Chapter 1

The Origin and Development of Existentialism
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1.1 Origin of Existentialism

Existentialism as a universal element in all thinking is the attempt of man to describe his existence and its conflicts, the origin of these conflicts and the anticipations of overcoming them. “Existentialism is a philosophy of reaffirming and regaining the lost status of man in the advanced scientific and technological society. Therefore, this is a theory of individual meaning which asks each man to ponder over the reason for his existence.”

The tendencies we have outlined are the forerunners of two great reform movements called the Renaissance and the Reformation – the development of nationalism, the heretical currents of thought and mysticism, the antagonism to the scholastic alliance of theology and philosophy. The times were beginning to find fault with the old traditions, with old language and literature, the art, the theological systems, the political relations of church and state, the authoritarian religion.

The conflict between church and state had been settled in favor of the state; but within both church and state themselves the desire for political, economic, religious, and intellectual liberty found partial realization in the ‘Renaissance’ and ‘Reformation’, expressing itself in modern philosophy and in other manifestations of the struggle for human liberty enlightenment.
In the early 20th century the whole world will indeed be ‘frightening, hostile and dangerous’, and the heavens of mercy and love will become more and more difficult to find. In the early 1930s, the whole world was in a political, economic and cultural tumult which was to reach a catastrophic culmination in the Second World War. As leader of the Nazi Party, Adolf Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany, books by Jewish and anti-Nazi writers were publicly burned, the labour unions were suppressed and the first wave of intellectuals and artists began an exodus from Germany. In the Soviet Union, Stalin’s autocratic regime had imposed the Second Five-Year Plan for collectivisation of farm and industry; ethnic pogroms and mass starvation swept through Russia and the Ukraine within a few years, millions had died. In the United States, unemployment had reached disastrous levels, financial markets were seriously unstable, drought and famine devastated the Midwest, and Present Roosevelt introduced the new deal to provide federal assistance to farmers, communities and businesses. France went through a delayed reaction to the great depression and much of its political energies were devoted to helping its East European allies. Between 1932 and 1935, there were eleven governments and fourteen economic plans, an exchange of incoherent power plays which contributed to an increased sense of unease and instability.

Existentialism found an especially strong foothold in France just before the war, perhaps due to circumstances of the sort that Paul Guerin remarked on, in the spring of 1939: “The political regime is paradoxical, conservative in purpose, revolutionary at heart, extremist and idealist in programs, opportunist and moderate in its actions.”

In those extraordinary years of upheaval and danger, threat and promise, several publications by a number of mostly unknown philosophers would dramatically
reshape the central topics of immediate philosophical concern. They were not so much influenced in a thoughtful, meditative way by the events unfolding about them as provoked and threatened by a challenge to the dominant worldview; thus one can say that these writers became engaged in articulating a new vision. For the first time, in these essays and lecture, they will seek to define the philosopher’s own intellectual and moral responsibility, a task which could only have been conceived as the consequence of their radically new understanding of the unique status of human being.3

After the Second World War, in which huge masses of humanity thrown into conflict, people have come to face each other more closely than before. They now wish to understand each other intimately and to avoid conflicts, which, in future will involve the whole of the globe. People realize that they have only two alternatives before them: recognition of the brotherhood of man or annihilation of man and civilization. This necessity to understand each other, each other’s point of view, each other’s culture, outlook, values and even religion have given comparative philosophy a new seriousness and importance. But the problems are complex; for we find not only different outlooks and cultural traditions but also outlook on life.4

Man cannot be ignored by any philosophy; he has to be retained at its centre. Towards the 2nd World War, when the price of everything rose, the saying was on the lips of almost every man: the value of everything was risen expect human life. Thinkers began to be repelled by the devaluation of human life, whether in the name of science, culture, religion or political ideology. Even the claim of absolute value for science is being questioned. Man and his value are primary; their primacy has to be acknowledged by any philosophy.
Like “rationalism” and “empiricism,” “existentialism” is a term that belongs to intellectual history. Its definition is thus to some extent one of historical convenience. The term was explicitly adopted as a self-description by Jean-Paul Sartre, and through the wide dissemination of the postwar literary and philosophical output of Sartre and his associates—notably Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Albert Camus—existentialism became identified with a cultural movement that flourished in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s. Among the major philosophers identified as existentialists (many of whom, for instance Camus and Heidegger—repudiated the label) were Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, and Martin Buber in Germany, Jean Wahl and Gabriel Marcel in France, the Spaniards José Ortega y Gasset and Miguel de Unamuno and the Russians Nikolai Berdyaev and Lev Shestov.

The nineteenth century philosophers, Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, came to be seen as precursors of the movement. Existentialism was as much a literary phenomenon as a philosophical one. Sartre’s own ideas were and are better known through his fictional works like “Nausea” and “No Exit” than through his more purely philosophical ones like “Being and Nothingness” and “Critique of Dialectical Reason”, and the postwar years found a very diverse coterie of writers and artists linked under the term: retrospectively, Dostoevsky, Ibsen, and Kafka were conscripted; in Paris there were Jean Genet, André Gide, André Malraux, and the expatriate Samuel Beckett; the Norwegian Knut Hamsun and the Romanian Eugene Ionesco belong to the club; artists such as Alberto Giacometti and even Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, and Willem de Kooning, and filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard and Ingmar Bergman were
understood in existential terms. By the mid 1970s the cultural image of existentialism had become a cliché, parodied in countless books and films by Woody Allen.\textsuperscript{5}

It is sometimes suggested, therefore, that existentialism just is this bygone cultural movement rather than an identifiable philosophical position or alternatively, that the term should be restricted to Sartre's philosophy alone. But while a philosophical definition of existentialism may not entirely ignore the cultural fate of the term, and while Sartre's thought must loom large in any account of existentialism, the concept does pick out a distinctive cluster of philosophical problems and helpfully identifies a relatively distinct current of twentieth and now twenty-first century philosophical inquiry, one that has significant impact on fields like theology (through Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Karl Barth and others) and psychology. What makes this current of inquiry distinct is not its concern with “existence” in general, but rather its claim that thinking about human existence requires new categories not found in the conceptual repertoire of ancient or modern thought; human beings can be understood neither as substances with fixed properties, nor as subjects interacting with a world of objects.

On the existential view, to understand what a human being is, it is not enough to know all the truths that natural science, including the science of psychology—could tell us. The dualist who holds that human beings are composed of independent substances “mind” and “body” is no better off in this regard than the psychologist, who holds that human existence can be adequately explained in terms of the fundamental physical constituents of the universe. Existentialism does not deny the validity of the basic categories of physics, biology, psychology, and
the other sciences (categories like matter, causality, force, function, organism, development, motivation, and so on). It claims only that human beings cannot be fully understood in terms of them. Nor can such an understanding be gained by supplementing our scientific picture with a moral one. Categories of moral theory such as intention, blame, responsibility, character, duty, virtue, and the like to capture important aspects of the human condition, but neither moral thinking nor scientific thinking suffices.

