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Existentialism and the search for meaning in human life (e.g., Sartre, Camus).

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Abstract
Existentialism, as articulated by thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, explores the human struggle to confront a world without inherent meaning while affirming the individual's capacity to create significance through freedom, choice, and authentic existence. Sartre emphasizes that "existence precedes essence," stressing radical freedom and the responsibility to shape one's own life, while Camus introduces the notion of the Absurd, the tension between humanity's yearning for purpose and the universe's indifference. Rather than seeking solace in religion or metaphysics, existentialism calls for acceptance of this condition and the pursuit of authenticity through conscious action, creativity, and moral responsibility. Camus advocates for "revolt" as a way of embracing life's absurdity without resignation. By engaging with these ideas, existentialism continues to provide a framework for addressing alienation, identity crises, and the quest for meaning in contemporary society, affirming that meaning is created rather than discovered.
Keywords: Existentialism, Absurd, Freedom, Authenticity, Meaning.

Introduction

Existentialism, as a profound philosophical and literary movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, grapples with the central question of human existence: how individuals confront a world devoid of inherent meaning and create significance for themselves through conscious choice and authentic living. Rooted in the earlier thought of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, and later shaped by Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, existentialism emphasizes the individual's confrontation with freedom, responsibility, and the inevitability of death. In this view, life is not guided by any predetermined essence or divine plan; rather, as Sartre declares, "existence precedes essence," meaning that humans must first exist and then define their essence through actions. This radical freedom brings with it not only the possibility of authentic self-creation but also the burden of responsibility, often leading to anxiety, despair, or what Heidegger termed *angst*. Sartre illustrates how people fall into *bad faith*—self-deception or denial of freedom—while authentic existence requires embracing one's liberty and accountability. In contrast, Albert Camus, while sharing the existentialist emphasis on the absurdity of human life, shifts the focus towards the concept of the Absurd: the tension between humanity's relentless search for meaning and the universe's indifferent silence. For

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Camus, the recognition of the Absurd does not necessitate surrender or escape into illusions of religion or metaphysics; instead, he advocates for "revolt"—a courageous acceptance of life's absurd condition while continuing to live fully and passionately. Works like *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger* embody this philosophy, portraying characters who face meaninglessness without resignation. Existentialism thus insists that meaning is not found but created, not received but forged in the furnace of individual freedom, responsibility, and engagement with life. Far from being a doctrine of despair, it is a call to authenticity, creativity, and moral responsibility, urging humans to craft their values and live deliberately in a world without guarantees. In contemporary times, existentialist thought remains highly relevant, offering insight into crises of alienation, identity, and purpose in a rapidly changing world, and reminding us that even amidst uncertainty and absurdity, the search for meaning is both a necessity and a possibility.

Definition of Existentialism

Existentialism is a modern philosophical and literary movement that centers on the individual's confrontation with existence, freedom, and the quest for meaning in an otherwise indifferent or meaningless world. Emerging prominently in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was shaped by the pioneering insights of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, and later systematized by thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. At its core, existentialism rejects the idea of a fixed human nature or predetermined essence, instead positing that individuals must first exist and then define themselves through choices and actions—an idea famously expressed by Sartre in the phrase "existence precedes essence." This emphasis on radical freedom underscores both the possibility of authentic self-creation and the heavy responsibility that comes with it, often giving rise to anxiety, despair, or existential angst. For Camus, existentialism is closely tied to the concept of the Absurd—the tension between humanity's deep longing for order and the universe's silence or indifference. Rather than seeking refuge in religion, tradition, or deterministic systems, existentialism calls for personal authenticity, courage, and engagement with life. It highlights the importance of living deliberately, facing death and uncertainty honestly, and creating meaning through one's relationships, values, and actions. Far from being a pessimistic doctrine, existentialism affirms the dignity and creative power of the individual, encouraging a life of freedom, authenticity, and responsibility in the face of an otherwise chaotic and ambiguous existence.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), one of the most influential figures of twentieth-century philosophy and literature, shaped existentialism into a coherent and widely debated system of thought, combining philosophical inquiry with literature, politics, and social criticism. His monumental philosophical treatise *Being and Nothingness* (1943) stands as the cornerstone of his

