Each seems to involve

1. treating the absurd as though it did not exist
2. its effects on human beings are illusory.



**Figure 5.2**

If the mystical and rational solutions are examples of **hope** by way of **denying** the absurd, then **suicide** is its “**acceptance** at its extreme” (p.54). Suicide then is seen as a solution to the absurd in that in seeing that life is meaningless, in seeing that our future is dreadful, we should just end it now rather than wait for the inevitable. As Camus writes, the person who accepts suicide as a solution sees his unique and dreadful future “and rushes toward it” (p.54). Thus, Camus’ dilemma involving the absurd seems to allow for two possible responses:

1. **accept** the reality of the absurd and stop living (suicide)

<sup>1</sup>For the second of these two claims, see his discussion of Husserl’s philosophy on pp.41-50.

2. **deny** the reality of the absurd and continue living (hope)

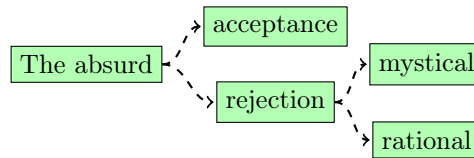


Figure 5.3

Given this setup, Camus suggests that there may be a **third** option. This is the option of the **absurd life** or **consciousness and revolt**. This option **accepts the absurd** (so it is **not hope** and similar to the suicide option) but continues life (so it is **similar to hope** and not the suicide option). In other words, the option of **consciousness and revolt** is **not hope** in that it rejects that life is meaningful (it accepts, rather than rejects the absurd). And, it is **not suicide** in that it rejects the resignation that is supposed to come along with accepting the life is not worth living. Camus offers a number of additional characteristics of the **third option** of consciousness and revolt:

- it takes “what I know, what is certain, what I cannot deny, what I cannot reject” as fundamental (p.51)
- it retains the **desire** for unity, solution, clarity and cohesion (p.51)
- it acknowledges a certain element of **chaos** and **chance** in the world (p.51)
- it accepts that there is no way to reconcile the desire for unity and the chaos of the world (p.51)
- it involves a constant confrontation between “man and his own obscurity” (p.54)
- it is “devoid of hope” in that it accepts the meaningless of life (our “crushing fate”) without resigning our self to it, viz., without quitting it (p.54)

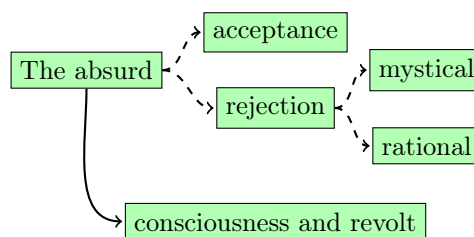


Figure 5.4

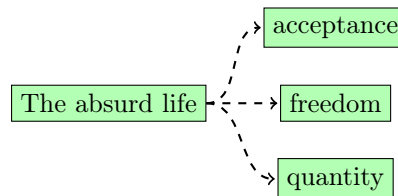
- Q1** Camus will clarify this response throughout the book, but what do you think of his response in general outline?
- Q2** Camus (pp.54-55) offers an example of the **consciousness and revolt** solution (I’m adding to this slightly). We can imagine an innocent person on death row (he is certain to die). The individual can have three possible responses:
1. **hope solution:** the situation is not absurd; somehow this is part of God’s plan; it seems unjust, unintelligible, but it is God’s

will. I'll just have faith that I'll be rewarded in this life or in the afterlife.

2. **suicide solution:** the situation is absurd; I am condemned to die; I might as well kill myself since my death is inevitable.
3. **consciousness and revolt solution:** the situation is absurd; yes, my death is inevitable, yes this is unjust, yes there is no meaning in this, but I plan to live anyway even though I will never make peace with this injustice.

Using the above example as your guide, apply it more generally to our situation in the world.

pp.51-65 Camus characterizes the absurd life as having three characteristics (consequences): acceptance, freedom, and quantity of life (see [Figure 5.5](#)).



**Figure 5.5** – Three features of the absurd life

We have already discussed the aspect of **acceptance of the absurd**. With respect to **freedom**, Camus contends that the absurd life shows that we are **not free** and instead aims to replace the notion of **freedom** with that of **liberation**. His argument for this first begins by defining a notion of **freedom** that he plans to examine:

1. it does not solve the free will vs. determinism problem (Camus says we cannot really know the answer to this, see p.56)
2. it is not given (or at least we don't know whether it is given) by God
3. it is freedom of thought and action within the confines of **imprisonment** and the State (some human stopping us from doing something, see p.56)

Next, Camus seems to have two reasons for why we are not really free in the sense described above:

1. He contends that all acts of freedom depend upon on the hope of a meaningful future (e.g. we take a business class in the hopes of having a **meaningful** life as a business person). However, once we accept the absurd, we recognize that these hopes are meaningless and so we are not really free (see pp.57-58).
2. We unconsciously think we are free and this is reinforced by everyone thinking they are free.

