

History of Philosophy

67 Introduction to Existentialism

By Dr. Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College

Abstract:

Dr. Arthur Holmes provides an overview of **existentialism** and **pragmatism**, highlighting their shared rejection of **foundationalism** and absolute certainty. He details Richard Bernstein's five contributions of pragmatism—such as **fallibilism** and the **social self**—while critiquing the movement's lack of **intrinsic values** due to its naturalistic roots. Shifting to existentialism, Holmes describes it as a **philosophy of existence** focused on the subjective experience of living in a "broken world" rather than abstract essences. He traces the movement's origins to **Kierkegaard** and **Nietzsche**, noting how they replaced Enlightenment rationalism with themes of **alienation**, **anxiety**, and **authenticity**. The lecture concludes by contrasting **Kierkegaard's subjective path** of passionate faith with the cold, unfinished nature of objective logic.

Briefing Document:

Introduction to Existentialism: Philosophical Origins, Themes, and Critiques

Executive Summary

Existentialism emerged as a predominantly European philosophical movement in the early 20th century, reaching its zenith before the activist movements of the 1960s. Rooted in the 19th-century works of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, it represents a fundamental shift from "essentialism"—the study of the universal essence of human nature—to a focused examination of "existence" as experienced by the individual.

The movement is characterized by a rejection of Enlightenment rationalism, focusing instead on the self-conscious individual living in a "broken world" shaped by the Industrial Revolution. Key themes include alienation, dehumanization, and the anxiety of choice. Philosophically, it draws heavily from the Kantian "Copernican

Revolution" and Hegelian dialectics, though it repurposes these for the study of subjective inwardness rather than abstract logic. A primary division exists between religious existentialists, who find authenticity through relationships (with God or others), and irreligious existentialists, who often view existence as inherently meaningless or defined by interpersonal conflict.

The Transition from Pragmatism

Before delving into existentialism, the source context examines the contributions and failures of pragmatism, as outlined by Richard Bernstein. Pragmatism shares several themes with the existential tradition:

- **Rejection of Foundationalism:** Moving away from the Cartesian attempt to deduce reality from indubitable foundations.
- **Fallibilism:** The recognition that all human judgments are fallible and that no logical certainty exists.
- **The Social Character of the Self:** Viewing the individual not as an isolated atom but as a locus within a complex web of social and historical relationships.
- **Contingency:** The understanding that human nature and individual identity are contingent upon genetic, environmental, and evolutionary factors.
- **Pluralism:** The acceptance of a variety of coexisting viewpoints where logical certainty cannot dictate a single choice.

Critiques of Pragmatism

While appreciating the connection between theory and practice, the analysis identifies significant deficiencies in pragmatism stemming from its underlying **philosophical naturalism**:

- **Loss of Intrinsic Value:** Naturalism recognizes only what is "valued" by an individual, rather than what is "valuable" in itself.
- **Situational Atomism:** By focusing only on discrete situations, pragmatism fails to account for the "orderedness" or universal types of human needs and values.

- **Lack of Teleology:** It misses the "overall project of life" and the meaning of life in its totality.
-

Defining Existentialism

Existentialism is described not as a formal school of thought or a set of doctrines, but as a "focus of attention" on human existence.

Core Characteristics

- **Existence Over Essence:** The focus is on the problem of human existence as it is experienced (concrete experience) rather than abstract definitions of human nature.
- **Self-Consciousness as a Lens:** The movement views the world through the lens of individual self-consciousness—an awareness that is often "emotion-loaded," carrying anxiety, dread, or melancholy.
- **Anti-Rationalism:** It rejects the Enlightenment vision of humans as primarily rational animals. It is described as "romanticism turned sour."
- **Historical Context:** Existentialism is a response to the Industrial Revolution and technological society, which introduced themes of dehumanization, alienation, and meaninglessness.

Phenomenology vs. Existentialism

It is critical to distinguish between the two:

- **Phenomenology** is a descriptive method (derived from Hegel) used to illuminate the predicament of the individual.
 - **Existentialism** is a position or focus that often utilizes the phenomenological method to describe existential characteristics.
-

Philosophical Lineage: Kant and Hegel

While neither was an existentialist, the movement is inextricably linked to the work of Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel.

Influencer Contribution to Existentialism

Immanuel Kant	The Transcendental Self: The "Copernican Revolution" shifted focus from the world to the self that brings structures and meanings to the world.
G.W.F. Hegel	The Dialectic: The unfolding of self-consciousness through thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Existentialists adapted this from a theoretical dialectic to an existential one.
G.W.F. Hegel	Absolutization of Freedom: Existentialists adopted the focus on freedom, though they applied it to the individual rather than the "Absolute."