“Existentialism”, therefore, may be defined as the philosophical theory which holds that a further set of categories, governed by the norm of authenticity, is necessary to grasp human existence. To approach existentialism in this categorical way may seem to conceal what is often taken to be its “heart”, namely, its character as a gesture of protest against academic philosophy, its anti-system sensibility, it is flight from the “iron cage” to reason. However, it is true that the major existential philosophers wrote with a passion and urgency rather uncommon in our own time, and while the idea that philosophy cannot be practiced in the disinterested manner of an objective science is indeed central to existentialism, it is equally true that all the themes popularly associated with existentialism—dread, boredom, alienation, the absurd, freedom, commitment, nothingness, and so on—find their philosophical significance in the context of the search for a new categorical framework, together with its governing norm.

Existentialism is the only philosophy which considers individuality as supreme. “Existentialism emphasizes the importance of man as an individual and his freedom and responsibility.”6
F. Molina characterizes existentialism, “as a type of philosophizing which endeavours to analyse the basic structures of human existence and to call individuals to an awareness of their existence in its essential freedom.”\(^7\) Existentialism is the systematic, often technical exploration of the category of the individual.

The first and most obvious one is that this style of philosophizing begins from man rather than from Nature. It is philosophy of the subject rather than of the object. According to Mary Warnock, “The common interest which unites the existentialist philosophers is the interest in human freedom”\(^8\) and she characterizes existentialism as ‘a committed and practical philosophy.’

For the Existentialist thinker, a human being is not the subject of his or her circumstances, nor an instance of a timeless essence, but a unique manner of \textit{existence}. The few years from 1932 to 1935 witnessed the first attempts to spell out this new understanding: Gabriel Marcel’s ‘\textit{Ontological Mystery}’; Karl Jaspers’ three–volume \textit{Philosophy}, Levinas’ translation and introduction to Husserl’s “\textit{Cartesian Meditations}” Ortega y Gasset’s “\textit{Man and Crises}” and “\textit{History as a system}” Martin Heidegger’s rise to pre-eminence through his post “\textit{Being and Time}” lectures and Merleau-Ponty’s first proposals for studies in the “\textit{Phenomenology of Perception}.”

It is a commonly accepted half truth that existentialism is a revolt against traditional Western philosophy. It is also a demonstrable not true that existentialist philosophy is very much a continuation and logical expansion of themes and problems in Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Husserl. But these misleading conceptions provide us with less than the truth that Existentialism is not simply a
philosophy or a philosophical revolt. Existentialist philosophy is the explicit conceptual manifestation of an existential attitude - a spirit of “the present age.” It is a philosophical realization of a self – consciousness living in a “broken world” (Marcel), an “ambiguous world” (de Beauvoir), a “dislocated world” (Merleau-Ponty), a world into which we are “thrown” and “condemned” yet “abandoned” and “free” (Heidegger and Sartre), a world which appears to be indifferent or even “absurd” (Camus). It is an attitude that recognizes the unresolvable confusion of the human world, yet resists the all too human temptation to resolve the confusion by grasping toward whatever appears or can be made to appear firm or familiar – reason, God, authority, history, work, tradition or the “other–worldly” whether of Plato’s Christianity or utopian fantasy. The existential attitude begins with a disoriented individual facing a confused world that he cannot accept. This disorientation and confusion is one of the by – products of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the growth of science, the decline of Church authority, the French Revolution, and the growth of mass militarism and technocracy. In philosophical terms, the new stress on “the individual” provides the key themes of the Enlightenment, the “Age of Reason” the philosophical rationalism of Descartes, Kant and Hegel. In these philosophers however, the theme of individual autonomy is synthesized and absorbed into a transcendental movement of reason. But in a culture that harps so persistently upon the themes of individual autonomy and freedom, there will always be individuals who carry these to their ultimate conclusion. Existentialism begins with the expression of a few such isolated individuals of genius, who find themselves cut adrift in the dangerous abyss between the harmony of Hegelian reason and the romantic celebration of the individual, between the warmth and comfort of the “collective idea” and the terror
of finding oneself alone. Existentialism is this self-discovery. Its presupposition is always the Cartesian *sum* (not the cogito).

### 1.2 The development of Existentialist Philosophy

Because existentialism is a trend or mood involving Philosophical themes rather than a coherent system of Philosophy, it is possible to trace through the post a number of pre cursors to the self-aware existentialism that developed in Europe during the early twentieth century. These pre cursors involved Philosophers who may not have been existentialists themselves, but did explore existentialist themes and thereby paved the way for the creation of existentialism in the 20th century.

The roots of Existentialism are found in the Socratic dictum ‘know thy self’. It was Socrates (469-399B.C) who first questioned human existence and saw man as a problem in himself and as a subject and object of true knowledge and enquiry. He stressed that self enquiry and self knowledge must be made the beginning as well as the end of life and that it is impossible for a man to live a genuine and fruitful life on earth unless first fully discovered. Pope said that the noblest study of mankind is man himself. The Upanisads also declared: *'Know thy self'* (ātmāanam viddhi).

Socrates disciple Plato had many existentialist elements in his thinking. Plato used existential terms when he spoke of the transition from existence to essence or from essence to existence; of the fall of the souls; of the seeming but not true character of the world of appearances and opinions; or of the bondage of the soul in the cave of shadows.

Another important writer who anticipated a number of existentialist themes was the 17th century French Philosopher Blaise Pascal. Pascal questioned the strict
rationalism of contemporaries like Rene Descartes. Pascal argued for a fideistic Catholicism that did not presume to create a systematic explanation of God and humanity. This creation of a "God of the philosophers" was, he believed, actually a form of pride. Rather than search for a "logical" defense of faith, Pascal concluded (Just as Kierkegaard later did) that religion needed to be based upon a leap of faith which has not rooted in any logical or rational arguments.

St. Augustine has an existentialist viewpoint of human fallenness, an emphasis on the existing individual and an existential attitude of involvement. The stance of man’s withdrawal into his own spiritual interior that we find in Marcel and Sartre has already been marked by Augustine. The requirement to know man in his particularity and therefore, in terms of a procedure different from scientific procedure to obtain knowledge of natural objects was dealt with by Wilhelm Dilthey. He viewed ‘understanding’ as the procedure and thus as the proper method of the human sciences. Understanding, according to him, “consists in the reliving and reproducing of the experience of others. Hence it is also a feeling together with others and a sympathetic participation in their emotions. Understanding, therefore, accomplishes a unity between the knowing object and the object known.”

During the later portion of nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, a number of writers contributed to the growth of existentialism. The Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky also is often considered to be a forerunner of existentialism and his “Notes from Underground” thought to be a rich source of existentialist thought. “Dostoevsky (1821–1881) probed deeply into human subjectivity and freedom in his works.”
Paul Tillich’s (1886-1965) most important contribution to existentialism is his exploration of three types of anxiety which are genuinely existential— the anxiety of fate and death, the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness and the anxiety of guilt and condemnation. He calls first of these the threat to ‘ontological self-affirmation’, second is the threat to ‘spiritual self-affirmation’ and third is the threat to the ‘self-affirmation’.