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existentialist philosophy, where he develops an ontology of human freedom, consciousness, and existence, while *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946) serves as a popular lecture-turned-text that defends existentialism against accusations of pessimism, immorality, and nihilism. Central to Sartre's thought is the principle that "existence precedes essence," which implies that there is no predefined human nature or essence given by God or society; instead, humans first exist and then, through conscious choices, define who they are. Unlike objects whose essence determines their purpose, human beings must take responsibility for creating their essence through free action. This radical freedom, while liberating, also imposes a profound responsibility, since every choice contributes not only to individual identity but also implicitly suggests a model of humanity for others. Sartre insists that this freedom is inescapable: even refusing to choose is itself a choice, and thus individuals cannot evade responsibility for their existence. Yet, many attempt to flee from this burden through what Sartre calls *bad faith* (*mauvaise foi*), a form of self-deception in which individuals deny or obscure their freedom by appealing to deterministic forces, social roles, or external authorities. For example, a waiter who over-identifies with his role as if it were his fixed essence is acting in bad faith by refusing to acknowledge his wider freedom to define himself beyond that occupation. Authentic existence, by contrast, requires individuals to confront their radical freedom honestly, accept the anxiety it produces, and live deliberately in accordance with self-chosen values rather than conformist illusions. Sartre's existentialism also carries political and ethical implications: since freedom is the defining condition of humanity, he argues that human liberation and social justice are moral imperatives. His later works, including *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), sought to reconcile existentialist freedom with Marxist concerns for collective struggle, reflecting his lifelong commitment to political engagement against oppression, colonialism, and social injustice. By fusing philosophy, literature, and activism, Sartre extended existentialism beyond abstract theory into a way of life, urging individuals to live authentically, shoulder responsibility for themselves and others, and recognize that meaning is not discovered but created in the very process of existence. In sum, Sartre's philosophy embodies both a call to personal authenticity and an ethical demand for social responsibility, making his existentialism one of the most enduring intellectual responses to the dilemmas of modern human life.

Albert Camus

Albert Camus (1913–1960), though often associated with existentialism, preferred to identify himself as a thinker of the Absurd rather than as a strict existentialist, and his works continue to stand as some of the most profound explorations of the human struggle with meaning in a world that offers none. In his philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus presents the foundation of his thought: the Absurd, which arises from the clash between humanity's deep longing for order, clarity, and purpose, and the universe's indifferent silence to such demands.

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Unlike Jean-Paul Sartre, who emphasized radical freedom and self-definition, Camus underscores the futility of searching for an ultimate essence or transcendent explanation. For him, existence is marked by the permanent absence of divine or metaphysical guarantees, and the only honest philosophical question becomes whether life is worth living. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus evaluates three possible responses to this dilemma: suicide, religious faith, or revolt. Suicide, for Camus, represents a false solution, an escape that eliminates the problem rather than confronting it. Similarly, religious faith or metaphysical transcendence constitutes what he terms "philosophical suicide," a retreat into illusion by assigning ultimate meaning where none exists. Instead, Camus advocates for the third option: revolt. Revolt means embracing the absurd condition of life without resignation, living fully, passionately, and authentically even in the absence of higher meaning. His metaphor of Sisyphus eternally pushing his boulder up the hill, only to see it roll down again, embodies this stance—Camus famously concludes, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy," for it is in the very act of struggle, in conscious acceptance of absurdity, that life gains dignity and intensity. Camus' philosophy is not merely abstract but vividly dramatized in his literary works. *The Stranger* (1942) depicts Meursault, a man indifferent to conventional morality and social norms, whose confrontation with the absurdity of existence ultimately leads him to a serene acceptance of life's meaninglessness. *The Plague* (1947), written in the aftermath of World War II, extends the idea of revolt into collective solidarity: in the face of suffering and death, humans may find purpose not in divine salvation but in mutual resistance and compassion. Through these works, Camus reveals that revolt is not despair but a creative and ethical response, calling for engagement, courage, and affirmation of life as it is. He thus rejects both nihilism and escapism, proposing instead a defiant joy rooted in awareness of life's fragility. Camus' rejection of transcendental meaning distinguishes him from religious existentialists like Kierkegaard, and even from Sartre, whose emphasis on freedom is more prescriptive, while Camus remains descriptive of human experience in its stark confrontation with absurdity. Nevertheless, his philosophy resonates deeply in times of crisis, alienation, and uncertainty, offering a mode of living that confronts mortality, suffering, and purposelessness with integrity and resilience. In this way, Camus' notion of revolt becomes both a philosophical and ethical principle: to affirm life without illusions, to resist oppression and injustice, and to find meaning not in eternal truths but in the lived intensity of each moment. Ultimately, Camus leaves us with a vision of human existence that is tragic yet dignified, absurd yet profoundly free, where authenticity is achieved not by transcending the world but by embracing it fully.