Finally, Camus says that acceptance of the absurd leads to a rejection of freedom, but this rejection allows us to accept a **principle of liberation**.<sup>2</sup>

According to Camus, by rejecting freedom we are liberated from (see p.59):

1. the need to follow common rules (e.g. etiquette, moral rules), societal expectations (e.g. to be a good, hard-working, contributing member

<sup>2</sup>It is so unclear whether this is part of the absurd life since (i) he seems to be pointing to the principle of liberation as a consequence of the mystical and suicidal views (views he rejects) and (ii) he will later say “[t]he absurd does not liberate; it binds” (p.67).

of society)

2. feelings associated with failing to live up to societal expectations (e.g. if you aren't a good person, you shouldn't feel bad; if you aren't "good-looking" according to society's standards, there is no reason to feel ashamed / bashful

At this point, Camus takes **acceptance** and **freedom** as a part of the absurd life.<sup>3</sup>

The **third** and final feature of the absurd life involves:

1. replace the search for *quality experiences* with a *quantity of experiences*<sup>4</sup>
2. what this means is the amount of time one is consciously aware of one's life, one's revolt to the world, one's liberation (see p.62-62).
3. this implies that no deep, meaningful, passionate, quality experience is worth more than a long life of being consciously aware of the absurd.

**pp.66-77** One of the problematic implications of the absurd life is that it seems to **permit immorality**.

- if life has no meaning, then there is no reason to be ethical (that is, if it isn't our *purpose to be good*, then the absurd life seems to allow us to **be evil**)
- if individuals are not bound to the common rules of life (nor to the belief in a God that might punish), then living the absurd life seems to permit immoral behavior and/or illegal behavior.

Camus' seems to have two responses to this criticism:

1. while the absurd life does not forbid evil action, it also doesn't recommend it.<sup>5</sup>
2. even if the absurd life can be said to allow for immoral, illegal acts, if one takes the absurd life seriously, one ought to see all actions (or the consequences of all actions) with an attitude of indifference and a feeling of responsibility. That is, if A does action X, then A is willing to face the consequences that are the result of doing X (responsible) but at the same time one will not feel remorse, guilt, or satisfaction for doing that act.

**Q1** If we accept the absurd life (and its three characteristics), does this imply that immorality and illegality is permitted? How convincing is Camus' reply to the charge of immorality?

**Q2** Ideologies seem to instill and reinforce "good" behavior, e.g. thinking I am going to go to hell keeps me from doing evil. The absurd life seems to suggest an abandonment of any sort of externally-set ideology. What effect would abandoning all ideologies have on human beings

<sup>3</sup>He summarizes the absurd life with these two components as follows: The absurd life is "[n]othing else for the moment but indifference to the future and a desire to use up everything that is given" (p.60).

<sup>4</sup>"If I convince myself that this life has no other aspect than that of the absurd, if I feel that its whole equilibrium depends on that perpetual opposition between my conscious revolt and the darkness in which it struggles, if I admit that my freedom has no meaning except in relation to its limited fate, then I must say that what counts is not the best living but the most living" (p.60-61).

<sup>5</sup>This is actually the opposite of what he literally, but what he suggests is (at least to me) incoherent: "[t]he absurd does not liberate; it binds. It does not authorize all actions. "Everything is permitted" does not mean that nothing is forbidden" (p.67).

and society (e.g. would the abandonment of ideologies make us more good, more evil?)

pp.66-92 Camus provides three illustrations, images, or sketches of the absurd life.

- the lover
- the actor
- the adventurer

Camus says a number of things about his particular selection of these three lives. Namely that,

1. he suggests that there is no way to give formal rules for how to live an absurd life (p.68); so illustrations are required
2. he does not suggest that any of these lives should be followed (p.68)
3. one key ingredient in all of them is that they all expend their whole lives as if this is the only life they will live; so, no afterlife (p.69)
4. they are just sketches (p.90)
5. they are extreme examples (p.91)

The **first** of Camus's illustrations of the **absurd life** is with the fictional womanizer Don Juan. While there are many adaptations of Don Juan, the key ingredients to these stories tend to involve a wealthy man who by various acts of seduction and trickery persuaded women to have sex with him. The legend of Don Juan has religious-moral implications in that it poses a challenge to the Christian act of contrition (confession, penance, reconciliation). If the sins of individuals can be forgiven by either (i) regretting them or (ii) confessing them, then individuals are free to behave in whatever perverse or sinful ways they please as long as they repent before they die. In some versions of Don Juan, he is denied salvation, thereby indicating that the act of contrition has its limitations and we are responsible for our actions (that is, some acts will receive punishment despite our being sorry for them).

