

The Existential Lexicon

This lexicon is based upon several works. On 22 June 2003, I located a copy of the out-of-print text, [The New Dictionary of Existentialism](#), by St. Elmo Nauman, Jr. Use of **NDE** indicates definitions taken from Nauman's work.

- A -

abandonment - The consequence of individualism. A metaphysical isolation according to which each individual must ultimately fall back upon his or her own resources.

abstraction - (from **NDE**) (Latin *ab*: from + *trahere*: to remove; to remove from) Existentialists criticize idealistic philosophy for its abstract character, for having abstracted thought from life. Believing that no definition of reality can substitute reality for itself, existentialists seek to avoid abstraction. Existential thinkers recommend abstraction as a kind of synonym for "reflection," that is, as the opposite of an entirely unreflective life, a life lived on the sensual level of pleasure.

absurd - (from **NDE**) (Latin *absurdus*: unheard of) The absurd is viewed either (as with [Kierkegaard](#)) as the positive basis for the acceptance of authentic reality, or (as with [Sartre](#)) as the negative basis for the rejection of a religious view of the world.

God's passion is to be found in the absurd; where this sign is to be seen, there God is present...
— [Kierkegaard](#), [The Last Years](#)

[Albert Camus](#) began with the declaration that the world was absurd and meaningless. Refusing to be defeated by such a reality, he celebrated the joy of what he called "the invincible summer" within.

absurdism - The belief nothing can explain or rationalize human existence. There is no answer to "Why am I?" Human beings exist in a meaningless, irrational universe and that any search for order by them will bring them into direct conflict with this universe.

aesthetical - (from **NDE**) (Greek *aisthetikos*: sensitive) [Kierkegaard](#) used "aesthetical" in a technical way in his thought. The aesthetical is the first "stage on life's way," or "sphere of existence." The aesthetical is that sphere of existence in which a person lives rather aimlessly, seeking pleasure.

Aesthetics, literature, poetics, drama, and music were important to the existentialists. Drama is a common subject, thanks to [Hegel](#) (existentialists critique Hegel frequently) and [Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy](#). [Camus](#) and [Sartre](#) were playwrights, recognizing that art reaches more people than dry philosophy.

agnosticism - The uncertain beliefs of many existentialists, agnostics claim one cannot prove or disprove the existence of a deity. Existential agnostics tend to claim they do not care if there is or is not a supreme deity.

alienation - A state of divided selfhood in which one is distanced from one's true being and confronts the self as an alien being.

anguish - (from NDE) (Latin *angere* to tighten, choke) One of the key terms in existential philosophy, anguish (or dread) reveals the character of human life and illuminates the nature of the world. In [Kierkegaard's](#) conception, dread (Angest) is not fear, caused by some external threat. Rather, dread is an inward passion, either a continuous melancholy or a sudden and terrifying emotion.

[Sartre](#) treats anguish (angoises) as the reflective apprehension of the Self as freedom. Anguish is the realization that a nothingness slips in between my Self and my past and future so that nothing relieves me from the necessity of continually choosing myself and nothing guarantees the validity of the values which I choose.

[Jaspers](#), differing from [Sartre](#), defines anguish (Angst) as “the dizziness and shudder of freedom confronting the necessity of making a choice.” As he develops his thought, anguish is experienced in those ultimate situations, such as before death, in which Existenz faces its most extreme limits.

As one of Dasein's possibilities of Being, anxiety — together with Dasein itself as disclosed in it — provides the phenomenal basis for explicitly grasping Dasein's primordial totality of Being.
— [Heidegger](#), *Being and Time*

The normal, existential anxiety of guilt drives the person toward attempts to avoid this anxiety (usually called the uneasy conscience) by avoiding guilt. ... The moralistic self-defense of the neurotic makes him see guilt where there is no guilt or where one is guilty in a very indirect way.
— [Tillich](#), *The Courage to Be*

atheism - Possessing no belief in an omnipotent deity, or finding no need to ponder the existence of a deity. For some, atheism implies the denial a deity exists, as opposed to non-belief. Existential atheism is an active debate, not to be confused with agnosticism.

authentic - To be true. If something is “authentic” it is exactly as named or described. According to some thinkers, nothing is authentic. Because people evolve and alter their essence, people cannot be authentic for more than an instant, frozen in time.

