

The Existential Imagination

A glossary of terms used in many of the existential essays and works of fiction.

ABSURDITY: For the existentialist, the term is the condition perceived by the individual. Absurdity does not carry the meaning of being "ridiculous". When the existentialist finds that he has cut himself off from the traditional beliefs in past epical, ethical, and religious concepts of the nature of man, he has arrived at the point where he sees life without purpose, without design and without hope. He then finds such a condition and "absurdity".

AGONY: The condition in which the existentialist finds himself as a result of realizing that his decision to choose or his decision not to choose has bound others as well as himself.

ALIENATION: For the existentialist this is a state reached after the individual has paid a price. The price paid is that actually choosing, willing, and deciding to be free from all external control that may come from institutions, events, laws, people, and ideas exterior and external to himself. If such a price is not paid, "alienation" or "isolation" is not attained and suffered. There is no "alienation" unless the price has been by an individual who makes the separation from society complete through his own continuous consciousness of rejecting all claims of man and nature. Thus, alienation is the state of liberation from all forces other than the choosing self, but is also the servitude forced on the individual who is conscious that he is rejecting a concept that must exist since he is always conscious of being forced to reject that concept continually.

ANGUISH: The suffering process that accompanies each decision to choose, a decision which must place the existentialist outside of and/or in opposition to any externally imposed standard.

ANTHROPOCENTRISM: The view that the world is primarily man-centered. This existentialistic view is not acceptable to the existentialist. He believes that the world is in terms of each individual who chooses and who makes his own world. The existentialist would say that he accepts "each man-centred world", if that world is entirely his own creation.

ATHEISM: This does not carry, for the existentialist, the ordinary denotative and connotative meanings held by the existentialist. The existentialist does not regard a god or God as an issue since he can readily will or choose to bring into his own consciousness the existence of a god or God, as he can deny such existence.

ATTITUDE: This refers, psychologically, to a complex of beliefs and emotions. These beliefs and emotions repeated in similar behavioural situations, result in specific attitudes--which, in turn, when added or fused, constitute the personality of the individual. Any attitude of the existentialist must be saturated with anxiety and anguish for each choice is a new experience with no external criteria as guides.

BEING: A permanent experience as a process of each man's existence and of man's existence. Each gulping of experience from a future, which is conceded as an approaching death, results in choosing: the willing to choose carries a stream of conscious events, a stream which can properly be termed "becoming". Being is the beginning, middle, and end of the existing which has meaning to an individual only insofar as he wills, endures, chooses, suffers, and agonizes.

BEING-IN-ITSELF: The condition of existence in action, devoid of any such terms as "could be", "maybe", "should", "would", "possible", and "impossible". Such terms would imply existence as being conditioned by external standards which could control or modify "being". "Being-in-Itself" postulates an existence allowing individuals--and each individual--to engage in actions entirely within their own consciousness.

BEING-FOR-ITSELF: This term, defined in Sartrean terms, the only consistent existential terms, eliminates any dichotomy or split between the mind and the body. In this existential position the mind is considered as the flow of experience which reveals the consciousness of self to the self. In "Being-For-Itself" there is no fusion or integration between body and the flow of consciousness--as mind. The two are one and the same. This position is mandatory for the existentialist. If he does not subsume body within his own consciousness as existing, he would find part of himself, as body, controlled by the external world of nature and man. Such a condition, for him, would be disastrous. His senses, as part of his body, would be enslaved to outside forces he calls the "others".

BELIEF: That form of knowledge which each individual holds as subject to proof by means available to like members of like societies: this belief is stated in existentialistic terms. The existential view of belief is the knowledge that a man must obtain from the flow of his own consciousness of emotional and intellectual components. This knowledge tells him that through choosing, willing, suffering, and agonizing, he has unique insight into his own existence.

CERTAINTY: In the existentialistic view, certainty carries meanings of viewing sensory, intellectual, and emotive phenomena as predictable, verifiable, and reliable. "Certainty", to the existentialist is an entirely relative experience. The only certainty he admits to is the inevitability that he is free, through choosing, to choose or not to choose, and through choosing, to act or not to act. Because each decision or choice will involve a new set of circumstances, no event, law, or standard can be "certain".

