

History of Philosophy

68 Historical Roots of Existentialism: Kierkegaard

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Abstract:

This text provides a philosophical overview of **existentialism** by examining the contrasting perspectives of **Søren Kierkegaard** and **Friedrich Nietzsche**. It explains Kierkegaard's focus on the **subjective path to faith**, where individuals move through **aesthetic and ethical stages** toward a radical **religious commitment** to the unknown. In contrast, the sources describe Nietzsche's **rejection of Christianity** and his declaration that **God is dead**, viewing religion as a denial of natural human vitality. Nietzsche advocates for a **will to power** and a **master morality** that embraces the creative, physical nature of existence over traditional rationalism. Ultimately, the material illustrates how both thinkers prioritize **inner passion** and spirit to challenge the objective certainties of the **Enlightenment**.

Briefing Document:

Historical Roots of Existentialism: Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

Executive Summary

The historical roots of existentialism are primarily found in the works of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. While both thinkers focus on human existence and the "crisis of the spirit," they represent opposing poles: Kierkegaard as a religious existentialist and Nietzsche as a naturalist/irreligious existentialist.

Kierkegaard's philosophy centers on the "subjective path" to faith, arguing that objective reasoning (natural theology or historical evidence) is insufficient for grasping the paradox of the Incarnation. He outlines a progression of human existence through three stages: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Conversely, Nietzsche posits that "God is dead"—a cultural reality where religious language has lost its meaning—and critiques Christianity for denying physical

nature. Nietzsche champions the "Will to Power" and the "Übermensch" (Superman), advocating for a "master morality" that affirms life through creative vitality rather than conforming to social or religious structures.

Søren Kierkegaard: The Subjective Path and Religious Existentialism

Søren Kierkegaard, a 19th-century Lutheran philosopher, defines existentialism not as a rigid system but as a focus on self-conscious human existence in a "broken world." His work is characterized by the distinction between objective and subjective approaches to truth.

The Limits of Objectivity and the Paradox

Kierkegaard argues that the "objective path"—relying on natural theology or historical evidence—is perpetually incomplete. Because there are always unanswered questions, the objective thinker defers decision-making indefinitely.

- **The Unknown:** Kierkegaard suggests humans are confronted by "the unknown," a concept echoing Paul's speech in Acts 17. This unknown cannot be demonstrated through neutral premises or empirical laws.
- **The Paradox:** Faith requires embracing a paradox—specifically, the Incarnation, where the eternal appears in time. Kierkegaard views this through a Hegelian lens of thesis (eternal God) and antithesis (man in time) without a conceptual synthesis.
- **The Lutheran Influence:** Unlike Reformed theology, which sees overlapping attributes between God and man, Lutheran theology (and Kierkegaard) emphasizes the difficulty of conceptualizing the unity of the divine and human, leading to the "cry of paradox."

Stages on Life's Way

Kierkegaard describes three stages through which the human spirit progresses in its search for fulfillment:

Stage	Characteristics	Outcome/Crisis
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	Living for the senses, the arts, and social life; objective type of existence without moral conscience.	Leads to boredom and "melancholy," described as the "hysteria of the spirit."
Ethical	Accepting adult/civic responsibilities; living by duty (Kantian); outward conformity to structures.	Leads to a "sickness unto death" because it fails to plumb the depths of the spirit.
Religious	The "teleological suspension of the ethical" for the sake of the spirit's hunger.	Transition to faith; divided into Religious A (institutional) and Religious B (vital spiritual life).

Religious A vs. Religious B

- **Religious A:** This is a continuation of the ethical stage, where an individual invests in religious institutions and "churchmanship."
- **Religious B:** The "vital kind of spiritual life" where one's self-consciousness before God is central. Here, the concepts of sin and the Incarnation become real, eliciting "passions" such as faith and love.

Critique of the Enlightenment and Romanticism

- **The Present Age:** Kierkegaard satirizes the Enlightenment for its lack of passion. He critiques the attempt to make life decisions through objective calculation, famously using the analogy of a lover using a "phrase book" rather than speaking from spontaneous passion.
- **Genius vs. Apostle:** Kierkegaard distinguishes between the "genius" (a human creative spirit) and the "apostle" (one sent by God). While a genius's ideas may eventually be overtaken, an apostle speaks with divine authority ("Thus saith the Lord"). This is a direct repudiation of 19th-century liberal theology that viewed revelation as merely evolving human "God-consciousness."