- B -

Bad Faith - A lie, especially to the self. Self-deception, the paradox of lying to the self, usually in an attempt to escape the responsibility of being an individual. The extreme example cited by existentialists is, “I was only following orders.” Any denial of free will is an example of bad faith. [Sartre](#) believed all moments of Bad Faith (Mauvaise Foi) were self-evident, contradicting many psychologists.

Being-for-Itself - Sartre's terms for sentient existence, namely human existence. A form of consciousness that entertains itself as possibility rather than as terminal fact. The recognition that a being can change itself.

Being-in-the-World - Choosing the self as a sentient, real being as manifested by thoughts, actions, and meaning. This is the existential existence, recognizing that at least in humans existence does precede essence. Being-in-the-World is a contrast to Being-in-the-Midst.

- C -

conscience - (from **NDE**) (Latin *conscientia*: feeling, knowledge) Existentialists are divided in their view of conscience. Some consider conscience to be the moral voice within the individual, helpful and necessary. Others believe conscience to be the product of society and thus completely relative.

conscious - All choices are conscious choices, according to [Sartre](#). In existentialism, every choice is made aware of the consequences. There is no "subconscious" for in Sartre's early works on psychology. Choices are made and denying a memory is an act of **Bad Faith** — a lie to the self.

- D -

Dasein - (from **NDE**) (German *Dasein*: being there) Dasein literally means "Being there," or, in other words, being in a particular place. Hence Dasein is used to mean human existence.

In traditional German philosophy, Dasein was used in a general way to stand for almost any kind of Being or existence which something has, for example, the existence of God. In common usage, Dasein was used to stand for the kind of existence which belongs to persons.

death - (from **NDE**) (Indo-European *dheu*: to become senseless) One of the preoccupations of existential philosophy, death for [Sartre](#) proves the absurdity of life. Existential thinkers on the whole are concerned to define and interpret death properly so that man is encouraged to face death with reckless freedom, embracing its absurdity yet not permitting death to rob life of all meaning and freedom.

When death is the greatest danger, one hopes for life; but when one becomes acquainted with an even more dreadful danger, one hopes for death. — [Kierkegaard](#), [*The Sickness Unto Death*](#)

The thought of death can give rise to the fear of not living authentically. One glimpse of the void within and without, and we take refuge in ceaseless activity, eschewing reflection. But the secret restlessness remains. The life force delivers us from it only in appearance; only the sheer force of the thought of death itself frees us in truth. It affirms that other than merely vital significance of man: the eternal weight of his love. Peace in the face of death springs from the awareness of what no death can take away. — [Jaspers](#), [*Philosophy Is for Everyman*](#)

When [Heidegger](#) speaks about the anticipation of one's own death it is not the question of immortality which concerns him but the questions of what the anticipation of death means for the human situation. — [Tillich](#), [The Courage to Be](#)

Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete. — [Frankl](#), [From Death Camp to Existentialism](#)

despair - (from **NDE**) (Latin *de* + *spes*: without hope) For existential thinkers, particularly [Kierkegaard](#), despair is one of the most significant human emotions which provides the spur to fruitful thought about the nature of the human condition. [Tillich](#) later repeats the same estimate, adding the qualification that the emotion of despair itself is not necessarily experienced by all or even the majority of people.

dialectic - Process associated with [Hegel](#) of discovering truth by stating a thesis, developing a contradictory antithesis, and combining and resolving them into a coherent synthesis. The Marxian process of change through the conflict of opposing forces, whereby a given contradiction is characterized by a primary and a secondary aspect, the secondary succumbing to the primary, which is then transformed into an aspect of a new contradiction.

epistemology - A branch of philosophy dedicated to scientific studies the nature of knowledge, its presuppositions and foundations, and its extent and validity.

essence - The intrinsic or indispensable properties that serve to characterize or identify something. The inherent, unchanging nature of a thing or class of things. Phenomenology and existentialism aim to observe the essence of objects. In existentialism, one's essence is his or her role in the universe. This essence changes constantly with each decision made.

ethics - In existential works, ethics refers to a system, a formalized method for determining "right and wrong" in any situation. **Morals** are practices dictated by probability, producing a conformity of behavior among a community.

existence - The state of being, usually in the material, scientific sense. In existentialism, the existence of a person does not define the individual; the individual is defined by his or her actions and thoughts.