The Human Search for Meaning

The human search for meaning lies at the very heart of existentialist philosophy, reflecting the deep tension between our desire for coherence and the uncertainty of life, and it often begins

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with what philosophers describe as an existential crisis. Such a crisis emerges when individuals are confronted with the recognition that the world lacks inherent meaning, a realization that provokes *angst* or existential anxiety. Unlike ordinary fear, which has a specific object, existential anxiety is diffuse and unsettling, arising from the awareness of human finitude, freedom, and mortality. Yet, paradoxically, this anxiety signals not despair but possibility, for it reveals the individual's radical freedom to define themselves. Jean-Paul Sartre emphasizes that this freedom is both a burden and a gift: a burden because individuals cannot escape the responsibility of choice, and a gift because it empowers them to create their own essence and values. Within this framework, every decision contributes to the shaping of one's identity, underscoring the role of choice in creating meaning. To live authentically is to embrace this responsibility, refusing to hide behind social conventions, deterministic excuses, or religious absolutes. However, freedom without responsibility risks devolving into nihilism, which is why existentialists insist that ethical living is inseparable from the creation of meaning. By recognizing the impact of one's choices on others, individuals are called to act with integrity and moral awareness. Beyond philosophy's abstractions, meaning is also pursued through concrete dimensions of life—creativity, relationships, and active engagement with the world. Creativity allows individuals to express their unique vision and affirm their freedom, while relationships provide intimacy, solidarity, and recognition of shared humanity, countering isolation. Similarly, engagement in work, community, and social struggle can transform the absurdity of existence into an arena for purpose and value. Albert Camus, for instance, stresses that meaning is not found in ultimate solutions but in the lived act of resistance, solidarity, and creation. Thus, the human search for meaning is not a quest for absolute truth but an ongoing process of self-definition, ethical responsibility, and connection with others, in which individuals continually create significance in a world that offers none by default.

Comparative Perspectives

Sartre's Emphasis on Radical Freedom vs. Camus' Focus on the Absurd

The philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, while often grouped under the broad umbrella of existentialism, diverge in profound ways, particularly regarding their conceptions of freedom and the Absurd. Sartre's existentialism begins with the radical assertion that "existence precedes essence," placing human freedom at the center of his philosophy. For Sartre, there is no predetermined human nature or divine blueprint; individuals are condemned to be free, meaning they must continually define themselves through their choices and actions. This radical freedom, however, is not without its weight: it generates anxiety because each decision carries not only personal but universal implications, as individuals set examples for humanity in general. Sartre warns against *bad faith*, or the denial of freedom by appealing to external authorities, social roles, or determinism, and he insists that authentic existence requires individuals to acknowledge

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their responsibility and act deliberately in shaping their lives. Camus, by contrast, does not begin with freedom but with the Absurd, the existential tension between humanity's relentless search for meaning and the universe's indifferent silence. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he articulates this as a fundamental condition of existence: life has no ultimate or transcendent justification, and yet humans cannot resist the desire to seek one. Unlike Sartre, who sees freedom as the foundation for self-definition, Camus interprets existence through confrontation with meaninglessness, emphasizing not the construction of essence but the embrace of life as absurd. His response is not to transcend the Absurd through religion, metaphysics, or even Sartre's radical project of self-creation, but to "revolt"—to live fully, passionately, and authentically without appeal to higher meaning. While Sartre's vision places responsibility at the forefront, compelling individuals to engage ethically with freedom, Camus' revolt stresses defiance and joy in the very face of purposelessness, finding dignity in persistence rather than in the invention of essence. Thus, the contrast between Sartre and Camus lies not only in emphasis but in orientation: Sartre's philosophy is prescriptive, demanding the acceptance of responsibility to forge meaning, while Camus' is descriptive, portraying the human condition as absurd and suggesting a stance of courageous acceptance. Both thinkers, however, converge on the idea that meaning is not given but must be lived into, making their philosophies complementary yet distinct responses to the timeless question of how humans should live in a world without guarantees.