Karl Barth (born 1886) united Christianity and existentialism. Martin Buber (1878-1965) has dedicated his life to promoting the thesis that one’s love of God must be expressed through his love of each particular man. Furthermore, it is the uniqueness in each particular man rather than generic ‘man’ that is the proper object of rest. Thus the existentialist theme that ‘existence is prior to essence’ is presupposed by Buber’s philosophy.

Franz Kafka described human existence as the quest for a stable, secure and radiant reality that continually eludes it or he described it as threatened by a guilty verdict about which it knows neither the reason nor the circumstances but against which it can do nothing - a verdict that ends with death.

In “The Rebel” (1951), Albert Camus described the ‘metaphysical rebellion’ as the movement by which a man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation.

The most obvious pre-existentialism existentialists, though, would have to be Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, two Philosophers whose ideas and writings are explored in some depth elsewhere.

Existentialism as a universal element in all thinking is the attempt of man to describe his existence and its conflicts, the origin of these conflicts and the
anticipations of overcoming them. “Existentialism is a philosophy of reaffirming and regaining the lost status of man in the advanced scientific and technological society. Therefore, this is a theory of individual meaning which asks each man to ponder over the reason for his existence.”  

Because of the issues that are addressed in existentialism, it is not surprising to find precursors to existentialism in literature as well as philosophy. John Milton's works, for example, evince a great concern for individual choice, individual responsibility and the need for people to accept their late-one which always ends in death. He also considered individuals to be for more important than the system, political or religious. He did not, for example, accept the Divine right of kings or the infallibility of the church of England.

Existentialism is a movement of the 19th and 20th centuries in metaphysical thought that encompassed a core set of principles. It stressed moral individualism, and challenged the predominant view on a wide range of human inventions, from politics to religion. Oddly enough, existentialism, a movement that would give rise to Nietzsche and Sartre, originated in the works of the very Christian writers Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky. Pascal, best known as a 17th century mathematician, was one of the first intellectuals within the Catholic Church to challenge the prevailing semi-Pelagian view and to embrace Jansenism, a somewhat Protestant outlook that stressed the individual’s role in salvation. He derided the Church and recognized the folly in Descartes’ attempts to rationally explain God. Nevertheless, he accepted the idea of God on faith via a method that came to be known as Pascal’s Wager. Essentially it suggested that there are two truths, either God exists or does not, and both are ultimately unknowable, given
that, the fruits of the former outweigh the detriments of the latter. It is a seemingly rational justification for a flawed concept, faith, but the Wager is also an excellent example of the individualistic perspective that would form existentialism. Kierkegaard would make a similar leap of faith. He outlined three spheres of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and later, the religious.

The aesthetic sphere is ‘a refined hedonism’ and interested only in ‘pleasure’ (Encarta), whereas the ethical one is concerned with commitment to duty. The religious sphere entails submitting completely to the will of God by faith. Kierkegaard places the religious sphere above the other two in “Fear and Trembling”, where he looks into the parable of God’s demand that Abraham sacrifice his son, Isaac. Abraham obeys God’s command, despite the repercussions, because he has faith. Dostoyevsky was not Christian, but he was possessed of a strong conviction in the Greek Orthodox faith. More so that Kierkegaard and Pascal, he was the first existentialist to influence literature. Existential undertones are evident in Crime and Punishment, The Brothers Karamazov, and Devils, but just as prevalent is the message of the importance of God in daily life and in society. Devil is a satirical attack on the liberals of the mid-nineteenth century that deigned to propose a government devoid of heavenly influence. In Crime and Punishment, the protagonist commits a murder that he believes will ultimately benefit all of society, but is driven mad by his conscience and, after confessing, comes to realize that his sin was not only an affront to Man. Perhaps the most interesting existentialist, and certainly the most controversial, is Friedrich Nietzsche. Although influenced by Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard, Nietzsche made a radical departure from their interpretation of existentialism. He rightly viewed Christianity as the archenemy of reason, and his analysis of the
origins of faith is flawless. ‘Weariness that wants to reach the ultimate with one leap…this created all gods and afterworlds’ is an example of his contention that Man’s desire created God in “Thus Spoke Zarathustra.” He is credited with the creation of the ‘superman,’ a being that rejects the traditional values of the masses. This superman, which Nietzsche points out has yet to be born, would have the individual right to rise above mankind, and would rationally focus on his existence instead of his hopes for a new life after death. Nietzsche’s most famous saying, that ‘God is dead,’ is a concise emblem for his rejection of established values. ‘God’ is those qualities that have mired Man in a thousand years of servitude to an illusion. Martin Heidegger, the 20th century’s most eminent philosopher, was greatly influenced by the works of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. As had Nietzsche, Heidegger rejected traditional values, and in his 1927 work “Being and Time,” he espouses an individualistic perspective on the nature of existence. His perplexing concoction of being, humanity, and time is nonetheless an important first step in 20th century existentialism. He is often associated with Nazism and his support of Hitler’s troops, supposedly in the hopes that the German leader would eliminate the threat of ‘technical nihilism,’ an issue that concerned him. Coupled with Nietzsche’s justification for the actions of ‘supermen,’ a reasoning that buttressed Hitler’s aims, an ominous shadow is cast on the socio-political effects of existentialism. The nihilism that concerned Heidegger would take root in his chief successor, Jean-Paul Sartre. In forming the classical existential viewpoint, the concept of ‘nothing’ and thus nihilism intrigued Sartre. “When we abandon illusions, life is revealed as nothing; and for the existentialists, nothing is source of not only absolute freedom but existential anguish.” (Pratt) Again, Sartre stressed the importance of the individual in works like “Being and Nothingness”, “Critique of Dialectical Reason”, and the novel “Nausea”. In Nausea, the speaker talks of
life as possessing an ‘intrinsic, incoherent aspect’ and regularly records in his
diary that there is ‘nothing new.’\(^{13}\) And as there is room in the existential camp for
atheists like Nietzsche and fundamentalists like Dostoyevsky, there is also room
for the fascism of Heidegger and Sartre’s Marxism. In his later life Sartre began to
focus on the economic slavery Marx exposed, and saw capitalistic systems as
perpetuating a subjugation of the individual. Obviously, Sartre is not noted for his
rationalism, because the Marxism he encouraged demanded a surrendering of the
self to class rebellion, and restricted the individual’s economic liberty. Indeed,
Albert Camus, a friend and contemporary of Sartre until he embraced
communism, and a renowned absurdist, correctly notes in his ‘The Myth of
Sisyphus’ ‘everything, joy or happiness, is liberty’ and that ‘a world remains of
which man is the sole master.’\(^{14}\) The true existentialist recognizes the importance
of liberty in all aspects of life. Ultimately, existentialism is an unsatisfying school
of thought. How can its adherents reconcile Sartre’s Marxism with Heidegger’s
Nazism, or Pascal’s Catholicism with Nietzsche’s atheism? It contains the
brilliance of Nietzsche and the folly of Sartre. If existentialism is widely marked
by any one thing, if there can be said to be a common bond among all of its
proponents, it is a rejection of conventional ideas and methodology. ‘The
repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs…that is the heart of
existentialism.’\(^{15}\)

1.3 The Emergence of Existence as a Philosophical Problem

The two wars shattered to pieces all hopes and confidence of man in himself and
God. Man realized that the omnipotent God was no more or, perhaps never was,
that his existence in this chaotic world has been left without any dependable
philosophical control and that all the up till then existing philosophies of pure
thought and reason put together are unable to help him out of this helpless situation; Thus man set out to discover new meanings and values in life and come to discover and define the modern philosophy of existentialism.