(from **NDE**) (Latin *existere*: to stand forth) Existential thinkers write of existence as it is in its factuality as opposed to idealistic philosophy (such as Hegelianism) which equated essence with existence to the detriment of existence. Passion and responsibility are two of the most significant aspects of existence as viewed by Kierkegaard and Sartre.

existentialism - The doctrine that among sentient beings, especially humanity, existence takes precedence over essence and holding that man is totally free and responsible for his acts. This responsibility is the source of dread and anguish that encompass mankind.

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.

Existential Vacuum - (from **NDE**) The psychological condition in which a person doubts that life has any meaning. This new neurosis is characterized by loss of interest and lack of initiative. According to [Viktor Frankl](#), the existential vacuum is apparently a concomitant of industrialization. When neither instinct nor social tradition direct man toward what he ought to do, soon he will not even know what he wants to do, and the existential vacuum results.

Because of social pressure, individualism is rejected by most people in favor of conformity. Thus the individual relies mainly upon the actions of others and neglects the meaning of his own personal life. Hence he sees his own life as meaningless and falls into the "existential vacuum" feeling inner void. Progressive automation causes increasing alcoholism, juvenile delinquency, and suicide. — Frankl speaking.

facticity - Those features of reality that cannot be transformed. Many things are not controlled by anyone, especially in nature and science. Sartre recognized these external factors, to which sentient beings can only respond.

freedom - The condition leading to both human accomplishment and anguish. I differ from existentialists in that I support the "freedom to" while Sartre and his socialist colleagues supported a "freedom from" certain conditions. I worry that we sacrifice our freedom to do things and express thoughts in return for "freedoms from" various concerns.

(from **NDE**) (Anglo-Saxon *freo*: not in bondage, noble) Man is essentially free and not determined by any external factor whatever, according to existential thought. [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) has formulated the most radical doctrine of freedom in the history of western thought. Accordingly, no limit to human freedom is admitted, neither temporal nor divine.

Sartre wants men to accept their own absolute responsibility for their lives. Thus he opposes any reliance upon the divine. All of man's alibis are unacceptable: no gods are responsible for man's condition, no original sin, no heredity or environment, no race, no caste, no father, no mother, no wrong-headed education, no impulse or disposition, no complex, no childhood trauma. Man is completely free. Man is *condemned* to be free.

Our description of freedom, since it does not distinguish between choosing and doing, compels us to abandon at once the distinction between the intention and the act. The intention can no more be separated from the act than thought can be separated from the language which expresses it. — [Sartre](#), *Being and Nothingness*

How absurd men are! They never use the liberties they have, they demand those they do not have. They have freedom of thought, they demand freedom of speech. — [Kierkegaard](#) (Victor Eremita), [Either/Or](#)

future - Existentialists focus their lives on the future, always attempting to become more, to learn more, to experience more of life. Life, being, is the process of becoming; this means the future is how men define themselves. We act and think looking forward. The future is why we do things.

- G -

god / God - (from **NDE**) (Unknown origin, *goth* or *guth*: to call out) Existential philosophers are divided into atheistic and theistic schools of thought, according to [Sartre](#). The atheistic existentialists are [Nietzsche](#), Sartre and the French school of existentialism, and [Heidegger](#). The theistic existentialists are [Kierkegaard](#), [Jaspers](#), and [Tillich](#). More important than this formal division is each thinker's conception of God and the place assigned to God within his thought.

[Friedrich Nietzsche](#) wrote of the “death of God,” by which he meant the loss of the culture's base values.

Jean-Paul Sartre, who also speaks of the death of God, means that it is necessary for man to invent his own values, to freely choose oneself as an image of man for all men.

Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is without excuse.

