

Existentialism: A facetious introduction. – David Miller

At the commencement of every meeting of the Existentialist Society, the following introductory statement is read out:

“Existentialism is an ‘umbrella’ term covering diverse and often conflicting schools of thought. Consequently we are not agreed on who or what is an Existentialist; we simply agree to disagree.”

First-time attendees of the Existentialist Society can hardly believe what they are hearing. Why is Existentialism in this situation? How come all these conflicting schools of thought were labelled as Existentialist?

The irony is that, following the 2nd World War, many of the so-called Existentialists actually denied being Existentialists. But the world and the media ignored their denials and nevertheless labelled all these philosophers, authors and playwrights as Existentialist. Existentialism became a media construct. Every philosopher, author and playwright who could not be otherwise pigeonholed was labelled as ‘Existentialist’. And the Existentialist Society has inherited this mess.

What on earth did all these viewpoints have in common? Perhaps nothing! Various definitions of Existentialism have been attempted. The problem is that whatever definition you might decide upon, some of the so-called Existentialists won’t fit in. And if you modify your definition to fit them in, then some others will drop out and not be included within your definition.

The usual way of dividing up the Existentialists is to differentiate between the atheists on the one hand and the religious on the other. Most, in fact, are religious. Nevertheless, my personal preference is to divide Existentialism into Positive Existentialism and Negative Existentialism.

Positive Existentialism

Let us take the Positive first and leave the Negative till later. We are most familiar with Positive Existentialism in its form of ‘Pop’ or Popular Existentialism. Declarations like: ‘Do your own thing!’, ‘Become what you are!’, and ‘Self-Fulfilment’ are everyday examples.

A serious definition of one type of Positive Existentialism is: ‘The search for authentic existence’. This translates into: Become the author of your own existence. And that translates into: Make up your own mind about what you believe, and act on it. Now that might sound like a motherhood statement. But, in regard to many areas of today’s world, my advice to you would be: Don’t try it if you want to stay alive. If you lived in those parts of the world, it could be a case of: Conform or die!

In our normal everyday life here in Australia, you can do whatever you please. Making up your own mind, and deciding to act on it, may be for something as simple as changing the colour or length of your hair. Or, at a more extreme level, you may have decided that the wearing of clothes is stupid.

Just remember, however, that there is usually a price to pay. You may find that you receive the disapproval of your family, your relatives, your friends, your community, your religion, your nation. And not only their disapproval. You may find yourself rejected, ostracised, expelled, and ex-communicated. You may be considered to be unethical and immoral. You may face legal sanctions. You may even have to cope with penalties as a criminal.

Yes, 'do your own thing'. But if you can't cope with the consequences, then perhaps it is easier to conform. Existentialism is not for everybody. Most people need it like they need a hole in the head!

And that was Positive Existentialism. Just wait till we get to Negative Existentialism!

Negative Existentialism

Positive Existentialism has a positive attitude towards belief and believing. If you lose your beliefs, you simply find another set of beliefs that suit you.

Negative Existentialism, on the other hand, has a negative attitude towards belief and believing. It might merely be the distrust of all beliefs and a suspicion of belief-systems. This could lead to the inability to believe in anything whatsoever. At its most extreme, it could be the deliberate rejection of all belief.

I will briefly list some types of Negative Existentialism starting with the most extreme:

The rejection of all belief. This is a dive into the meaningless void. It is usually labelled as 'Nihilism'. Some of these Nihilists actually find joy in their release from the shackles of belief. But there is argument as to whether or not they should be included as part of Existentialism.

However, most Nihilists can't stand being Nihilists. This leads us to the next category of Negative Existentialism. Those 'Nihilists-who-can't-stand-being-Nihilists' find that the meaningless void makes them dejected, dispirited, and despairing. This is a life-threatening situation. Suicide has been a constant problem for this type of Existentialism. One solution has been to pick a belief, any belief whatsoever, even one that you have earlier rejected, then commit yourself to it, and make it a lifelong commitment.

A milder form of Negative Existentialism emphasizes rationality over belief. Instead of allowing yourself to be welded-on to a belief, you take a reasonable, measured and considered approach to life's decisions.

The final type of Negative Existentialism that I will deal with is that of the distrust of belief. You may have a number of beliefs and you may have come to firm conclusions about many issues. But your 'alarm bells' start ringing. You begin to constantly ask yourself, "Am I kidding myself?" You have then become a self-doubter, an angst-ridden agonizer.

Okay. I have dealt with Positive Existentialism as well as Negative Existentialism. Let me finish, as I started, with the Existentialist Society's Introductory Statement:

“Existentialism is an ‘umbrella’ term covering diverse and often conflicting schools of thought. We are not agreed on who or what is an Existentialist; we simply agree to disagree.”