1. lives by an ethic of quantity (as opposed to quality), tries to love as many women to the fullest degree possible
2. only thing that matters to someone who seeks quantity of joys is efficacy (getting the joys)
3. not an immoralist, lives by personal moral code
4. capable of loving in an authentic life; love not clothed in the illusion of eternity (see p.73). Says that most people define "love" as that which "binds us to certain creatures only by reference to a collective way of seeing for which books and legends are responsible" (p.73, indicating that this is adopting from without) whereas Don Juan defines love more neutrally, namely as "that mixture of desire, affection, and intelligence that binds me to this or that creature" (p.73).
5. seems to suggest that a polygamistic love does not keep you from loving everyone, whereas a monogamistic love has you focus on a single person (p.73)
6. sees love as short-lived
7. Don Juan is willing to face the consequences without fear / regret. Camus writes that to Don Juan "nothing is vanity to him except the hope of another life. He proves this because he gambles that other life against heaven itself" (p.70). Don Juan is open to ridicule, blame, torment, etc. (pp.74-75)

- Q1** Camus' other examples of the absurd life concern the **actor** and the **adventurer**. What does Camus say about these individuals?
- Q2** You know have a description of the absurd life, an argument for it, and some examples. Do you think living an absurd life is an example of the authentic life? Do you think that in order to live an authentic existence one must live an absurd life? What sorts of struggles are there in living an absurd life?



pp.93-104 Camus notes that it is difficult to maintain a commitment to the absurd life (p.94). In addition, living one's own life adhering to the ethic of quantity is challenging since we are only living one life. To this end, Camus stresses the role of **the work of art** for both (i) revitalizing our commitment to the absurd life and (ii) allowing us to live more fully a life of quantity.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Camus contends not only states that "creating is living doubly" (p.94) but also that the work of art functions by making "the mind get outside of itself and places it in opposition to others" (p.95). In short, the act of creation allows us to experience more perspectives outside of our own.

With this said, Camus explores the question of whether the work of art is itself absurd (p.96). He contends that it is and explores some key features of this claim. Namely, he contends that

1. the work of art is prompted by intelligence but *displays* and *describes* life in physical form (pictures, images, scenes, etc.) rather than in symbolic relationships or principles (see p.97). Here there is an emphasis on **concrete** descriptions, images, scenes as opposed to **abstract** theorizing or moralizing.
2. it doesn't have any deeper meaning. The work of art shouldn't signify the purpose of life.<sup>7</sup>
3. it is always a human production about the human experience (p.98).
  - (a) attentive to what we know with certainty
  - (b) it is grounded insofar as it is attentive to the limitations of human thought (what we can know)
  - (c) No divine, supernatural intervention.
4. it suffers when it tries to fully explain whatever it is describing and good when it only tries to describe a feature of experience.<sup>8</sup> Camus contends that attempts to give a total explanation involve a "pretension to the eternal" (essentially an attempt to give purpose to life) whereas mere descriptions don't pretend to have a reason, they are just a series of images (see p.98). Should not explain (p.102)
5. suggests that the absurdity of a work of art (e.g. literature, painting) etc. can best be seen in **music**.
  - (a) In some literature or art, we sometimes see a point to it. The artist is trying to tell us this or make a commentary on that.
  - (b) In some music, there isn't supposed to be a greater meaning or significance. Pure melody
6. even literature can be absurd (see pp.99-104). Camus' interest in this seems tied to his own career as an author as he writes that "I want to liberate my universe of its phantoms and to people it solely with flesh-and-blood truths whose presence I cannot deny. I can perform absurd work, choose the creative attitude rather than another" (p.102)
  - (a) absurd work should be pointless ("gratuitous"),
  - (b) should illustrate divorce from the world

<sup>6</sup>Camus writes "[i]n this universe the work of art is then the sole chance of keeping his consciousness and of fixing its adventures."

<sup>7</sup>"It will not yield to the temptation of adding to what is described a deeper meaning that it knows to be illegitimate" (p.97). It "signifies nothing more than itself" (p.97).

<sup>8</sup>More specifically, he says this about the *relationship* between the artist's experience and the experience expressed by the artwork (see p.98).

- (c) shouldn't contain illusions, hope, assign a role to the divine
- Q1** Can you think of some clearly non-absurd artworks (e.g. movies, paintings, music)? Describe these.
- Q2** think of various works of art that you are familiar with (e.g. movies, paintings, songs, etc.), which of these would best be described as absurd works of art?
- pp.104-118** Camus closes his chapter on "Absurd Creation" with some examples of absurd literature (or literature that seems to address the problem of the absurd). His particular focus is on several works by Dostoevsky. He begins by citing several passages of Dostoevsky's work that deal with the absurd (see p.105 for some examples). One of the key issues concerns the existence of God. One of Dostoevsky's characters reasons that God must exist for the world to make sense, but, at the same time, the character recognizes that God doesn't exist and cannot. This seemingly inconsistent set of propositions prompts the following argument:

- P1 If God does not exist, I am God.  
 P2 If am God, I must kill myself.  
 C Therefore I must kill myself to become God.