CHOICE: For the existentialist, this is the horror and glory, concurrently, of his existence. His freedom from the external world demands that he must choose alternatives "blindly". The horror, for him, is the anxiety and agony he experiences, for he knows that he binds others as well as himself by his inevitable choosing, or not choosing. He can, of course, choose not to choose.

CONFLICT: That complex of decisions which involve opposition to being forced to conform to external standards, opposition to being possessed by the thoughts and emotions of "others", and opposition to being chosen by death and for death--his conflict finds a continual series of choices, each of which results in his decision to seek his own death.

CRISIS: A way of life for the existentialist. Crisis comes with each experience for there is always that moment when the decision to make a choice or not to make a choice brings agony, despair, anxiety, and the sense of alienation. The choice that binds the chooser as well as the chosen must always be accompanied by the despair of alienation, because the choice is always made within, by the individual, who looks only within his own nature.

DEATH: The terminal point for an existence of alienation, despair, and agony, from an existential point of view. DEATH IS destroyer and preserver. Death will terminate individual existence, but, because the existentialist chooses his own death and accepts its movement toward him over time, he is able to incorporate death as a part of his own existence.

DEHUMANIZATION: This term, to the existentialist, does not refer to a reversion to the primitive, or to the animal-like state. The existentialist views dehumanization to be the state of divesting oneself of all the qualities which have been said to constitute the nature of "man"--of every man.

The essentialist, viewing the existentialist, uses the term "dehumanization" in the sense of seeing the existentialist as having reached the condition, where he is little more than bestial. Thus for the essentialist, "humanization", refers to a pleasant process, where to be human is to be in a gratifying condition. For the existentialist "dehumanization" also implies the condition of having freed one's self from a collective and essentially negative society of man and nature.

DESPAIR: A phase of existential living. To be free, an existentialist divorces himself from outside knowledge he must admit to, in all logic. He despairs because he must make a continual series of choices, which series can terminate only when he dies. These choices, ironically, bind himself to others from whom he would remain free. To be conscious of theirs: therefore, he despairs.

DREAD: The cruel weight of oppression that the existentialist pays for his freedom. We may fear someone or something; we may be free from or for something. But freedom is about and for nothing. Such is true dread. To face the world condemned to be free to choose only in one's own creating and judging processes must be encountered by a depressing force that signifies an impossible withdrawal--such is dread. Yet, to be conscious of one's dread is to be conscious of freedom--states the existentialist.

ENCOUNTER: This term to the existentialist, does not refer to a conscious of unconscious collision between two objects or people. To the existentialist, "encounter" refers to the following areas:

- a) the need to continue suffering and agonizing because one encounters the need to choose or not to choose;
- b) the continual pressure of rejecting any access the examining self by an "other" which might control or swallow up or engulf the self;
- c) the need to engage Being-for-Itself in order to avoid being Being-for-the-Other. "Encounter" is that experience which is essential to confirm to the self its unique and free existing self in its own terms. Only through encounter with force which warns the existentialist that he may be chosen, if he does not choose, can the existentialist continue to choose for himself for himself.

ESSENCE: That which is the central nature of some thing, idea, person, institution, or event. Essence is that which makes one thing--such as a door, a door--that thing and not another thing, for that time and place. The very concept of "essence" is that of an invariable nature. The individual obtains his very flavour from the essence of the concept of "man".

ESSENTIALISM: The philosophical and literary doctrine that there are objective standards which characterize the class and which, as a result, bind the individuals within the class. There is a commensurable order which determines natural and human phenomena, and does so apart from the single individual. Each man is determined by the essentialism inherent in the personality of man overall, for an example.

EXISTENTIALISM:

That literary philosophy which places its entire emphasis on the individual's existence, an existence which postulates man as free from any natural or human standards in terms of which he must act. The existentialist creates his world of experience through a choice of alternatives, a choice which makes him free from all other men but a choice which enslaves him to his own doubts, uncertainties, and to the consequences of his own choices. He has a consciousness which must consider what his choice has done to others.

FAITH:

This is objected to by the non-Christian existentialist because there is always faith that something will happen, or there is always faith in something. The true existentialist must deny faith because all things, ideas, events, and people have their existence only insofar as his choosing and willing bring them into being as part of the flow of experience. Yet, the existentialist has his own brand of faith. He uses the term "good faith" when he chooses because he ought to choose or ought to choose not to choose: he is in "bad faith" when he chooses what someone wants him to choose.