Camus' Rejection of Sartre's Political Existentialism

Although Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus shared an intellectual kinship in the 1940s, particularly through their common interest in freedom, responsibility, and the condition of modern humanity, their relationship fractured over profound philosophical and political differences. At the heart of this divide lay Camus' rejection of Sartre's political existentialism, especially Sartre's increasing alignment with Marxism and revolutionary praxis. Sartre believed that existentialist freedom could not be confined to the private realm but had to extend into political engagement, since authentic existence required acknowledging one's responsibility not only for oneself but for humanity as a whole. This conviction led him to argue that individual freedom was bound up with collective liberation and that, in the context of social oppression, radical political action—including revolutionary struggle—was sometimes justified as a necessary means to achieve a freer society. Camus, however, sharply diverged, fearing that such a justification risked subordinating individual dignity to abstract historical goals. In *The Rebel* (1951), Camus articulated his central critique: any political philosophy that sanctions violence or oppression in the name of future freedom becomes self-contradictory and dehumanizing. For Camus, Sartre's political existentialism, influenced by Marxism, fell into this trap by justifying revolutionary violence as historically necessary. Camus insisted that revolt must remain grounded in respect for the limits of human life and the rejection of absolute ends that excuse

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cruelty. While Sartre framed freedom as a project intertwined with history and collective struggle, Camus maintained that freedom should be lived in the present through personal integrity, solidarity, and refusal to compromise human dignity for ideological goals. This divergence culminated in their famous quarrel, with Sartre criticizing Camus for political naivety and disengagement, while Camus condemned Sartre's willingness to excuse authoritarianism for the sake of revolutionary ideals. Ultimately, Camus' rejection of Sartre's political existentialism reflects his deeper philosophical stance: whereas Sartre sought to anchor existentialism in political praxis, Camus rooted his philosophy in the ethical imperative of revolt, affirming life's value without sacrificing the individual to history, ideology, or utopian visions. In this sense, Camus upheld the belief that true freedom lies not in political absolutes but in a perpetual struggle to affirm dignity, justice, and authenticity within the absurd condition of human existence.

Conclusion

Existentialism, as articulated through the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, remains one of the most powerful philosophical responses to the enduring human question of meaning in a world marked by uncertainty, mortality, and the absence of divine or predetermined order. Both thinkers challenge the individual to confront existence honestly, rejecting illusions that seek to escape responsibility or obscure the reality of the human condition. Sartre emphasizes radical freedom, insisting that "existence precedes essence" and that individuals must shoulder the responsibility of shaping their own lives through conscious choice and authentic engagement with the world. Camus, by contrast, locates the essence of the human dilemma in the Absurd, the confrontation between humanity's hunger for meaning and the silence of the universe, and he calls not for resignation but for revolt—a courageous embrace of life in spite of its lack of ultimate justification. Together, Sartre and Camus illuminate two complementary dimensions of the existential quest: the necessity of self-definition and responsibility on the one hand, and the necessity of living fully within the tension of meaninglessness on the other. Their philosophies converge in affirming that meaning is not discovered but created, not received from transcendent authority but forged in the lived reality of choice, struggle, and solidarity. In contemporary contexts—marked by alienation, rapid technological change, social upheaval, and global crises—their insights remain profoundly relevant, offering individuals a framework for authenticity, resilience, and ethical responsibility. Existentialism thus concludes not in despair but in affirmation, calling humanity to embrace freedom, confront absurdity, and live deliberately, creating meaning through action, creativity, and relationships in the face of life's ultimate uncertainties.

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