Friedrich Nietzsche: The Will to Power and Naturalism

Friedrich Nietzsche represents a "contradictory antithesis" to Kierkegaard. As a philosophical naturalist and vitalist, Nietzsche rejects 19th-century optimism and religious structures in favor of creative individuality.

The "Death of God" and Cultural Critique

For Nietzsche, the statement "God is dead" is a cultural phenomenon rather than a mere philosophical claim.

- **Meaninglessness of God-Language:** In the "present age," God-language has become a "dead language" that no longer carries meaning for people.
- **Rejection of Christianity:** Nietzsche argues that Christianity says "no" to nature, physicality, and emotion. He contrasts this with ancient Greek paganism, which said "yes" to nature and physical virility.
- **Critique of Darwinism:** Nietzsche rejects the Darwinian theory of natural selection because it implies a gradual adjustment to the environment. He believes this produces "well-adjusted doodlers" rather than individuals with the creative vitality to overcome their environment.

The Dionysian and Apollonian Dialectic

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche identifies two opposing Greek traditions:

1. **Dionysian:** Representing vitality, passion, and "riotous creative outbursts."
2. **Apollonian:** Representing rational order, form, and "logo-structure." Nietzsche argues that tragedy arises from the tension between these two, affirming life even in the face of the horrible.

Voluntarism and the Will to Power

Nietzsche is a voluntarist, meaning he believes the ultimate nature of reality is "will" rather than "intellect."

- **Will to Power:** The underlying reality of all existence is the drive to overcome and exercise creative power.
- **Master vs. Servant Morality:** Nietzsche posits that morality is relative to the strength of the individual.

- **Master Morality:** The morality of the strong-willed, who affirm life and their own power.
- **Servant Morality:** The morality of the weak-willed, which emphasizes non-egoistical values.
- **Ressentiment:** A technical term describing the subconscious opposition of the weak against the strong. Nietzsche suggests that "guilt" and "asceticism" are forms of subconscious aggression turned inward against the self.

The Übermensch and Vitalism

Nietzsche promotes the ideal of the *Übermensch* (Superman or Super race)—those who are strong-willed enough to affirm life despite the "death of God" and the "no" of traditional Christianity. His philosophy is a form of biological vitalism, suggesting that ethics and social behaviors are determined by a biological drive for power and creativity, a precursor to modern sociobiology.

Conclusion: Comparative Summary

Feature	Søren Kierkegaard	Friedrich Nietzsche
Orientation	Religious / Christian Orthodox	Irreligious / Naturalist
Core Concept	Subjective Faith / Paradox	Will to Power / Übermensch
View of Nature	Transcendence through spirit	Affirmation of physical nature
View of Logic	Paradox/Contraries	Contradictory to religion
Human Aim	Self-consciousness before God	Creative overcoming of environment
Source of Authority	The Apostle (Divine)	The Creative Spirit (Individual)

Study Guide:

The Historical Roots of Existentialism: Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

This study guide examines the foundational figures of existential philosophy, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, as presented in the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes. While both philosophers focus on human existence and the "inner spirit," they represent a stark antithesis: Kierkegaard as the religious existentialist and Nietzsche as the irreligious naturalist.

I. Søren Kierkegaard: The Subjective Path to Faith

Kierkegaard's philosophy is not a systematic position but a focus on self-conscious existence within a "broken world." A devout Lutheran, his work primarily addresses the nature of becoming a Christian and the limitations of objective reasoning in matters of faith.

The Two Paths

Kierkegaard distinguishes between two ways of approaching Christianity:

- **The Objective Path:** This includes natural theology and historical evidence. Kierkegaard argues this path is always incomplete because there are always unanswered questions that cause a person to defer a final decision. It cannot reach the unique reality of the Incarnation through logic or empirical general laws.
- **The Subjective Path:** This is the internal response to "The Unknown." Since the divine cannot be demonstrated, it must be attested to through testimony and personal passion.

Paradox and the Unknown

Kierkegaard views the Incarnation—the eternal appearing in time—as a **paradox**.

