

Essence: The traditional belief that human beings are born already endowed with certain qualities; that is, they are born with an **essence** – things predefined by nature of being human. This essence gives context to the meaning in our lives.

This essence comes from God, religion, society/culture, even politics.

It is often referred to as “human nature” and implies a certain order exists in the universe. Events, situations, etc. can be seen as having inherent qualities (good/bad, fair/unfair, etc.) in and of themselves.

Common expressions of essence would be the concept of original sin, the belief that people are essentially born good (or good or bad), the notion that human beings are thinking creatures, things will work out for the best, that sort of thing.

The core idea here is that ESSENCE precedes EXISTENCE.

Existentialism: *A philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts...all without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad.* (Combined definition from American Heritage & Merriam Webster)

The position held by Satre and many others that there is no essence that dictates the meaning of our lives. Instead, human beings determine the meanings of life by choice; i.e., by how they choose to perceive and react to the world.

Based on this, **essence is formed by the human being him/herself** – meaning is freely chosen and does not exist for us outside of the lives we lead.

Therefore, a given situation is not good/bad, fair/unfair, just/unjust, moral/immoral by its own nature. In fact, there is no way we can truly comprehend the reasons for any situation. Instead, it is how we choose to perceive and react to it that defines it and hence, it's meaning and the meaning of life in general.

Example: A person may choose to be a kind human being – but it is his/her choice to be such, act as such, and eventually be known as such. Nevertheless, he/she is not kind for any other reason than the choice itself – not genetics, fundamental human nature, the goodness of God's creation, etc. In other words, there was **no essence** for the person to be kind – it was his/her choice to act in that matter.

Because of all of this, life can become strange, absurd, or even meaningless. Consider horrible tragedies or suffering of any kind. If there is no predefined sense of meaning, say “God's plan” or “fate,” then such a tragedy would be incomprehensible or absurd, rendering life meaningless to us in many ways – as it often does.

Existentialists show us this world – a world where we must create our own meaning – in order to show how we might deal with the absurd or fail to do so.

Keep in mind that **this does not mean the existentialist thinks there is no meaning in life!** (That's a bit more nihilism.) It's just that the meaning is created by ourselves uniquely – it IS REAL MEANING.

While this may seem a cold existence, it does empower us in that we are allowed to choose how we define the world. We do have the power to choose to our own benefit, even in the fact of suffering.

Given these facts about existentialism, we might easily see this philosophy as being quite atheist. There is, however, a middle ground, which leads us to...

Existential Theism...*theistic existentialism insists that each person must take the 'blind leap of faith' to believe in God. Therefore, although both forms believe that no one can ever really know 'transcendent' truth, theistic existentialists choose to cope in such a world by believing that there is a meaning, even if we can't understand it. To a theistic existentialist, as with an atheistic existentialist, we start with ourselves, not with God. Therefore, a theistic existentialist realizes the absurdity of life in the same way an atheistic existentialist does. Although s/he does not immediately perceive that God exists, s/he chooses to believe so based upon the very **real need for meaning** in a seemingly meaningless world. Thus, the question of whether or not God exists is **not solved by reason, but rather by faith.***

(http://www.multnomah.edu/Worldseen/worldviews/theistic_existentialism.html)

Just like traditional existentialism, theistic existentialism begins with the ideas that **the true meaning of existence is unknowable** and we therefore start **with the individual, who must create that meaning for him/herself.**

That true meaning, though, does exist **in essence** to the existential theist while it does not to the traditional existentialist. To the ET, there is, in fact, a God behind it all. The ET simply accepts that life will seem incomprehensible to us because we simply cannot understand God.

That acceptance of absurdity is just as strong as the faith in God. We create our own existence in spite of that greater meaning that exists but is basically immaterial to us.

Thus we move through life creating our own existence and meaning out of the absurd and incomprehensible with the faith that there is something larger than us that we cannot fathom.

Existentialism offers meaning to a life experience full of contradictions; a world we can never fully understand. If we could perfectly understand God's ways would he not be too small a God. Existentialism prizes the act of faith on the strength of the absurd. (Kierkegaard)

Nihilism: *Nihilism is the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. It is often associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism that condemns existence. A true nihilist would believe in nothing, have no loyalties, and no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy.* (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/nihilism/>)

Just throwing this one in here to show the difference between this and existentialism.