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Existentialist Ethics

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Existentialist Ethics

Most ethical theories give you a rule or a goal. Sartre's existentialism says life has no ready-made rulebook. Each person creates values through their own choices. This lesson explains Sartre, Beauvoir and Camus, and why they matter for a civil servant.

Core idea "existence precedes essence". We exist first, then define ourselves through our choices.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and the lecture *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946).

Key terms condemned to be free, bad faith, authenticity.

Simone de Beauvoir *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) adds the freedom of others.

Albert Camus (1913-1960) the absurd and *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). He denied being an existentialist.

Two branches Christian existentialists such as Jaspers and Marcel, and atheist ones such as Sartre.



Jean-Paul Sartre, the French philosopher who argued that existence comes before essence. Photo: User:T1980, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 3.0.

Understand the words

1 What is existentialism, and what does "existence precedes essence" mean?

Existentialism is a way of thinking about life that starts from the single person. It stresses **freedom**, **choice** and **personal responsibility**.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was a French philosopher. He is closely linked with existentialist ethics.

What does the famous phrase mean?

Sartre's phrase is **"existence precedes essence"**. Here, *essence* means a fixed nature or purpose. The phrase says you are not born with one.

Sartre put it in one line. "Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards."

What is a simple example?

Sartre's own example is a paper-knife. Its maker had its purpose in mind before making it. A person is different. Nobody fixes your purpose in advance. You build it through what you do.

Does every existentialist say life has no given meaning?

No. That view belongs to **Sartre's atheist version**. In his version, no God hands down a purpose, so each person must make one. Religious existentialists see it differently, as the next card shows.

> **Quick check 1.** "Existence precedes essence" means a person is born with a fixed nature. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: marxists.org; plato.stanford.edu; nobelprize.org

2 Are all existentialists atheists?

No. Sartre himself said there are **two kinds of existentialists**.

- **Christian existentialists:** Sartre named **Karl Jaspers** and **Gabriel Marcel**.

- **Atheist existentialists:** Sartre placed **Martin Heidegger**, the French existentialists and himself here.

Søren Kierkegaard is also a religious existentialist. So the movement has both secular and religious voices. *Secular* means not based on religion.

Is existentialism one school with one system?

No. It is not a single, tidy school. Its main thinkers hold very different views. Only **Sartre** and **Simone de Beauvoir** openly called themselves “existentialists”.

Who came first?

- **Nineteenth century: Kierkegaard** and **Friedrich Nietzsche** laid the early groundwork.
- **Twentieth century:** German philosophers **Edmund Husserl**, **Heidegger** and **Jaspers** carried the ideas forward.

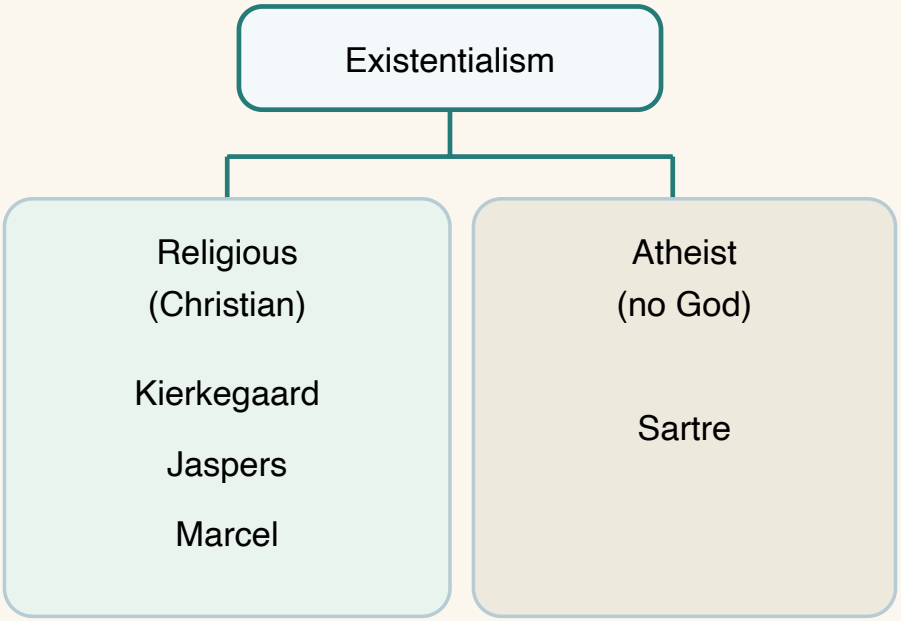


Illustration: The two branches from card 2. Names are examples, not a full list.