**Table 5.3** – Kirilov's argument

The argument at first glance seems ridiculous. Let's consider **P1**. Camus explains that:

1. If God exists, then we depend upon God and cannot act against God's will (p.108). If God does **not** exist, then we are independent beings, beings not dependent upon God. In other words: if God exists, everything depends upon him; if God doesn't, everything depends upon us.
2. In saying one is God, one is not saying that one is that one is not from this world (e.g. from the heavens)
3. in saying that one is God, one is not saying that one is actually a spiritual being taking the shape of man (e.g. Jesus)
4. in saying "I am God" all one is saying is that one is free on this earth, one is independent, one does not serve some immortal being (p.108)
- 5.

Thus, the argument can be rewritten as follows:

- P1 If God does not exist, I am God (that is, independent).  
 P2 If am God (that is independent), then I must kill myself.  
 C Therefore I must kill myself to become God.

**Table 5.4** – Kirilov's argument rewritten

What about **P2**? Why does the non-existence of God require suicide?

- if you feel you are God, you will live a free life, one that is your own, one without hope
- but most people don't feel that they are Gods. They don't feel that they are independent (free from social expectations)
- one way to show people that you are God. That is, really free, is to kill yourself (not be a victim of some killing, but kill yourself out of

your own volition). This would be a truly radical expression of your own freedom. However, it is worth questioning whether you actually need to do this or you merely *could* do this to show you are free.

- in short, killing yourself would be a humanitarian act

**Q1** Suppose you were to encounter someone who hasn't read any philosophy, any existentialist philosophy, and knows nothing about the absurd or Camus, how would you put the above argument in plainer language? Is the suicide suggested here, metaphorical? Does it apply to everyone or a single person?

**Q2** Much of Camus' discussion of the absurd has brought in some elements where Christianity is hostile to the absurd life. However, on p.112 he says that "it is possible to be Christian and absurd"? What does he mean by this? How might you convince a Christian to live an absurd life?

**pp.119-123** In the final chapter, Camus considers the myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus is a figure in Greek mythology / history. He was king of Corinth and considered by Homer to be one of the “the craftiest of men”. Camus focuses on **three** different aspects of the myth.

**Aspect 1: Hate of the Gods.** In the first account of the myth, Aegina (whose father was Asopus, a river god and son of Poseidon) was captured by the god Zeus/Jupiter. Sisyphus knew of the abduction and offered to tell Aesopus on the condition that he would create an eternal spring of water in Corinth (Sisyphus was the king of Corinth/Ephyra). Camus takes Sisyphus’ as preferring things of the earth over the divine for he writes “[t]o the celestial thunderbolts he preferred the benediction of water” (p.119).

**Aspect 2: Hatred of Death.** Even though Zeus had taken Aegina, Zeus was enraged and sent Thanatos (the god of death) after Sisyphus. Sisyphus however tricked Thanatos and chained him in his home. From there on out, no mortal could die. Camus indicates that this shows Sisyphus’ “hatred of death” (p.120). What he neglects to mention that because of Sisyphus’ action, people continued to live on Earth with horrible diseases, painful injuries, and even bloodless. Ultimately, Zeus sent Ares (the god of war) to free death.

**Aspect 3: Passion for Life.** Before Sisyphus’ death, he asked his wife Merope to forgo the traditional burial rituals. These include burial, sacrifices to Hades, and placing a coin under his tongue to pay the ferryman who takes the dead across the river Styx to the home of Hades. Once Sisyphus arrived at the home of Hades, he argued that (i) he shouldn’t be in the home of Hades, (ii) he should be allowed to return to the Earth to both arranged a proper funeral and discipline his wife thereby setting an example for all other widows. Sisyphus was allowed to return to Earth for three days, but did not return to the underworld as he had promised. Ultimately, he died of old age.

When Sisyphus finally died, he was punished. Despite undertaking a variety of heinous acts (rape, murder, theft), Sisyphus was punished for his trickery and disobedience toward the Gods. The punishment and Sisyphus’ general attitude toward this punishment is the central focus of Camus’ final chapter. Sisyphus is tasked with an eternity of pushing a boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down. One of the key claims of the chapter is Camus’ characterization of Sisyphus’ descent after the boulder has rolled back down the hill. Camus contends that Sisyphus’ punishment is **tragic** (sad, melancholic) yet also capable of taking place in **joy**.

**The case for the tragic.** Camus contends that the tragedy of Sisyphus depends upon his **being conscious** (see p.121).