Sartre's existentialism drew its immediate inspiration from the work of the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's 1927 “Being and Time”, an inquiry into the “being that we ourselves are” which he termed ‘Dasein’, a German word for existence, introduced most of the motifs that would characterize later existentialist thinking: the tension between the individual and the “public”; an emphasis on the worldly or “situated” character of human thought and reason; a fascination with liminal experiences of anxiety, death, the “nothing” and nihilism; the rejection of science (and above all, causal explanation) as an adequate framework for understanding human being; and the introduction of “authenticity” as the norm of self-identity, tied to the project of self-definition through freedom, choice, and commitment. Though in 1946 Heidegger would repudiate the retrospective labelling of his earlier work as existentialism, it is in that work that the relevant concept of existence finds its first systematic philosophical formulation.

As Sartre and Merleau-Ponty would later do, Heidegger pursued these issues with the somewhat unlikely resources of Edmund Husserl's phenomenological method. And while not all existential philosophers were influenced by phenomenology (for instance Jaspers and Marcel), the philosophical legacy of existentialism is largely tied to the form it took as an existential version of phenomenology. Husserl's efforts in the first decades of the twentieth century had been directed toward establishing a descriptive science of consciousness, by which he understood not
the object of the natural science of psychology but the “transcendental” field of intentionality, that whereby our experience is meaningful, an experience of something as something. The existentialists welcomed Husserl's doctrine of intentionality as a refutation of the Cartesian view according to which consciousness relates immediately only to its own representations, ideas, sensations. According to Husserl, “consciousness is our direct openness to the world, one that is governed categorically and normatively rather than causally; that is, intentionality is not a property of the individual mind but the categorical framework in which mind and world become intelligible.”

A phenomenology of consciousness, then, explores neither the metaphysical composition nor the causal genesis of things, but the “constitution” of their meaning. Husserl employed this method to clarify our experience of nature, the socio-cultural world, logic, and mathematics, but Heidegger argued that he had failed to raise the most fundamental question, that of the “meaning of being” as such. In turning phenomenology toward the question of what it means to be, Heidegger insists that the question be raised concretely, it is not at first some academic exercise but a burning concern arising from life itself, the question of what it means for me to be.

Existential themes take on salience when one sees that the general question of the meaning of being involves first becoming clear about one's own being as an inquirer. According to Heidegger, the categories bequeathed by the philosophical tradition for understanding a being who can question his or her being are insufficient: traditional concepts of a substance decked out with reason, or of a subject blessed with self-consciousness, misconstrue our fundamental character as “being-in-the-world.” In his phenomenological pursuit of the categories that
govern being-in-the-world, Heidegger became the reluctant father of existentialism because he drew inspiration from two seminal, though in academic circles then relatively unknown, nineteenth-century writers, Sören Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. One can find anticipations of existential thought in many places (for instance, in Socratic irony, Augustine, Pascal, or the late Schelling), but the roots of the problem of existence in its contemporary significance lie in the work of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

1.4 Branches of Existentialism

There are mainly two branches, in which the philosophy of existentialism divided. These are Theistic Existentialism and Atheistic Existentialism.

If we differentiate between these two branches on the basis of “the place of God”, because first one provides the highest place for God and the second one has no place for the existence of God. Yet it is a real fact but it is very usual and well-known. But the base of this differentiation is purely ideological. The fundamental concept of Existentialism “the first experience or feeling of existence” is common for the two branches.

Theistic existentialists finds a base for their internality by the faith in God and their faith changes the whole surrounding for them. On the other hand Atheistic existentialists explains the life and existence according to the first feeling of existence and they never find any place for God. They deny the existence of God which is useless for them.

Soren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Karl Jaspers are the main Theistic Existentialists and J. P. Sartre, Heidegger, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Albert Camus are the representative Atheistic Existentialists.
1.5 Basic Aspects of Existentialism

Although a highly diverse tradition of thought, some themes can be identified that provide some sense of overall unity. Here, these themes will be briefly introduced; they can then provide us with an intellectual framework within which to discuss exemplary figures within the history of existentialism.

1.5.1 Existence

Existentialists believe that existence of a person means his period from birth to death. In between we have been thrown into a social life and the characteristics of this social life are the contingent circumstances of our life. This contingency is often characterized by experience of dread, horror, anguish, solitude, bewilderment, uncertainty and finally limited by death. As Jean Wahl puts it, “man is in this world, a world limited by death and experienced in anguish, is aware of himself as essentially anxious; is burdened by his solitude within the horizon of his temporality.”

The meaning of ‘existence' cannot be discovered by logical abstraction. On the contrary it designates the real, concrete, temporal, contingent being of human existence. Secondly it refers man's finite and infinite existence. Thirdly existence is understood as an act by which the ideal is being realized in the form of becoming.

Actual existence signifies the possibilities of existence. Next it insists on subjectivity which is the basis of human existence and it is passion that marks to subjectivity. Further existence does not refer any quality that is to be added but our whole being which includes contingency, necessity and possibility.
1.5.2 Freedom

The heart of existential philosophy is human freedom. It is present and prominent among existential philosophers. This aspect plays a very significant role in the existentialist philosophy which involves both choices and the responsibility. It is often considered as a compulsory factor and a burden because the human being is free to choose and is bound to face the consequences of that.

Freedom plays a very important role in an individual’s life and his existence, as each and every human being has the capability and liberty to choose from all the alternatives in his life, the being is free to choose meaning, responsibilities and the interpretations about his actions in his life. Living in the uncertain world, the individual faces all the limitations in life such as the codes of the society, laws, rules, illness, the tragic element in life that all existence ends in death. Yet the individual has freedom to compose his individuality, that is, how he is going to use his freedom to think, dream, plan, envisage and create. And at the same time he is solely responsible for his course of action, what-so-ever the consequences may be. The human being does not have even the choice to blame others for the consequences, as the being is responsible for his present, future and his past. An individual develop his own personality, so at every step he takes decisions at his free will to make and develop himself.

In the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, “Man is condemned to be free.” He is condemned to take his own decisions, to choose from the alternatives. Once thrown in this world, he is responsible for every action and reaction. Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself, this is the first and foremost principle of the existential philosophy.
Existentialism strongly stresses freedom of individual. In spite of the individuals being determined by the body, the world, the society, and the past of and culture, he has freedom to choose his goal and make himself out of his chosen decisions. His decision and choice, his end or ideal, his moral affirmation, give a meaning and value to his life.

