

Philosophy Insights
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Existentialism

Richard Gravil

*'Existence
precedes
Essence'*

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A Note on the Author

Richard Gravil took his BA in Wales and his PhD at East Anglia. He has taught in the University of Victoria, B.C., the University of Łódź, Poland, and the University of Otago, New Zealand. His books include *Romantic Dialogues: Anglo-American Continuities, 1776–1862*, (St Martin's, 2000) *Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation, 1787–1842* (Palgrave, 2003), and five edited works including *Master Narratives: Tellers and Telling in the Nineteenth Century Novel* (Ashgate, 2001).

He is Managing Director of Humanities-Ebooks.co.uk and Academic Convenor of the Wordsworth Winter School and Summer Conference.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This introductory study sets out to trace the origins of one of the most influential movements in modern thought and to explain the principles that lie behind it. It looks at the historical background to the rise of Existentialism and examines the lives and works both of the leading Existentialists and of those earlier philosophers whose writings had an influence on them. Primarily, however, it is concerned with explaining what Existentialist thought involves and how Existentialist writers have set about trying to answer the fundamental questions that lie at the heart of all philosophy: Why do we exist? What is our purpose in life? What is our relation to the world, and to other people?

There is some dispute as to who should be termed an Existentialist, since some its major figures were reluctant to be classified as such, and had considerable disagreements with each other. I shall take the broad view, and include the nineteenth-century precursors, [Søren Kierkegaard](#) and [Friedrich Nietzsche](#), the major twentieth-century philosophers, [Karl Jaspers](#), [Martin Heidegger](#), [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) and [Simone de Beauvoir](#) (the hyperlinks here lead to brief biographical sketches), and a number of associated figures who have worked under the Existentialist umbrella, including two theologians, Gabriel Marcel and Martin Buber.

To begin with a thumbnail sketch: essentially, Existentialism is ‘the philosophy of existence’, as opposed to those kinds of philosophy which are concerned with a realm of permanent ‘realities’ above and beyond this world of unstable ‘appearances’ or are restricted to what one can be logically positive about. To Descartes’ famous declaration, ‘I think therefore I am’, the Existentialists reply, in a variety of voices, ‘I think therefore I think: but whether I exist is another matter altogether’; ‘I rebel, therefore we exist’; ‘I am, therefore I think’. They assert, in contradistinction to a purely rationalist view of man, the themes of human being, and human freedom, and human action.

The briefest summary of Existentialism is Sartre’s phrase ‘existence precedes essence’. You are what you do. This is an attack on the notion that people come ready-made, as it were, with predetermined personalities or fates. In Existentialism you choose your own fate, and you determine what you (in essence) are: even if you