1. would not be tragic if he was mechanically doing it. We don’t find the fate a machine to be tragic for doing the same thing over and over again.
2. would not be tragic if he had hope
3. tragedy is found in that he “knows the whole extent of his wretched condition” (p.121)

**The case for joy.** Camus says that despite this tragic outcome, Sisyphus’ descent can “take place in joy” (p.121) and conclude “all is well” (p.122).

1. joy found in that the “wild and limited universe” is ours, not God’s
2. there is still something left to live with (maybe not for).<sup>9</sup>
3. our tasks are not performed with God’s who allow human suffering (p.122)
4. our fate is a human fate (it is a personal one), not a divine one, not one that is destined (pp.122-123)

**Q1** Camus seems to suggest that the absurd life is both tragic and has an aspect of joy. Do you think this is really the case?

**Q2** Camus has finally made his case. Is Sisyphus’ fate (the absurd life) preferable to the other options, e.g. (i) living under an illusion or (ii) suicide?

**Q3** After having read this book, has your perspective on life changed at all? If so, in what way? If not, what about the book is unpersuasive or impractical?

pp.

pp.

pp.

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<sup>9</sup>Camus writes that “[i]t teaches that all is not, has not been, exhausted” (p.122)

## Existentialism is a Humanism

**pp.17-25:** Sartre states that the agenda of the essay (lecture) is to defend existentialism from some criticisms. These criticisms include:

1. encouraging people to despair, to see life as pointless and futile
2. as a bourgeois philosophy (hyper-intellectual, not practical for the worker)
3. stressing what is dark, base, ugly, and evil about human beings rather than focusing on their finer points (p.17, p.18-19)
4. for treating human beings as though they were isolated, alone, unconnected to their fellow human beings.
5. denial of all values thought to be eternal (kindness, honesty, etc.).  
The criticism here is that if there is no God, then “

To start, he doesn't do much with the definition. Instead, he address the objection that existentialism stresses the **dark side of life**, viz., it is **pessimistic** about human beings. Sartre's reply to this is to point out that those who make these claims are fond of proverbs, social conventions, and ethical rules that stress **conformity, tradition, and adherence to social norms** (see p.19). He contends then that these individuals likely find **existentialism** to be objectionable not because of it is pessimistic but instead because it is **optimistic** insofar as it contends human beings have individual choice.

Sartre defines “existentialism” as “a doctrine that makes human life possible and also affirms that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity” (p.18).<sup>1</sup> He distinguishes two varieties: an atheistic version and a theistic version. Regardless of this, he contends that they share the common view that “existence precedes essence”

<sup>1</sup>This definition is unclear in ways, ways that we hope he will make clear as the lecture goes on. For example, what does he mean by “makes human life possible”, certainly he can't mean *biological life*. In addition, what does he mean when he says that “every truth and every action imply an environment”, does he mean “natural environment”, or “social setting”, or “perspective”?

(p.20).<sup>2</sup>

Sartre clarifies this example through at least two examples where *essence would precede existence*:

- *Essence of a knife*: the concept of a knife in the mind of a craftsman, the knife has a definite purpose, it is produced in a certain way, and then it *exists*. The knife's essence preceded its existence.
- *Essence of man (w/ an existent God)*: concept of man in the mind of God, man has a definite purpose (God knows what man is and why man is being created), and when man is produced in a certain way, then man exists. The human being's essence precedes his/her existence.

Sartre contends that if God does *not* exist, then "there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it. That being is man" (p.22). In contrast then to the *essence precedes existence* examples, Sartre contends that we are not the *production* of some divine mind nor do we have a conception of who we are when we first exist. Instead, he proposes the following sequence:

1. we become material beings - at this stage we are *nothing*.
2. we will ourselves (a subjective existence) into being
3. we begin to define ourselves, conceive ourselves, make ourselves into something that has something like an essence

**Q1:** On the one hand, Sartre seems to suggest that there are no sharply defined (or predetermined) categories that human beings must fit into given their birth, e.g. a son of a banker must also be a banker. This claim seems to echo a point he makes against his critics that they object to existentialism because it doesn't toe the party line (conform) and instead insists on **independent choice**. On the other hand, some of the passages that Sartre utters seem more radical. He says that (i) there is no human nature, (ii) man is "that which he wills himself to be", that an individual is "nothing other than what he makes of himself" (p.22), and that our existence depends upon a consciously willed decision. This seems to imply that there are no constraints on who we will become and that our unconscious choices don't play an important role in defining us.

- Which of the two claims do you think Sartre means?
- Which of the two claims do you think is more plausible and why?

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<sup>2</sup>He calls this "the first principle of existentialism" (p.22).

**pp.25-37:** One of the objections leveled against existentialism is that it encourages (or entails) a state of anguish, abandonment, and despair. And, these states (or attitudes) thus promote inaction, quietism, immorality, and a kind of social isolation. On **pp.25-36**, Sartre clarifies the notions of **anguish** (pp.25-27), **abandonment** (pp.27-34), and **despair** (pp.34-36), and responds to the aforementioned criticisms. Here we will focus on the issue of abandonment.