1.5.3 Existence precedes Essence

Jean-Paul Sartre, the father of the atheist existentialism, made a very famous and fundamental pronouncement or a proposition about the existential philosophy that is ‘Existence precedes Essence’. The distinction between existence and essence is one of the oldest concepts in philosophy. The essence of a thing is what the thing is whereas existence refers rather to the fact that it is. Existential philosophy attempts to assert self understanding and basically the origin and the evolution of the human being. The search of the existence of the human being is as old as the human being himself.

According to Sartre’s statement, “at first, the human being exists in this world and then he develops himself with the power of his decision making ability, and develops his past, present and future.” The individual is thrown into this world and then he develops his essence, his character, personality, purpose and meaning in his life.

Even existence is an embodiment of an essence the self which is a part of a universal essence. Thus in the philosophy of Plato existence becomes pale shadow of essence. Plato holds that essence is prior in reality to existence. The majority of other western philosophers carried forward this theory. Descartes even affirmed the reality of existence because of its essence –thinking, as he said ‘I think
therefore I am’. Bergson even went to the extreme of saying that ‘I do not think, it essence thinks in me’, thereby striking a transcendental, desperately deterministic note on human existence. On the problem of existence and essence, St. Thomas Aquinas gave existence the more important place by saying that existence is prior to essence. He said, “It is only in God the essence and existence coincide, I am not, since if my essence was identical with my existence then it would be my essence to exist. In such a case I would be immortal.”

The whole idea of precedence of essence over existence has been challenged by existential philosophers, and declares, existence precedes essence. Therefore “Man is conceived of as a free, responsible, aspiring and striving becoming.” Sartre explains this concept to us, “what is meant here by saying that ‘Existence precedes Essence’, it means that first of all, man exists, turns up appears on the scene, and only afterwards defines himself.” Man from existentialist’s point of view is indefinable; it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterwards he will be something. Hence man is nothing other than what he makes himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism.

1.5.4 Absurdity

The idea of absurd is a very common theme in the philosophy of existentialism, which stresses the disagreement between the human beings in seeking some inherent meaning in this world and their hopelessness of finding meaning. The notion of the Absurd contains the idea that there is no meaning to be found in the world beyond what meaning we give to it. This meaninglessness in life also encompasses the amorality or unfairness of the world. It highlights the quest of human being for purpose. It is assumed that everything has a purpose, a reason for
existence. This even argues about the universal question, like if the humankind is created by God then who created God?

The concept of the Absurdity contains the idea that life has no meaning beyond what meaning we give it. Existential philosophers believe that life is absurd; it does not have any pre-given meaning it is meaningless and it has no ultimate purpose, but we humans need to make sense of it and to give it a meaning. In the world anything can happen to anyone any tragic event may occur and could plummet because of the world's absurdity. Albert Camus stated, “That individuals should embrace the absurd condition of human existence while also defiantly continuing to explore and search for meaning.”

To exist as a human being is mysterious and wholly absurd. Each of us simply exists here, or is thrown into this time and place, which has no meaning and no purpose of its own. This aspect of existentialism is also related to the alienation and rootlessness in an individual’s life.

1.5.5 Authenticity

Authenticity is another significant concept of existential philosophy. Authenticity is the degree to which one is true to his own life despite external pressures. Life of authenticity is to live in a way that is in tune with the truth of who they are as humans and in the world in which they resides. Ones realization of freedom, responsibility and Individuality is an important part of developing an authentic life. The existentialists consider this aspect as the degree to which one is true to one’s personality and character despite the external difficulties. The consciousness seems to come to terms with being in the material world and encountering with the exterior facts and pressures; which are rather different from other than own self. It
is often taken to mean that one has to find oneself and then live in accordance with own self.

Lake of authenticity is considered bad faith in existential philosophy. Authenticity involves a person confronting reality and facing up to the hard truth that he at all times a free being who will never obtain coincidence with himself. Sartre in War Diaries writes that “authenticity consists in adopting human reality as one’s own.” Heidegger also defined authentic man, “a man being one who escaped from the banality of everyday existence by recognizing his finitude and courageously facing up to the fact of death.”

Hence existential philosophy holds that an individual can truly change the way as he think and feel about his life by believing differently, by acting rather than simply reacting, by asserting his will rather than simply allowing himself to be swept along by circumstances, by always taking responsibility for making himself and his actions. Existentialism is the only philosophy that emphasizes human existence and the qualities which are distinctive in man. It signifies restoration of man to himself and calls him to face the problems and to realize the possibilities of his own existence as a ‘concrete individual’.

Authenticity is also connected with the creativity; it arises from the actions of the individual person and not imposed from the external factors. It cannot be arrived by just repeating certain actions or events in human life. To describe authentic life the individual takes possession of himself to become a particular kind of person, to adopt certain kind of life and the pressure to ignore human morals and principles in order to have more comfortable existence.
1.5.6 Facticity

Facticity may be defined as the quality or state of being a fact. Pointing on something factual is an objective affair, but facticity might be called the inward or the inner side of factuality.

The fact is that our existence is given; the only thing human being knows is that we exist, and we are. From where we have come from and what will be our destiny is just a mystery. We have aspirations and beliefs but still the fact remains the same that, we are, and we have to be.

Facticity has a variety of meanings, and it can refer to the facts, factuality, trueness, ideality or verity. This concept is closely related to the aspects of freedom.

The word facticity has been derived from the German word, Faktizitat, French word, Facticite, and from the Latin language Factum. It can be better understood in relation to the dimensions of the past of each and every human being, it is believed that one is only one’s past. However, to say that one is only one's past would be to ignore a large part of reality that is his/her present and the future; while saying that one's past is only what one is, in a way that would entirely detach it from them now. Man is thrown into existence; each and every individual is thrown into his particular existential situation. And there is no known reason about the differences between every human being.

1.5.7 Situation

The next common theme called ‘situatedness’. Although my freedom is absolute, it always takes place in a particular context. My body and its characteristics, my
circumstances in a historical world, and my past, all weigh upon freedom. This is what makes freedom meaningful. Suppose I tried to exist as free, while pretending to be in abstraction from the situation. In that case I will have no idea what possibilities are open to me and what choices need to be made, here and now.

Man is a being-in-situation. To exist means to be in situation. Jaspers writes, “Situation is a reality for an existing subject who has a stake in it.” Situation reveals my true being. I can realize myself when I am in peril. Situation is an opportunity upon which man exercises his freedom. I have to act, think or exercise my freedom when situations are given. I cannot change them; but I can modify it. So it definitely reveals my true being. There are some ‘boundary situations’ which cannot be avoided. They are inevitable. They cannot be overcome. Boundary situations are frontiers that cannot be crossed. And yet it is through the boundary situation that we affect the leap from existence to Existenz.

1.5.8 Humanism

Existentialism is a person-centered philosophy. It considers human personality as the highest value. For them ‘man’ is the centre of universe and nothing is equal to it. Even Brahman, God, universe etc. are subsidiary to man. Society and social institutions are for the sake of man and not vice-versa.