- **Hegelian Context:** A paradox involves a thesis and an antithesis with no conceptual synthesis available to human logic.
- **Theological Roots:** Kierkegaard's Lutheran background emphasized that divine and human attributes do not interpenetrate, making the unity of Christ

a logical paradox rather than a conceptualized unity (as seen in Reformed theology).

- **Limiting Concept:** Borrowing from Kant, Kierkegaard suggests the Incarnation is a "limiting concept." We can know *that* it is (the phenomenal appearance) but cannot conceptualize *what* it is in itself.

Stages on Life's Way

Kierkegaard outlines a progression of human consciousness through three distinct stages:

Stage	Characteristics	The Crisis/Transition
Aesthetic	Living in the world of the senses and social life without moral conscience.	Leads to melancholy or "hysteria of the spirit." The sensate life becomes boring and unsatisfying.
Ethical	Accepting adult responsibilities and civic duties; acting out of a Kantian sense of duty.	Fails to plumb the moral depths of the spirit; leads to a " sickness unto death " (despair).
Religious A	Divided into Religious A (institutional churchmanship) and Religious B (vital spiritual life).	Requires a " teleological suspension of the ethical " and a leap into faith and passion before God.

II. Friedrich Nietzsche: The Will to Power

Nietzsche represents a "late Romantic" repudiation of 19th-century optimism, Enlightenment rationalism, and Darwinian adjustment. He views the world not as a progress toward the good, but as an arena for creative vitality.

The Death of God

For Nietzsche, "God is dead" is a cultural phenomenon. God-language has become a "dead language" that is irrelevant to modern life. He argues that Christianity (specifically "Victorianized" religion) says "no" to nature and the physical body, whereas ancient paganism said "yes" to life's virility.

Philosophical Foundations

- **Voluntarism:** The ultimate nature of reality is **will**, not intellect. Reason is merely an appearance or outward form (the Apollonian), while the underlying reality is the creative, riotous outburst of passion (the Dionysian).
- **Vitalism:** Life is a creative force that seeks to overcome rather than simply adjust to the environment (a critique of Darwinian natural selection).
- **The Will to Power:** The fundamental drive of the "master race" to overcome opposition and affirm life despite the absence of God.

Morality and Ressentiment

Nietzsche is an ethical relativist who distinguishes between two types of morality:

1. **Master Morality:** The morality of the strong-willed, which values creative power and life-affirmation.
2. **Servant Morality:** The morality of the weak-willed.
3. **Ressentiment:** A technical, subconscious opposition where the weak turn aggression inward. Nietzsche suggests that values like altruism, guilt, or asceticism are actually subconscious "revenge" or aggression against the self, driven by the suppressed will to power.

III. Review Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the source context.

1. Why does Kierkegaard believe the "objective path" to Christianity is inherently incomplete?
2. How does Kierkegaard define "The Unknown" in the context of Paul's speech at Athens?
3. What is the "teleological suspension of the ethical" in Kierkegaard's Religious stage?
4. Distinguish between Religious A and Religious B in Kierkegaard's thought.

5. What is the difference between a "Genius" and an "Apostle" according to Kierkegaard?
6. What does Nietzsche mean by the statement "God is dead"?
7. How does Nietzsche's view of evolution differ from Darwin's theory of natural selection?
8. Define the Dionysian and Apollonian elements in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.
9. What is "ressentiment," and how does it function in Nietzsche's psychology?
10. Why does Nietzsche refer to himself as the "anti-Christ"?

IV. Answer Key

1. The objective path relies on natural theology or historical evidence, which always leaves unanswered questions that cause a person to defer their decision. Furthermore, Kierkegaard argues that unique historical events like the Incarnation cannot be deduced from neutral premises or empirical general laws.
2. "The Unknown" refers to that which cannot be demonstrated by logic or historical evidence but can only be attested to by testimony. Kierkegaard echoes Paul's speech in Acts 17 to highlight that Christianity is about declaring a reality that natural theology is unable to reach.
3. The teleological suspension of the ethical is the transition where an individual transcends the outward conformity of social duties for the purpose of satisfying the inner hunger of the human spirit. It is a movement toward the religious stage, where the individual's self-consciousness before God takes precedence over social institutions.
4. Religious A is characterized by "churchmanship," where an individual invests themselves in religious institutions and structures as a continuation of ethical duty. Religious B is the vital, spiritual life where the crisis of the spirit is satisfied through a personal relationship with God, characterized by faith and love.