The criticism is that existentialism involves **abandonment**. Sartre contends that this involves two things:

1. That God does not exist
2. That there are profound consequences to God not existing.
  - (a) *No God, No Big Deal:* In contrast to Sartre's claim that God's nonexistence is a big deal, there is the theory that God's nonexistence does not change anything.
    - We still keep the same morals and laws
    - We know what is right and wrong as if God had told us (morality is known *a priori*, that is by reason alone; it is known by a reflection upon our human nature).
  - (b) *No God, Big Deal:* Sartre claims, however, that the recognition of God's nonexistence has significant consequences.
    - If **God does not exist**, then everything is permissible. (Nothing is prohibited by God's decree).
    - If we cannot rely on God or some innate features of ourselves to determine what we should do, then we are in a state of abandonment. *In short, we lack guidance from without and within.*

With the notion of abandonment clarified, how does Sartre respond to the criticisms surrounding that concept? I think the manner in which he rebuts the criticism is by showing the notion of abandonment requires individuals take on a **radical responsibility** for their actions. That is, ultimately, we are totally responsible for every action of our lives; nothing we do is justified nor excused by an appeal to some outside factor.

- P1 Existence precedes essence (no human nature).  
 P2 God does not exist.  
 P3 Nothing can excuse, justify, or legitimate our conduct.  
 For example, we cannot appeal to God to justify why we did one thing rather than another.  
 C Therefore, we bear an absolute responsibility for our actions.

**Table 6.1** – A simple version of Sartre's argument for radical responsibility.

Let's consider **P3** in some detail. Sartre considers and rejects several ways that an individual might try to excuse, justify, or legitimate his/her behavior (See [Figure 6.1](#)).



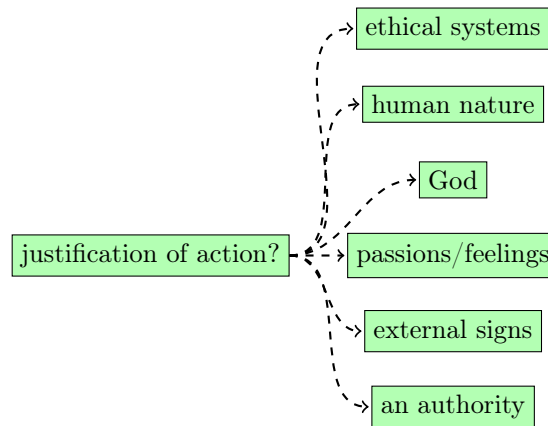


Figure 6.1

- *Passion*: An individual might argue that they are not responsible for what they did; they were instead driven by a powerful passion or feeling. Sartre contends that “[e]xistentialists do not believe in the power of passion. [...] They think that man is responsible for his own passion” (p.29)
  - *Ethical Systems*: An individual might argue that they could justify their actions based on some ethical system, e.g. the Christian doctrine, Kantian ethics, etc. Sartre’s reply is that this gives *general advice at best*, we still have to figure out how to apply it and is pretty useless in ethical dilemmas. See Sartre’s *discussion of the son/brother and his mother*, pp.30-31.
  - *Signs*: An individual might argue that they received a sign that they should do one thing rather than another, and they are thus not responsible for their subsequent actions because they were just going off what the world told them. See Sartre’s *Jesuit story*, pp.33-34.
- Q1** Do you agree with Sartre that ultimately, there is nothing outside of our own personal, free choice that can justify our behavior? Are we fully responsible for everything we do?
- Q2** What would Sartre say to a murderer who argued that s/he wasn’t responsible for killing someone because they were provoked (e.g. angered, annoyed, set off by the actions of the victim)?
- Q3** Can you think of any examples of people you know (famous, friends, family, or even yourself) who try to justify or excuse themselves from responsibility for their actions? What do they try to excuse? What do they point to as justification?

**pp.36-44** We will look at two issues raised in these pages. The **first** is what I'll call Sartre's **actualism**, namely his denial that human beings have any character traits other than those displayed in their acts. This contrasts against what we might call **possibilism**, people are what they might (or what they probably would do if circumstances were different) and **dispositionalism**, people are what they would do given their habits, dispositions.

The **second** is Sartre's response to the criticism that existentialism is based on the subjectivity of the individual – and so is a bourgeois philosophy (the idea here is that it isn't one where we can depend upon our fellow man/woman for things; it is a philosophy only fitting for the wealthy elite).

Sartre contends that individual human beings are **defined by their actions**. He writes that “he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life” (p.37). In putting forward this position, he contrasts it against the person who thinks that they would be different if only given **different circumstances** or the **right opportunities**.<sup>3</sup>

1. I would have written a great book, but I'm so busy with work.
2. I would have told that person I had a crush on them, but I was born shy.
3. I would have been more charitable to the needy, a better friend, and called my parents more, but I need to study so I get a good job.