Existentialism is not atheistic in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God. It declares, rather, that even if God existed that it would make no difference from its point of view. — [Sartre](#), essay: “Existentialism”

The best proof of the soul's immortality, that God exists, etc., actually is the impression once received thereof in childhood, namely the proof which, differing from the many learned and grandiloquent proofs, could be summarized thus: It is absolutely true, because my father told me so. — [Kierkegaard](#), [The Diary](#)

good - (from **NDE**) (Sanskrit *gadh*: to hold fast, fit) The individual is the only center for the choice of the good. No rules or commandments or laws have any ethical significance unless they are chosen by the individual. This choice is completely free. Man is free to choose his own nature. Man alone is responsible to choose what he is to become, and this is his choice alone. Objective advice on moral matters cannot be given, as choice and value are subjective.

- H -

Historical Materialism - (from NDE) [Jean-Paul Sartre](#)'s term explaining part of his attitude toward [Marxism](#). The only view of dialectical materialism which makes sense is historical materialism, that is, materialism viewed from inside the history of man's relation with matter.

hope - (from NDE) [Kierkegaard](#), in recounting the Abraham story, says that it was necessary for Abraham to have renounced everything, to have given up all hope that things were going to turn out all right in the end, before anything divine could happen to him.

Human Nature - (from NDE) There is no settled human nature, according to existentialism. Because the will is more basic than the reason, the choice the individual makes of his own nature is more basic than the rational analysis of that nature.

- I -

ideal - (from NDE) An important concept for [Kierkegaard](#)'s later thought. As he sought to apply his concepts to social and religious conditions, he made extensive use of the category of the ideal. Not defined, it was considered a self-evident idea, the ideal being contrasted with the actual.

The ideal means hatred of man. What man naturally loves is finitude. To face him with the ideal is the most dreadful torture. Certainly, when the ideal is produced in the most exalted poetic fashion, like an enchanting vision of the imagination, he accepts this pleasure. ... (¶) But when the ideal is produced as the ethico-religious demand, it is the most dreadful torture of man. — [Kierkegaard](#), *The Last Years*

individual - (from NDE) One of the key Existential themes, originating with [Kierkegaard](#), expressing the opposition to idealism, to any tyranny whether rational or legal over the right of the existing person to choose the course and nature of his own life.

The individual is opposed to universal laws, norms, necessities; untragically, he represents mere willfulness opposing the law; tragically, he represents the genuine exception which, though opposing the law, yet has truth on his side. — [Jaspers](#), *Tragedy Is Not Enough*

The very term "individual" points to the interdependence of self-relatedness and individualization. A self-centered being cannot be divided. It can be destroyed, or it can be deprived of certain parts out of which new self-centered beings emerge... Man not only is completely self-centered; he also is completely individualized. — [Tillich](#), *Systematic Theology*

The first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. — [Sartre](#), *Existentialism is a Humanism*

in-itself - (from NDE) (French *en-soi*) Sartre's term for non-conscious reality, as contrasted with conscious reality, or the being of the human person (being-for-itself).

Logotherapy - (from **NDE**) In Existential psychology, the term for Dr. [Viktor Frankl](#)'s therapy. The theory states that the spiritual aspects of the distressed individuals require treatment rather than the physical symptoms. Thus it is named Logotherapy, from the Greek word "logos," which is "word," "meanings," or "spiritual."

"Logos" being the *meaning* — and, beyond that, something pertaining to the noetic, and not the psychic, dimension of man. — [Frankl](#), *From Death Camp to Existentialism*

According to logotherapy, the striving to a meaning in one's own life is the primary motivational force in man. — [Frankl](#), *Man's Search for Meaning*

It is, of course, not the aim of logotherapy to take the place of existing psycho-therapy, but only to complement it... which includes the spiritual dimension. — [Frankl](#), *Doctor of the Soul*

Thus, logotherapy is a personalistic psychotherapy which does not concern itself primarily with symptoms, but rather tries to bring about a change in orientation with respect to the symptoms. The therapeutic aim of logotherapy is to make the individual aware of his purpose in life and to bring him to a fuller understanding of it.

Logotherapy is based on the observation that uncertainty about life's meaning is one of the most important causes of emotional problems in the world today.

man - (from **NDE**) (Sanskrit *manu*) Existentialists form their view of man by beginning with the fact that the individual is always the existent-in-the-world, already in encounter. Generally speaking, they hold that there is no such thing as a pure subject. [CSW: Man, in this view, is whatever he chooses to be, not merely a physical entity, but a collection of actions and interactions.]

morality - Doing as the powerful in a society or social system dictate. If one believes in a deity, that deity is the most powerful entity in existence, so its rules must be followed in order to be moral.