Varieties of Existentialism

The movement is divided primarily by its approach to religion and interpersonal relationships.

Religious Existentialists

Thinkers such as **Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Paul Tillich, Martin Buber**, and **Nicholas Berdyaev** argue that authentic existence is found through relationships.

- **Buber's "I-Thou":** Meaning is found in the relationship between individuals; the "we-ness" is prior to the solitary "I."
- **Marcel's "Philosophy of Existence":** Repudiated the term existentialism due to its association with pessimism, focusing instead on the "giving of oneself."

Irreligious Existentialists

Thinkers like **Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger**, and **Friedrich Nietzsche** tend toward a more pessimistic or individualistic view.

- **Sartre's Conflict:** In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre posits a dialectic between *l'angoisse* (the thing in itself) and *le poursoir* (the thing for itself). He views relationships as inherently masochistic or sadistic.

- **"No Exit"**: Sartre's famous play concludes that "Hell is other people," illustrating a world where the individual is constantly negated by others.

Søren Kierkegaard: The Subjective Path

Kierkegaard, the 19th-century Danish philosopher, centered his work on the theme of "becoming a person," which he equated with becoming a Christian. He identified two distinct paths to truth:

1. The Objective Path

This path relies on natural theology and historical evidence. Kierkegaard rejected it for several reasons:

- **Indecisiveness**: Rational arguments always face counter-arguments, leading to a never-ending cycle of evidence-gathering.
- **Logic vs. Individual**: Traditional logic deals with universal concepts and cannot capture the "unique individual."
- **Lack of Passion**: Cool, detached reason "cheats us out of the passion" required for faith, love, and hope.

2. The Subjective Path

This path focuses on "inwardness" and a passionate response to God.

- **Truth as Subjectivity**: Kierkegaard defined truth for the existing individual as **"an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness."**
- **The Paradox**: While the objective path is troubled by the paradox of the eternal being in time, the subjective path responds with faith and "grateful love."
- **The "How" vs. the "What"**: The objective path accents *what* is said (propositions), whereas the subjective path accents *how* it is said (the nature of the individual's relationship to the truth).

"A logical system is possible... but an existential system is impossible... because its universal truths can't catch that slippery eel of individual existence." — Søren Kierkegaard

Study Guide:

A Study Guide to the History of Philosophy: Introduction to Existentialism

This study guide provides a comprehensive review of the transition from pragmatism to existentialism, as outlined in the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes. It explores the philosophical shifts regarding foundationalism, the nature of the self, and the pursuit of meaning in a "broken world."

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences, ensuring all responses are based on the provided text.

1. What are the primary reasons for the pragmatist rejection of foundationalism?
2. How does the "social character of the self" differ from the "atomistic" view of the individual?
3. Why does the "pragmatic test" fail to provide logical certainty according to the text?
4. What is the central critique of philosophical naturalism regarding value?
5. Distinguish between "existence" and "essence" as understood by existentialists.
6. How did the Industrial Revolution and technological society contribute to the rise of existentialism?

7. In what way did Immanuel Kant's "Copernican Revolution" influence existential thought?
 8. Compare the views of Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel regarding human relationships.
 9. According to Søren Kierkegaard, why is the "objective path" to truth insufficient for becoming a Christian?
 10. How does Kierkegaard define "subjective truth"?
-

Part II: Quiz Answer Key

1. **Rejection of Foundationalism:** Pragmatism rejects the Cartesian tradition of attempting to deduce all knowledge from indubitable, certain foundations. Instead, it embraces fallibilism, the view that all human judgments are subject to error and that ideas should be treated as hypotheses to be tested through experimentation.
2. **The Social Character of the Self:** Rather than seeing the individual as an isolated, atomistic unit (the "Robinson Crusoe theory"), pragmatism views the self as a locus within a complex network of social relationships. Influenced by Hegel, this perspective suggests that an individual is the historical realization of universal possibilities through their interactions with others.
3. **Logical Uncertainty and the Pragmatic Test:** The pragmatic test involves a logical fallacy known as affirming the consequent (If A, then B; B is true, therefore A). While experiential verification may establish probability, it cannot provide certainty because a result (B) could be caused by factors other than the hypothesis (A).
4. **Naturalism and Intrinsic Value:** Philosophical naturalism suggests there is no intrinsic value to anything that exists; instead, value is defined only by what an individual happens to value. This leads to a situational relativism that ignores the potential for universal values or an ordered teleology in human existence.