Sartre denies that we can attribute features to the person that are not actualized. He denies that a person has within them “a host of untried but perfectly viable abilities, inclinations, and possibilities that endow me with worthiness not evident from any examination of my past actions” (p.37).

Sartre recognizes that this sounds like a harsh position, but insists:

- only reality counts
- your dreams, goals, expectations, hopes only matter to the degree that they define how you've failed, what you haven't accomplished

Given Sartre's position that we are **radically responsible for our own actions** and that **we are nothing more than the sum of our actions**, Sartre contends that when we call someone a **coward, spineless, weak, evil, heroic, kind**, etc., we are saying that this person **chose** to be this way. Their cowardice is not the result of being born that way or because of the circumstances that they found themselves in.

**Q1** Do you think people are merely the sum of their actions (actualist position) or do you think there is something more to defining the human being, e.g. people are also what they might do in different

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<sup>3</sup>Sartre contrasts existentialism against **quietism**, which he defines by the attitude of people who say “[o]thers can do what I cannot do.” (p.36). He says existentialism is the opposite of quietism. So, this would be to curiously contend that existentialism contends that others cannot do what I cannot do.

circumstances?

Another criticism that Sartre considers is the charge that existentialism is an **individualistic**, specifically **subjectivistic** philosophy. The idea here is that reality is defined relative to (and depends upon) the subject. This is, in contrast to an **objectivistic** philosophy that might define what there is (reality) independent of any knowing subjects.

**First**, Sartre agrees with the claim that existentialism is a subjectivist philosophy. He contends that this is the case because the theory is based on an absolute truth, rather than on a hope. The absolute truth in question is the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*. Sartre contends that:

- this is an absolute true
- all other truths not built on an absolute truth are merely probable
- that this truth involves the subject (consciousness) confronting itself
- that all other truths depend upon it
- that it is simple, easy to attain, and within everyone's reach

**Second**, Sartre contends that the subjectivist aspects of existentialism is important for it is the **only philosophy that endows human beings with dignity since it does not recognize them as objects**. How does this work?

- We realize that we exist
- We realize that we cannot be anything (e.g. a coward, a hero, a good husband, spiritual, cruel) unless others acknowledge us as such. *The idea here is that in order to be cruel/evil to someone, this would imply that some other subject regards us as cruel/evil. So, in order to be something, we need to recognize other subjects in the world who are similar to us.*

**Q1** Sartre contends that existentialism is built on an absolute truth (the *cogito ergo sum*). Is this an indubitable truth? Can you doubt this proposition?

**Q2** Sartre contends that even though existentialism is a subjectivist philosophy, it does not imply that there are no other subjects (or that everyone else is an object to be used). The subjectivity of existentialism entails intersubjectivity. Sartre's position seems to involve a kind of idealism (everything is the nature of an idea) or dualism (there is an immaterial / mental substance and a material substance) in contrast to a materialism that says everyone is simply a material / physical object. The former position takes first-person experience and the knowing subject to be primary while the latter might be said to take a scientific / objectivist view to be primary. Which of the two positions strikes you as more intuitive and why?

**pp.44-51** We discussed Sartre's initial response to the charge that existentialism is **subjectivist**. He contends that (i) this is true, but not a problem since it is the only philosophy that rests on an absolute truth and (ii) it nevertheless acknowledges the existence of other subjects (so it is not solipsism).

Sartre considers three additional objections to existentialism being a subjectivistic philosophy. Here we will consider two:

1. since existentialism is a form of subjectivism, you can do whatever you want (no moral rules, anarchy)
2. since existentialism is a form of subjectivism, you cannot judge anyone

With respect to the objection that existentialism entails **amorality** and/or **moral anarchy**, Sartre contends that this is false since the choices we make are not capricious (done simply based on our mood) or on a whim.

1. there are no a priori values and no moral rule dictated by God.
2. human beings are free
3. each human being bears the responsibility for his/her action (cannot excuse it by appealing to moral systems, God, human nature, circumstances, etc.)
4. whenever we make a choice, this choice does not merely commit us but commits the whole of humanity.
  - not totally clear what Sartre means by this.
  - sometimes he says that choices we make for own lives imply that we think they are good for everyone else (see p.24)
  - other times he seems to be saying our choices simply influence them in some way, shape, or form, e.g. if we are legislator then the policies we enact will influence others (p.25) or if we choose not to get married and have children then this will influence what kinds of people are in the world (p.45)

Sartre tries to illustrate what situation the existentialist finds him/herself in with an analogy: **making moral choice is like constructing a work of art.**