FOR-ITSELF:

An existential term which stresses that each true man must choose, must will, must suffer, and must agonize. He does not choose something, but merely chooses. His merit is in the acts of choosing and willing.

FREEDOM:

In existential parlance, that state which results from one's choosing himself. In choosing one's self, one sets himself apart from all other individuals, all other beliefs, all other opinions, and all laws. In being free from traditional standards, which are essential, he is free for deciding willing and choosing. A man is free when he chooses his own will over the claims of others and when he accepts the fact of his own death.

HUMANISM:

The philosophy that experience is designed mainly for training the intellect of man. Interest is in man for certain ideas about the nature of man. Because the philosophy is "a" man-centered philosophy, the intense rationality of humanism is repellent to the existentialist.

NATURE:

A term which has been poorly used. On one hand, "nature" refers to the central core of meaning in any human or non-human phenomenon. On the other hand, "nature" refers to the world of physical phenomena in both interpretive and non-interpretive way. The existentialist is exceedingly chary of being pinned down to the reality of the externally-ordered universe of air, land and sea. There is the nature of the mind, the body, and the spirit. The existential interest in nature extends little farther than the nature of existence as absurd and absurd in terms of the existential individual.

NOTHINGNESS:

For the existentialist, this is the very absence of what is, being. Were dread and choice to cancel each other out, there would be no existence. Such a state can take place only in case of insanity OR death. Since life is absurd, the onward choosing of the individual is always, through time, toward death, which must be nothingness. Since death is accepted as an integral part of the living experience of an existentialist, nothingness, or no being at all, is woven into the fabric of all consciousness.

SELF-EXAMINATION:

For the existentialist this carries more than one meaning, although each meaning is closely related to crisis. We distinguish, of course, "conflict" and "crisis". "Conflict" requires an objective external force or person. "Crisis" is the conscious thought or feeling the existentialist has when he faces a problem that must be seen, judged, and handled within himself and to himself, and by himself. Having faced the agonizing in an existing that demands continual choices which, in each instance, result in repudiating all external force, the existential individual responds to these nearly infinite sets of crises resulting from the nearly infinite sets of alienating choices by a self-examination. This self-examination is made by the individual with no recourse to any other self, and with no other recourse than to the material of his own consciousness. He must, within himself, examine the flow of his own mind, a mind which in its sensations, sense, and sensibilities can only reveal that alienated self to the examining self. Of course, existentialism, as a philosophy, flounders when faced with explaining how the examiner can be examined at one and the same time.

SUBJECTIVITY:

From the existentialist point of view this is the thesis that the individual is conscious of the nature and demands of objective phenomena and their criteria, but elects to forego his rational approach in order to make emotive judgment in terms of his own attitudes. From the existential point of view subjectivity is that useful, necessary, and imperative approach to life which rests on an admission and on a claim. The admission is that every subject, even an existentialist, must be an object to others. The claim is that each individual in his choosing, engaging, and willing, holds all experience as both object and image in his consciousness. That is, he is conscious of the image of the object. Thus, each individual, as subjective, cannot escape the subjectivity of his own consciousness, even though he would make such an effort.

TIME:

For the existentialist, this is the measure of the flow of consciousness. Each experience bites big chunks out of the approaching future moments which quickly become "presents" and "pasts". While time separates past choices from choices yet to come and while the consciousness of past despairing promises a continuum of despair into future moments, there is a sense in which time is completely unified as a flowing stream. Life flows away with each passing experience, yet life unrolls in the terms of experiences yet to come. While time makes man measure himself in the light of separate encounters, time also presents a movement of death toward the individual. The common element here is that time must make this movement toward the individual, and the individual has agreed to accept the fact of his death, and his acceptance is carried into time by the individual--the existentialist.

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ANXIETY:

The suffering process that accompanies each decision to choose, a decision which must place the existentialist outside of and/or in opposition to any externally imposed standard.

ANTHROPOCENTRISM:

The view that the world is peculiarly man-centered. This existentialistic view is not acceptable to the existentialist. He believes that the world is in terms of each individual who chooses and who makes his own world. The existentialist would say that he accepts "each man-centered world", if that world is entirely his own creation.

ATHEISM:

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