

What is Existentialism?

Worksheet

Existentialism is the philosophy that existence precedes essence - humans are first thrown into existence and must freely define their own meaning, values, and identity through action.

Questions

1. Sartre's phrase 'existence precedes essence' means:

- A) Objects define humans
- B) Humans have a fixed nature from birth
- C) Humans exist first and create their own meaning after
- D) Meaning comes only from religion

2. 'Bad faith' in existentialism refers to:

- A) Religious doubt
- B) Denying your own freedom and responsibility
- C) Lying to others
- D) A logical fallacy

3. Who wrote about the 'myth of Sisyphus' and the absurd?

- A) Kant
- B) Camus
- C) Descartes
- D) Locke

4. Existentialism is most concerned with:

- A) Formal logic rules
- B) Individual freedom and self-created meaning
- C) Mathematical proof
- D) Empirical scientific method

5. Sartre says 'existence precedes essence.' What does this mean for a human being compared to a manufactured object like a paper-knife?

6. A person conforms entirely to social expectations, never questioning their own choices, and later feels their life wasn't truly 'theirs.' Which existentialist concept explains this?

7. Camus describes life as 'absurd' - the conflict between humans seeking meaning and a universe that offers none. How does he say we should respond, using the myth of Sisyphus?

8. Define: What does 'existence precedes essence' mean?

9. Define: What is 'bad faith' in existentialism?

10. Define: Who are the key existentialist philosophers?

Answer Key

1. C) Humans exist first and create their own meaning after - Sartre holds that we exist without a predetermined essence and must create it through choices.
2. B) Denying your own freedom and responsibility - Bad faith is self-deception about one's own radical freedom.
3. B) Camus - Albert Camus used the myth of Sisyphus to illustrate the absurd condition.
4. B) Individual freedom and self-created meaning - Existentialism centers on freedom, choice, and self-authored meaning.
5. A paper-knife is designed with a purpose (essence) before it's manufactured (existence) - its function comes first. Sartre argues humans have no such blueprint: we simply exist first, without a predetermined nature or purpose. Therefore, each person must define their own essence - who they are - through the choices and actions they make after existing.
6. Existentialists call this 'bad faith' (Sartre) or inauthenticity - denying one's own freedom by hiding behind roles, norms, or excuses. By simply following the crowd, the person avoids the anxiety of free choice but also avoids genuinely authoring their own life. Authentic existence requires consciously owning one's choices and taking responsibility for them, even without external justification.
7. Sisyphus is condemned to endlessly push a boulder uphill only for it to roll back down - a symbol of a meaningless, repetitive existence. Camus argues we should neither escape into false hope (religious answers) nor give up (suicide), but instead accept the absurd. He concludes 'one must imagine Sisyphus happy' - finding meaning in the struggle and choice itself, not in an external, fixed purpose.
8. Humans exist first, without a fixed purpose, and must define their own nature and meaning through free choices.
9. Denying your own freedom and responsibility by pretending your choices are forced by roles, society, or excuses.
10. Jean-Paul Sartre, Sren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir.

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