**Work of Art.** Consider some features of a work of art:

1. we don't blame the artist for not following "the rules of art"
2. we don't tell the artist what to create – no image / picture that the artist *ought* to create
3. the artist commits him/herself to a painting
4. cannot judge the painting until it is finished

**Making a Moral Choice.** The same features are said to hold for the individual:

1. we cannot decide what should or should not be done
2. it is up to the person to decide what life they will create, what

- commitments they will have, what morality they will live by
3. the person commits him/herself to their projects
  4. cannot judge them until they are finished

- Q1** The criticism to Sartre is that existentialism permits moral anarchy because individuals can do whatever they want. Has Sartre adequately responded to this criticism?
- Q2** Sartre proposes an analogy between an artist and his/her work of art *and* an individual and his/her life. Try to develop this analogy further by considering other connections / parallels between the two.

The **second** objection is that *since existentialism is a form of subjectivism, you cannot judge anyone*. Sartre contends that this is partly true and partly false.

**It is true**, insofar as we cannot judge people who are forced to make some basic choices in life about what we will do, and once an individual makes a choice sincerely, it is impossible for that individual to change his/her choice. Sartre's examples concern moral and political choices, e.g. whether to side with the North or South in the American Civil War.

**It is false**, insofar as we can pass judgment when:

1. an individual makes a **logical error**. I think by this Sartre means when we make a choice based on a false belief, e.g. if I want to help my child who is sick, but I think that medicine won't help (false belief), then my not giving my child medicine is a choice that we can pass judgment upon.
2. when an individual acts in **bad faith**. We can judge someone when they pretend that their choice is not a free choice but (i) is instead excused or justified by some other factor, e.g. God, their passions/feelings, human nature, etc. or (ii) when they say they are bound to do it by the values they have.<sup>4</sup>

- Q1** Sartre contends that we all choose our own ethics (that we determine what we should or should not do), think of a person that acts in bad faith (don't pick anyone in the class). What sorts of judgments can you pass on this person?
- Q2** Sartre limits the judgments we can pass on people to the above two cases, does this seem enough?

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<sup>4</sup>Sartre thinks that this is a contradiction. You cannot be bound (a slave) to the values that you are responsible for choosing

pp.51-54 In these pages, I asked you to tell me what Sartre means when he writes that “existentialism is a humanism” (the title of the book). Sartre distinguishes between two types of humanism. Here are some thoughts (provided by you).

**Non-existentialist humanism** refers to a view that:

1. it views human beings as “ends” (assumes a human nature that only needs to be actualized)
2. involves a **worship of humanity**: human beings have supreme value, they are the most important thing in the world, “man is amazing”
3. Man gets credit and defined in terms of what certain (the best) humans do. We are all *great*, even if this greatness is not actualized by us as individuals. It is only the circumstances that hold us back. We would achieve great deeds given the right setting.
4. human beings are to be evaluated in terms of their **most admirable** (not the least admirable) features. This is *true human nature*.
5. implies a notion of progress; humanity as a whole is getting better insofar as we achieve more

In contrast, there is **existentialist humanism**:

1. **not an end or finished product**
  - (a) it views human beings as constantly in the "making", not finished products, not having a pre-built essence – *existence precedes essence*.
2. **takes human beings (not God) to be central to the understanding of one’s life and the world.**
  - (a) An **existentialist humanism** is a system that puts man before any supernatural or divine influence
  - (b) The only world that exists is the human one. – *we see the world (and the objects in it) in human terms that we define, e.g. seeing someone as a “friend”*. No one can experience the world outside of the human perspective, one that is subjective.
  - (c) *Idealism* - The only universe that exists to humans is one that involves human subjectivity - no universe without it.
  - (d) Claiming that existentialism is a humanism forces us to **realize that there is nothing that governs our decisions besides us**, so we must be responsible for our actions
3. **takes human beings (not God) to be the creators of value.**
  - (a) humans are the sculptors of their lives and values
  - (b) human beings are in a never-ending or ever-evolving effect to **define** themselves.
  - (c) acknowledge the central role that human beings play in the world, we **make our own choices** and everything is reliant on us
  - (d) there is **no legislator** outside of man that can save him from having to freely choose what to do with his/her life.
4. **Values don’t emerge because of some *underlying human nature* that is evidence by what “great” humans do.**

- (a) it does not glorify or value anything *humanly* (as if this could already be defined / known)
- (b) just because a person **X** does some great thing doesn't mean this is representative of humanity in general (doesn't mean that greatness, kindness, courage is in all humans naturally).
- (c) understands value in terms of something we must find or create, not discover in the here and now.

5. **involves pursuing transcendence.**

- (a) constantly seeking goals outside of ourselves
- (b) constantly looking for ways to become more than himself
- (c) constantly looking to liberate himself from what is holding him back

**Q1** What is existentialism? In a group, state three features that you think best describe this philosophical point of view.