Humanism is a very common term which refers to or centers on the human beings, and concerns the work of the humanity and neglects the metaphysical speculation about the nature of God. This is associated with the optimistic outlook towards the human beings, and stresses the choice of the beings in the creation of their own values and decisions. In other words, humanism is optimistic in nature, in spite of the fact that there is an objective value, we are entirely responsible for what we
become, and even puts the future of humanity in the hands of the human beings. Therefore, the Existential philosophy is considered as a man centered philosophy. It focuses more on the human being than on nature, on the individual’s pursuit of identity and meaning in his/her life than the social, emotional and economic pressures. In this regard it is considered that, “Man is the future of man.”

Existentialists also fix on ‘man’ they emphatically assert the importance of man as constituting the central theme of Existential Philosophy. Man knows many things, but himself remains unknown He is the originator of all studies, like Science, Art, Religion and Philosophy, yet he is a mystery to himself.

In arguing that existentialism is a humanistic philosophy, Sartre means that “it places the human being at the centre of its attention and at the apex of its value-hierarchy.” Though he mentions theistic existentialists in this lecture, citing Jaspers and Marcel as examples, it is difficult to find room for them in the body of his speech. Rather, he insists that the ultimate value, the goal of our endeavors, should be the fostering of the freedom of the individual, by which he means the enhancement of his or her concrete possibilities of choice.

1.5.9 Anxiety

German word ‘Angst’ is translated as ‘anxiety’ and dread. This is a phenomenon whose place in existentialism is pivotal. The other expressions favored by some existentialists are ‘anguish’ (Sartre), ‘metaphysical fear’ (Jaspers) and ‘dazziness of freedom’ (Kierkegaard). Angst is the disturbing and ‘uncanny’ mood. It is extremely intense experience. Kierkegaard concentrates on its religious meaning while Sartre on moral meaning. Dread originates from the feeling of ‘vacuity’ or ‘emptiness’ or ‘nothingness’ or meaninglessness of human existence.
Dread is not fear. Fear means fear for something definite and objective. But the object of dread is nothing. It is a frightful feeling of Being, or the fearful experience of uncertain future.

Human beings feel it when he is unable to express his freedom. This situation produces a state of anxiety in his mind. According to Kierkegaard, it reminds the “Possibility of freedom.” According to Heidegger “in Angst all entities within the world sink away. But it ultimately leads Dasein towards its ownmost Being-in-the world and thereby he individualises himself.” Heidegger says that “the experience of death creates the feeling of dread. In the moment of dread man personally experiences nothingness.” So dread reveals Nothingness. Heideggerean dread reveals nothingness while Kierkegaardian dread is produced by nothingness. Similarly Jaspers views, “The experience of ‘nothingness’ arises out of human failure and frustration. It turns into the experience of Being.” Sartre says, “Man is in anguish.” The exact feeling of freedom is the feeling of anguish. This anguish is called by Kierkegaard ‘the anguish of Abraham’. Nietzsche asserts that “Will to Power and faith in self will help us to be free from the ‘Angst of life.”

1.5.10 Death

We are all aware of our situations in life, limited by death, and existentialists rightly remarked that man is the only being in the world who knows that sometime he will die. That is why his existence is through- out permeated by dread, anxiety and fear. He cannot escape or transcend this situation. He has to be prepared to face dread, anguish, and fear resolutely Hence existential philosophy holds that an individual can truly change the way as he think and feel about his life by believing differently, by acting rather than simply reacting, by asserting his will rather than
simply allowing himself to be swept along by circumstances, by always taking responsibility for making himself and his actions.

Existentialism is the only philosophy that emphasizes human existence and the qualities which are distinctive in man. It signifies restoration of man to himself and calls him to face the problems and to realize the possibilities of his own existence as a ‘concrete individual’ and courageously. He must learn to live with anguish, dread and anxiety. He must learn to love death like great men and a score of other great men for whom dying for a meaningful case was of greater importance than living a purposeless life.

1.6 Existentialist Thinkers

1.6.1 Soren Kierkegaard

The official founder of existentialism is the Danish philosopher and Christian fundamentalist, Soren Kierkegaard who in the nineteenth century explore the fundamental existential question about ‘existence of man’.

Kierkegaard’s physical abnormalities and introversion, disposed him to despair and dissipation while his exceptional intellectual and literary quality. A genuine Christian inwardness and uncompromising religious spirit gave him the confidence in himself and the courage to love his individuality and to safeguard it against all sorts of attacks on it. This created a tension between despair and dissipation on one hand and hopefulness and concentration on the other. He wanted to carve out for himself a real existence. He wanted to become a unique individual different from others and exist as ‘the individual’.

Kierkegaard first turned to Christianity but not sufficient space for man, then aimed to reform traditional Christianity and to make it acceptable to the existential
beings. He criticized organized Christianity and protested against the Danish state church of his time because in his view it prevented the individual’s confrontation with God and thus made real religious experience impossible.

Kierkegaard’s philosophy is fundamentally indirect antithesis to Hegelianism. The main element in Hegel’s idealism that Kierkegaard attacked is objectivity and determinism. In opposition to Hegel’s objectivity of history according to which the world process is all-inclusive and completely logical, whatever happens in history must happen; whatever, is right, Kierkegaard emphasized the essentially subjective existence of the individual and his passionate involvement in his existence.

Kierkegaard attempted to make each of us aware of our primal subjectivity, so that we may live authentically, without the crutch of antecedent social and intellectual guides. One can only live authentically – become a person – by bearing the sole responsibility for his decisions rather than by appealing to the authority of custom or even of one’s own past patterns of thought. This awareness of the conditions for becoming authentic constitutes a part of self knowledge.

Major works by Kierkegaard include “Either\Or” (1843), “Fear and Trembling” (1843), “Philosophical Fragments” (1844), “Concluding Unscientific Postscript” (1846), “The Sickness unto Death” (1849) and “Edifying Discourses”. In his work “Either\Or”, the focus is on the task and rewards of adopting an ethical in preference to a consciously hedonistic or ‘aesthetic’ way of life. In “Philosophical Fragments” and “Concluding Unscientific Postscript”, Kierkegaard’s principle philosophical pseudonym attacks the Hegelian notion of an objective science of human spirit for obscuring the nature and place of
Christian faith, as well as for the subjective viewpoint from which alone the questions which prompt faith can meaningfully be raised. “The Sickness Unto Death” offers a systematic psychopathology of progressively deliberate renunciations of a Christian ideal of human fulfillment. Kierkegaard also published in his own name a large number of “Edifying Discourses” dedicated to ‘the individual’.

Thus Kierkegaard’s original contributions to existentialist philosophy is his interpretation of the essentially subjective nature of human existence, he insist the complete freedom of the individual to choose and to become what he wills himself to become and the priority of essence over existence. His protest against traditional Christianity and emphasis on the personal encounter with God that is the only true religious experience. Analysis of human condition as being one of despair and anxiety.

1.6.2 Friedrich William Nietzsche

The other representative in the existentialism is the German philosopher Friedrich William Nietzsche. He was born in Rocken, in the province of Saxony in 1844 and died in 1900. He was one of the authentic geniuses of the nineteenth century. Nietzsche studied at Leipzig and became professor at Basle. His first book was “The Birth of Tragedy” (1872). Other works are “The Gay Science” (1882), “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” (1883-85), “Beyond Good and Evil” (1886) and “Twilight of the Idols” (1889). In last years of his life his most aggressive anti theistic book was published namely “The Antichrist” (1895).