Quick check 2. Every existentialist thinker denied the existence of God. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: marxists.org; plato.stanford.edu

3 Why did Sartre say we are "condemned to be free"?

Sartre said we are **“condemned to be free”** because no outside rule makes our choices for us. Freedom is not a comfortable gift. It is a heavy responsibility.

Why “condemned”?

We did not create ourselves. Yet we are free from the moment we are thrown into the world. So we are responsible for everything we do. We cannot blame fate, God or “human nature”.

What three feelings come with this freedom?

Sartre named three: **anguish**, **abandonment** and **despair**.

- **Anguish:** the weight of knowing that your choice sets an example for all people.
- **Abandonment:** God does not exist, so no outside rule rescues you. You decide what you are.
- **Despair:** you rely only on what lies within your own will.

What does this look like at work?

A civil servant says, “I only followed the rulebook.” In Sartre’s terms, that official still chose to follow it. The rulebook cannot make the choice. Only the person applying it can.

Sources: marxists.org; plato.stanford.edu

4 What did Sartre tell the pupil who could not choose?

Sartre gave his pupil no rule. He said only: **“You are free, therefore choose, that is to say, invent.”**

What was the pupil’s problem?

The story comes from the same lecture. The facts are these.

- The pupil's elder brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940.
- His father leaned towards being a "collaborator", someone who worked with the German occupiers.
- His mother lived alone with him.
- He could go to England and join the **Free French Forces**.
- Or he could **stay near his mother** and help her to live.

The mother was grieving her eldest son. The pupil was her one comfort.

Why did Sartre refuse to give advice?

Sartre said no rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do. Even picking an adviser decides in advance what advice you will get. So the pupil alone had to choose, and become the person that choice made him.

What is a common mistake about this story?

Some retellings say he chose between "joining the resistance" and caring for an "aging" mother. The lecture says the Free French Forces in England. It does not call the mother aging.

> **Quick check 3.** Sartre advised his pupil to stay with his mother. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: marxists.org

Follow the key ideas

5 What is "bad faith"?

Bad faith is Sartre's term for pretending you have no real choice. You tell yourself "I had to do it" or "that's just how things are". You do this to escape the discomfort of your own freedom and responsibility.

What is Sartre's own example?

Sartre describes a **café waiter**. The waiter plays the role of "waiter" so completely, in his movements, tone and manner, that he treats the role as his fixed identity.

He hides from a simple fact. Being a waiter is still a choice he renews each day. Sartre put it this way: "I am a waiter in the mode of being what I am not."

Where is bad faith in daily life?

"The system made me do it" is a classic bad-faith line. It hides a choice behind a role.

> **Quick check 4.** Sartre's café waiter is his example of bad faith. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: plato.stanford.edu

6 What does authenticity mean?

Authenticity means owning your choices honestly. Existentialist ethics has no fixed list of moral rules. But it does insist on authenticity, rather than following the crowd or hiding behind excuses.

How did Sartre define it?

Sartre called it “a lucid consciousness of the situation”. *Lucid* means clear-sighted. You see your situation clearly, and you accept the responsibilities and risks it brings.

Heidegger also wrote about authenticity. He gave much of the second half of *Being and Time* to it.

An example: the official who disagrees

This example is our own reading, not Sartre’s.

An official privately disagrees with a policy but carries it out anyway. On this view, the official can still act authentically. The test is whether they see the situation clearly and own the choice. Hiding behind “I was just following orders” would fail that test.

Did Sartre write a full ethics?

Not in his big book. *Being and Nothingness* ends with a footnote that promises an ethics. He treated authenticity at more length in his *Notebooks for an Ethics*.