5. A genius is a creative human spirit who stands above the crowd and is remembered for their individual brilliance. In contrast, an apostle is one sent by God who speaks with divine authority ("Thus saith the Lord"), representing a qualitative difference because they speak for the eternal.
 6. For Nietzsche, the "death of God" is a cultural phenomenon meaning that God-language has become a dead language with no relevance to people's lives. It signifies that belief in God is no longer a functioning part of the cultural or moral landscape.
 7. Darwin viewed evolution as a gradual process of "adjustment" to the environment to create well-adjusted conformists. Nietzsche rejected this, viewing life as a creative force of "vitalism" where the strong-willed strive to overcome their environment through the will to power.
 8. The Dionysian represents vitality, riotous outbursts of emotion, and passion, while the Apollonian represents rational order and form. Nietzsche argues that Greek tragedy was born from the tension between these two, affirming life even in the face of the horrible.
 9. Ressentiment is a subconscious opposition or "revenge" against powerful people that is turned inward. It explains non-egoistical values, such as guilt or asceticism, as manifestations of subconscious aggression against oneself rather than genuine moral virtues.
 10. Nietzsche uses this term to signify his opposition to "Victorianized" Christianity, which he believes denies the physical nature and virility of life. He positions himself against the "no" to nature represented by traditional religion, instead affirming the biological and creative drives of humanity.
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V. Essay Questions

1. Compare and contrast Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's critiques of the Enlightenment. How do their alternative solutions (Religious B vs. Will to Power) reflect their differing philosophical foundations?

2. Analyze Kierkegaard's "Stages on Life's Way." Discuss how each stage fails to satisfy the human spirit and how the "crisis of the spirit" eventually leads to the religious life.
3. Discuss the role of "Paradox" in Kierkegaard's theology. How does his Lutheran background influence his insistence that the Incarnation cannot be conceptually synthesized?
4. Examine Nietzsche's distinction between Master Morality and Servant Morality. How does his concept of "ressentiment" challenge traditional Western ethical values?
5. Explain Nietzsche's "Aesthetic Point of View" and "Vitalism." How do these concepts serve as a rejection of both Hegelian Idealism and Darwinian Naturalism?

VI. Glossary of Key Terms

- **Apollonian:** In Nietzsche's thought, the element of rational order, form, and logical structure.
- **Dionysian:** In Nietzsche's thought, the element of vitality, passion, and riotous creative outbursts.
- **Geist (Spirit):** A Germanic term referring to inner creativity, self-consciousness, and the inner resources of a human being.
- **Hysteria of the Spirit:** Kierkegaard's term for melancholy; the boredom and dissatisfaction that arises from a purely aesthetic (sensate) existence.
- **Limiting Concept:** A term drawn from Kant; Kierkegaard uses it to describe the Incarnation as something we know *exists* but cannot fully *conceptualize*.
- **Passion:** In the 18th-century psychological sense used by Kierkegaard, it refers to emotions, dispositions, and attitudes—the non-cognitive dimensions of the inner spirit (e.g., faith and love).
- **Ressentiment:** A technical term for a subconscious opposition or internalised aggression used by the weak to negate the values of the strong.

- **Sickness Unto Death:** Kierkegaard's description of the spiritual despair or crisis that occurs when the ethical stage of life fails to satisfy the depths of the human spirit.
- **Teleological Suspension of the Ethical:** The act of transcending social and objective duties for the sake of a higher spiritual fulfillment in the religious stage.
- **Übermensch:** Often translated as "Superman" or "Super Race"; refers to the strong-willed individuals who affirm life and power in the absence of divine meaning.
- **Vitalism:** The philosophical view that life is a creative, driving force rather than a mere biological adjustment to the environment.
- **Voluntarism:** The philosophical position that the ultimate nature of reality is derived from the will rather than the intellect.
- **Will to Power:** The fundamental drive in Nietzsche's philosophy; the creative spirit of the "master race" to overcome and affirm life.