Nietzsche had a basic religious theme but he reacted differently to the character of religion as he said, “God is dead and we have killed him.”38 We have killed God
with reason and with rationalistic philosophies, as well as with rationalistic science, we have killed him with our pretensions to objective truth and since God is dead, religion is also dead. Each of us is on our own.

Nietzsche predicted that ‘a new episode in the history is to begin’. He thought he saw the beginning of a ‘more manly, a warlike age’ and this age was to be preparatory to a time in which man would carry heroism and strong character into pursuit of knowledge. He called this man “Superman”.

Nietzsche foresaw with great clarity the problems that were to haunt man in the twentieth century, problems that many of us have not even faced, much less solved. “His statement of and reactions to these problems for one of the great contributions to the modern philosophy and their influence on the development of present day existentialism is decisive.”

‘Will to Power’ is chief concept in Nietzsche’s philosophy. According to him the ‘Will to Power’ works in all sorts of human behavior and valuation. “In Zarathustra he proclaimed “it man’s basic motive and suggested that it is to be found in all living things.” according to Nietzsche ‘Will to Power’ is the ultimate reality. Nothing is real except our world of desires and passion and thus we can rise or sink to the reality of our drives only. He further argues that the ‘Will to Power’ is not simply the will to self preservation, it is not the effort to experience pleasure and avoid pain. From ethical perspective, pain and suffering cannot be avoided since they are necessary elements in that experience of those who live dangerously. Nietzsche warns man against the easy pessimism into which the pleasure seekers or hedonists are prone to slip, since they make their value judgements on the basis of pleasure and are therefore, sickened by the pain that surrounds them.
1.6.3 Martin Heidegger

The critics of existentialism have recognized Heidegger as one of the most original and influent existentialist philosophers because he shared with existentialists not only their themes and ideas but also the language and the logical ideas of the subject.


Among these “Being and Time” (“sein und zeit”) is considered to be the most original, comprehensive and systematic work.

The philosophical problem of being is a paramount concern of Heidegger’s philosophy. For Heidegger there is only one basic question in philosophy: the question of being. His philosophy thus held that the nature of human existence involve active participation in the world, regardless of what that participation entailed. This he termed as ‘being there,’ in German ‘Dasein’ is being or ‘being there’. It expresses only existence. Only Dasein can be said to have or not to have meaning; hence Being is meaningful solely in terms of human existence. Man exists through his choices and his being, therefore is entirely indeterminate. Other things like trees, rocks and animals and angels and God are also there but they do not exist. It is man alone who can be said to exist because man has conscious awareness about his existence. To exist, to have authentic being, is to reflect on one self, to be concerned about one self. True being is self being, involving not
only consciousness, but responsibility and free decision as well. The real nature of *Dasein* is revealed in its temporality.

Death is important in Heidegger’s system. For Heidegger there is no reality for an individual before birth or after death. The man who recognizes this fact, freely accepts its inevitability. He is no longer bound by fear of death or imaginary retributive punishment after death. He is able to choose his actions, thereby choosing his existence and ultimately his essence. This is man with dignity.

Heidegger’s greatest contributions to the existential thought are his concept of *Dasein* (being-there) and exploration of the horizons of time (and temporality as the basis for the possibility of time) as a fundamental dimension of human existence and of the way understanding this existence.

### 1.6.4 Karl Jaspers

Karl Jaspers was born on 23 February, 1883 in Oldenburg. In 1922 he became professor of philosophy at the University of Heidelberg. Works by Jaspers include “Psychology of World Views” (1919), “*Man in the Modern Age*” (1931), “*Philosophie*” (1932) “*Reason and Existenz*” (1935), “*Philosophy of Existence*” (1938) and “*The Question of German Guilt*” (1946).

His basic philosophic concern was with concrete individual and he believed that genuine philosophy must spring from one’s individual existence and address itself to other individuals to help them gain a true understanding of their existence. His philosophy “can be best characterized as a disciplined and organized description of the critical fringes of human existence, such as impenetrable limits, unmitigated freedom, and the experienced indefinite expanse of space, time and consciousness.”

His philosophical activity was influenced by studies of Kant and Hegel, His basic
philosophic concern was with concrete individual and he believed that genuine philosophy must spring from one’s individual existence and address itself to other individuals to help them gain a true understanding of their existence.

Jaspers introduced two states of being: the *Dasein* (not Heidegger’s *Dasein*) and *Existenz*. *Dasein* is the realm of objectivity and science. Objectivity is considered a simplistic approach in discovering the nature of existence and the self. *Existenz* is the real and valuable in man. Jaspers also identified the importance of freedom and considered it as central to man. It is recognized with choice, awareness and selfhood. Jaspers himself claimed, “Decision makes *Existenz* real”\(^4\) This suggests that the kind of person one becomes is a product of the series of choices and decisions.

Another important concept of Jaspers’ philosophy is the “encompassing”. It is fundamentally religious concept, intended to suggest the all embracing transcendent reality within which human existence is enclosed. It is the ultimate experiencable horizon that anyone has taken.

### 1.6.5 Jean Paul Sartre

The pioneer of the French existentialism and the central figure in the modern existential movement. Sartre was born in Paris on June 21, 1905. He, for many is the personification of existentialism. Sartre is one of the most well-known philosopher of existentialism in modern times. He proclaimed that freedom of man to be absolute. He adopted the Husserlian phenomenological method to analyze the different layers of human existence. His philosophy deals with the all aspects of life, with an enquiry into the ontology of man’s being, ethical reality, social and political life to determine the authentic nature of human existence.
Man is understood to be a unique object of cognition and subject of activities, therefore none of the objective laws of the world should be applied to him or her. These alternative conceptions are characterized by heuristic moments. Thus, it is the conceptions of these philosophical trends that are most worth to be studies.

Besides a number of important philosophical works, his plays, short stories and novels are the best expression of his existential experience and outlook. Despite great diversity of his writings which range from deep ontological dialectic to political journalism and film scenarios the central theme that runs through all Sartre’s work is his passionate interest in human being.


One of the basic concerns in Sartre’s philosophy is the ontological question of being. He distinguished between two forms of being: being-in-itself (‘en soi’) and being-for-itself (‘pour soi’).

Thus Sartre’s greatest contribution to the existential thought is his famous dictum “existence precedes essence”, the idea of two forms of being: ‘being-in-itself’ and ‘being-for-itself’ and his concern for desolate, forlorn and anxious man on whom has been thrown the total responsibility of existence by way of a dignified choice of his own.

1.6.6 Gabriel Marcel

The French philosopher and playwright, was born on 7th December, 1889 and died on 8 October 1973. Marcel is an existentialist in his stress on key experiences and
on the impossibility of adequately conceptualizing the important features of human life.