- N -

nausea - (from **NDE**) (Greek *nausia*: illness) The title of [Sartre](#)'s famous novel of solipsistic despair, and the name Sartre uses for man's reaction in experiencing the absurd world. Both the physical world and the realization of their own uselessness give men the feeling of revulsion which [Sartre](#) calls nausea.

Necessary Being - The rationalistic explanation of a deity; a being that cannot **not** exist due to the paradox created. Many existentialists have faith, therefore they believe in a being or intellect preceding all other existence. Sartre viewed the paradox as evidence there was no Creator.

nihilism - Often viewed as "amoral" by some, nihilism is amoral in the existential sense. Nihilism is the rejection of all distinctions in moral or religious value and a willingness to repudiate all previous theories of morality or religious belief. Politically, nihilism is the belief that destruction of existing political or social institutions is necessary for future improvement.

Nihilism is associated with [Nietzsche](#), who was not a nihilist according to most scholars.

objectivity - The ability to study events or objects dispassionately, without any prejudice or bias. Existentialists consider claims of objectivity bad faith, since human objectivity is impossible.

original project - The fundamental choice of being that each sentient being makes in every action performed.

- P -

Paradoxical Intention - (from NDE) [Frankl](#)'s term for one of the procedural methods in treatment of mental illness on existential-psychoanalytic principles. It refers to the paradoxical wish which the patient may use to take the place of his fears

As soon as the patient stops fighting his obsessions and instead tries to ridicule them by dealing with them in an ironical way, by applying paradoxical intention, the vicious circle is out. — [Frankl](#), *Man's Search for Meaning*

praxis - (from NDE) (Greek: deed or action) [Sartre](#) uses this Greek word to refer to any purposeful human activity. The whole structure of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* depends on the notion of praxis, that is, man's action in the world, his work, and his rational intention in the material universe.

psychology - (from NDE) Existential interest in the theory of man has led to its formulation of a psychological theory which is distinctive. Sartre, Jaspers, and others of the philosophical Existentialists have written a great deal on the topic.

In Europe there are four explicitly Existential psycho-therapists, who are (1) [Viktor Frankl](#), the Viennese neuropsychiatrist, founder of "Logotherapy," (2) Ludwig Binswanger, the Swiss psychiatrist, founder of "Existential Analysis," (3) Medard Boss, also a Swiss psychiatrist, who calls his therapy "Daseinanalysis," and (4) Hans Trüb, Swiss, who calls his therapy "anthropological."

Existential psychoanalysis is going to reveal to man the real goal of his pursuit, which is being as a synthetic fusion of the in-itself with the for-itself; existential psychoanalysis is going to acquaint man with his passion. — [Sartre](#), *Being and Nothingness*

- R -

radical conversion - The responsibility and possibility that each being has in each moment of life. At any moment a sentient being can reject his or her **original project** and select another course in life.

reflected consciousness - Thoughts about thoughts. [Sartre](#) found thinking about how and why we think quite interesting. The moment one ponders other thoughts, he or she is acting as a philosopher.

- S -

society - (from **NDE**) The reason for the existential rejection of society lies in the failure of existential philosophy to provide for a clearly non-repressive social organization, one which allows the individual freedom to develop.

Freedom for the individual is possible only by becoming free from the restrictions of society, which is the animal organization of man at any rate — “the herd,” or “the crowd.” This is a theme which [Nietzsche](#) also developed, in speaking of the “transvaluation of values,” by which the true individual would be freed from the restrictions of society.

subjective - How everything is viewed by existentialism: nothing is certain, it is all opinion, bias, and prejudice.

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transcendence - The mental act of projecting a consciousness beyond itself, referring to and establishing new relations with entities that are external to the self.

unreflected consciousness - Thoughts of external objects and concepts, without any consideration as to the nature of the thoughts. This form of consciousness is the “practical” mode of thought used at most times by sentient beings, as compared to **reflected consciousness**.