5. **Existence vs. Essence:** Essentialism focuses on defining the universal nature or "essence" of humanity, whereas existentialism focuses on the concrete experience of existing. Existentialists argue that existence precedes essence, meaning humans first exist and then must create their own meaning and identity.
6. **Impact of Technological Society:** Existentialism is described as "romanticism turned sour" following the Industrial Revolution, which introduced themes of dehumanization, alienation, and meaninglessness. In this context, the individual feels like a "world of fact without value," struggling to find meaning in a broken, industrialized world.
7. **Kant's Influence:** Kant moved philosophy away from the view of the self as a detached observer and toward the "transcendental ego" that brings its own structures and meanings to the world. Existentialism adopts this theme, emphasizing that the self-conscious individual is the lens through which the world is experienced and interpreted.
8. **Sartre vs. Marcel:** Sartre views relationships through a lens of conflict, famously stating "Hell is other people" and focusing on masochism and sadism where individuals negate one another. In contrast, Marcel emphasizes the "we-ness" of relationship and the act of giving oneself as the basis for a meaningful life.
9. **The Failure of the Objective Path:** Kierkegaard argues that the objective path of historical evidence and natural theology is indecisive and lacks a starting point because there is always another counter-argument to address. Furthermore, it "cheats us out of the passion" required for faith, love, and hope, which cannot be reached through detached, cool reason.
10. **Subjective Truth:** For Kierkegaard, truth is an "objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness." It is not about the logical accuracy of propositions, but rather the quality and "how" of an individual's personal, passionate relationship to God.

Instructions: Use the themes discussed in the source context to develop detailed responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Pragmatist-Existentialist Link:** Analyze the five contributions of pragmatism listed by Richard Bernstein. To what extent does existentialism build upon these contributions, particularly the rejection of foundationalism and the acceptance of contingency?
2. **The Crisis of the Individual:** Discuss the existentialist view of the "broken world." How do the themes of alienation, anxiety, and the "problematic man" reflect a departure from Enlightenment rationalism?
3. **Hegelian Roots:** Explore how Hegel's dialectic of self-consciousness and his concept of the "concrete universal" were adapted by existentialists. Contrast Hegel's focus on universal essence with the existentialist focus on individual becoming.
4. **A Conflict of Existentialism:** Compare and contrast the "irreligious" existentialism of Sartre and Heidegger with the "religious" existentialism of Buber, Marcel, and Kierkegaard. How does the presence or absence of a relationship with a "thou" or God alter the conclusion of their philosophies?
5. **The Logic of Passion:** Evaluate Kierkegaard's critique of traditional logic. Why does he believe that a "logical system is possible" but an "existential system is impossible," and what are the implications for human faith?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Affirming the Consequent	A logical fallacy (If A then B; B, therefore A) used to illustrate why pragmatic verification cannot produce absolute certainty.
Alienation	A theme in existentialism and Marxism describing the estrangement of the individual from their own nature, society, or the products of their labor.

Dasein	A term used to describe the individual as "being there" or merely an object on hand without inward identity.
Dialectic	A process of unfolding consciousness through a series of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis; used by Hegel theoretically and by existentialists to describe the process of becoming.
Fallibilism	The philosophical view that all human judgments and knowledge claims are potentially mistaken and lack indubitable certainty.
Foundationalism	The traditional philosophical approach of attempting to deduce all knowledge from certain, self-evident foundations; rejected by both pragmatists and existentialists.
I-Thou	A concept popularized by Martin Buber suggesting that meaning is found in relationships and that "we-ness" is prior to the solitary "I."
L'angoisse	Sartre's term for the "thing in itself," representing the world as it is, often acting as an intransigent block to the individual.
Le pour-soi	Sartre's term for the "thing for itself," representing the self-conscious individual's experience of the world.
Naturalism	A philosophical position that denies intrinsic value in the universe, focusing instead on what individuals value within specific situations.
Phenomenology	A descriptive method rather than a theory, used to describe the predicament of human existence and the characteristics of individual experience.
Teleology	The study of evidence of design or purpose in nature; dismissed by naturalists and many existentialists but argued for by critics of pragmatism.

Verhandensein

A term used by Heidegger to describe existence that is "merely on hand" like an object, lacking inwardness or authentic identity.