He was a thinker whose thought sprung from personal experience. His thought revolves around a number of root ideas as modes of concrete experience: estrangement, nostalgia and homecoming; presence and absence; appeal and response; fidelity and betrayal; availability and unavailability; despair, recollection, courage and hope. He dealt with such themes as participation, incarnation, man as being in the world and the priority of existence as a starting point for philosophy. Major works by Marcel includes “Metaphysical Journal” (1927), “Being and Having” (1935), “Creative Fidelity”, “Homo Viator”, “The Mystery of Being” (2 vols.) (1951) and “Man Against Humanity” (1951).

One of the most characteristic features of Marcel’s thinking is his distinction between two types of thinking, primary and secondary reflection. Primary reflection is characterized as abstract, analytical, objective, universal and verifiable. The thinking subject in primary reflection is mind, not the individual human. Secondary reflection is concerned not with problems, but with mystery. It is concerned not with objects but with the presence of being and is typically concerned with the individual’s own life meaning. Secondary reflection penetrates into the mystery of existence and being only when it works in conjunction with love, fidelity, faith and the other ‘concrete approaches’. For Marcel “Being is eternal and inexhaustible. It does not allow itself to be dissolved by the dialects of experience. Only by participation in being man overcomes isolation, despair and tragedy.”

Marcel was not an atheist. In the work of Marcel, there is reaffirmation of certain religious categories of experiences. Marcel believed that “Without a belief in God
there is no hope — life is meaningless God is restored as the Giver of life and the Ruler of heaven and earth.”

1.6.7 Simone De Beauvoir

De Beauvoir was born in (1908) and died (1986) in Paris. One of the most famous women of the age. Among her many plays, novels, philosophical treatises and multi-volume memories, the work that consolidated her international reputation and served as a foundational text for the feminist movement was “the second sex” (1949). Though she never married, she and Sartre were partners most of their lives.

De Beauvoir’s work constitutes a body of independent philosophical work, or is a reformulation of Sartre’s work. The debate rests of course upon the fundamental misconception that wants a body of work to exist and develop independently of its intellectual environment. Such ‘objectivity’ is not only impossible but also undesirable: such a body of work would be ultimately irrelevant since it would be non-communicable. So the question of de Beauvoir’s ‘independence’ could be dismissed here as irrelevant to the philosophical questions that her work raises.

In 1947 Simone de Beauvoir’s “Ethics of Ambiguity” is published. The book is an introduction to existentialism but also a subtle critique of Sartre’s position on freedom, and a partial extension of existentialism towards the social. Although de Beauvoir willecho Merleau-Ponty’s criticism regarding the essential interrelation of the subjects, nevertheless she will leave unstressed the importance that the social context plays in the explication of moral problems. In “Ethics of Ambiguity” she offers a picture of the human subject as constantly oscillating between facticity and transcendence. Whereas the human is always
already restricted by the brute facts of his existence, nevertheless it always aspires to overcome its situation, to choose its freedom and thus to create itself.

Drawn from Hegel’s moment of recognition, de Beauvoir acknowledges that the possibility of human flourishing is based firstly upon the recognition of the existence of the other “Man can find a justification of his own existence only in the existence of the other men”\(^4^4\) and secondly on the recognition that my own flourishing (or my ability to pose projects, in the language of existentialists) passes through the possibility of a common flourishing. “Only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening in the absurdity of facticity,”\(^4^5\) de Beauvoir writes; or again “To will oneself free is also to will others free”.\(^4^6\) The “Ethics of Ambiguity” ends by declaring the necessity of assuming one’s freedom and the assertion that it is only through action that freedom makes itself possible.

1.6.8 Albert Camus

Camus was born in Algeria, in 1913. He moved to Paris in 1940 where he joined resistance movement, editing the clandestine newspaper *Combat*. His first novel “*The Outsider*” and “*The Myth of Sisyphus*”, both published in 1942, made him famous and brought him to the attention of Sartre. He soon became associated with the existentialist movement. A recipient of the 1957 Nobel Prize for Literature primarily for his novels and died in a car accident in 1960.

Camus was French intellectual, writer and journalist. His multifaceted work as well as his ambivalent relation to both philosophy and existentialism makes every attempt to classify him a rather risky operation, he is also known as a philosopher due to his non-literary work and his relation with Jean-Paul Sartre. And yet his response was clear: “I am not a philosopher, because I don’t believe in reason
enough to believe in a system. What arising interest in me is knowing, how we must behave, and more precisely, how to behave when one does not believe in God or reason.”47 The issue is not just about the label ‘existentialist’. It rather points to a deep tension within the current of thought of all thinkers associated with existentialism.

Philosophically, Camus is known for his conception of the absurd. The absurd is not nihilism. For Camus the acceptance of the absurd does not lead to nihilism according to Nietzsche nihilism denotes the state in which the highest values devalue themselves or to inertia, but rather to their opposite: to action and participation. The notion of the absurd signifies the space which opens up between, on the one hand, man’s need for intelligibility and, on the other hand, ‘the unreasonable silence of the world’ as he beautifully puts it “In a world devoid of God, eternal truths or any other guiding principle, how could man bear the responsibility of a meaning-giving activity?”48 The absurd man, like an astronaut looking at the earth from above, wonders whether a philosophical system, a religion or a political ideology is able to make the world respond to the questioning of man, or rather whether all human constructions are nothing but the excessive face-paint of a clown which is there to cover his sadness. This terrible suspicion haunts the absurd man.

1.6.9 Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty was born in 1908. He was a classmate of De Beauvoir and two years behind Sartre in ENS. His major work, the “Phenomenology of Perception”, appeared in 1945. He figured Husserl importantly in his thought. He founded the avant-grade journal “Les Temps moderns”. He died abruptly at his desk at the age of 53.
Best known for his original and influential work on embodiment, perception, and ontology, he also made important contributions to the philosophy of art, history, language, nature, and politics. Associated in his early years with the existentialist movement through his friendship with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty played a central role in the dissemination of phenomenology, which he sought to integrate with Gestalt psychology, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and Saussurian linguistics. Merleau-Ponty published two major theoretical texts during his lifetime: “The Structure of Behavior” (1942) and “Phenomenology of Perception” (1945). Other important publications include two volumes of political philosophy, “Humanism and Terror” (1947) and “Adventures of the Dialectic” (1955), as well as two books of collected essays on art, philosophy, and politics: “Sense and Non-Sense” and “Signs”, Two unfinished manuscripts appeared posthumously: “The Prose of the World” (1969/1973), drafted in 1950–51; and “The Visible and the Invisible” (1964), on which he was working at the time of his death. Lecture notes and student transcriptions of many of his courses at the Sorbonne and “the Collège de France” have also been published.

For most of his career, Merleau-Ponty focused on the problems of perception and embodiment as a starting point for clarifying the relation between the mind and the body, the objective world and the experienced world, expression in language and art, history, politics, and nature. The characteristic approach of Merleau-Ponty’s theoretical work is his effort to identify an alternative to intellectualism or idealism, on the one hand, and empiricism or realism, on the other, by critiquing their common presupposition of a ready-made world and failure to account for the historical and embodied character of experience.
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