Sources: plato.stanford.edu

7 Why does one person's choice speak for everyone?

Sartre said that when you choose, you choose an image of what a person should be. In his words, **“In fashioning myself I fashion man.”**

So he asks a hard question of every choice. “What would happen if everyone did so?”

How is this like Kant?

The idea echoes Kant's own test, covered in our Kantian Ethics lesson. Kant asked whether you could will your action as a rule for everyone. Sartre reaches a similar point from radical freedom, not from reason alone.

Why does this matter?

It gives existentialism a shared sense of responsibility. Freedom is personal, but its effects are not.

Sources: marxists.org

8 What did Simone de Beauvoir add?

Simone de Beauvoir added the social side. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), she argued that I cannot affirm my own freedom without affirming the freedom of others.

What did she say we must do?

She said we are responsible for the **conditions of freedom**. These include two things.

- **Material conditions:** a minimal standard of living.
- **Political conditions:** uncensored discourse and association.

Why does this matter?

It answers a common charge. Critics say existentialism only cares about the lonely individual. Beauvoir shows that my freedom depends on other people's freedom too.

On this reading, a civil servant's own freedom is tied to public duty. Protecting citizens' freedoms becomes part of acting well.

Her best-known book, *The Second Sex*, followed in **1949**.

Sources: plato.stanford.edu

9 What did Camus mean by "the absurd", and was he an existentialist?

Albert Camus was a French writer and philosopher. He explored **the absurd**. The absurd is the clash between our wish for meaning and a universe that offers none on its own.

How should we live with the absurd?

Camus did not answer with despair. He said we should still choose to live fully and act with integrity. No final cosmic justification is needed.

Picture a person asking a silent universe "why?" and getting no answer. Camus's reply was defiant, deliberate living anyway.

Was Camus an existentialist?

Camus denied being an existentialist. His friendship with Sartre got him the label. But he preferred not to be linked with any ideology. Still, *The Myth of Sisyphus* belongs squarely in the existentialist tradition.

What are the key facts about his life?

- **Born:** 7 November 1913, in Mondovi, French Algeria.
- **Novel:** his novel *The Stranger*, in June 1942.
- **Nobel Prize:** Literature, **1957**.
- **Died:** 4 January 1960.

Quick check 5. Camus happily accepted the label "existentialist". *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: plato.stanford.edu; nobelprize.org

10 What is Camus's famous line about Sisyphus?

The essay turns to the Sisyphus story. Its famous line is **“One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”** The essay appeared in **October 1942**.

What is the myth?

Sisyphus is a figure from Greek myth. He is condemned to push a boulder up a hill forever. Each time, it rolls back down. Camus uses him as a symbol of a life that seems meaningless.

Why happy?

The line just before gives the reason: “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart.”

So the point is not a final purpose or success. The struggle itself is enough.

What is the common mistake?

Some summaries say Sisyphus finds “purpose” in pushing. Camus’s actual word is **happy**. Remember the exact line.

Quick check 6. Camus writes in "The Myth of Sisyphus": "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: plato.stanford.edu

Context and criticism

11 Why did existentialism grow after the Second World War?

Existentialism took off in **mid-twentieth-century France**, after the Second World War.

What shaped its mood?

The war, the **Nazi death camps** and the atomic bombings of **Hiroshima and Nagasaki** shook old beliefs. A whole generation had to face death, freedom and meaninglessness.

Old ideas of automatic moral progress felt broken. Existentialism offered a way to act with purpose and responsibility anyway.

When did Sartre's ideas reach the public?

- **1943:** Sartre published *Being and Nothingness*, his big and difficult book.
- **Late 1945:** thousands of Parisians packed into his lecture *Existentialism Is a Humanism*.
- **1946:** the lecture was published. It gave an easier version of his ideas.

Sources: plato.stanford.edu

12 Does "be authentic" give any real guidance?

Critics say it gives little. By rejecting fixed rules, existentialism offers no firm answer for a hard choice.

What is the critics' example?

A civil servant is torn between a superior's order and their own conscience. "Be authentic" alone does not say which way to go. Critics argue that a firm rule is exactly what such a moment needs.

How would Sartre reply?

In our reading, Sartre would say the missing rule is the whole point. He told his pupil that no rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do. Guidance by rule is the very thing he denies.

So the criticism is real, but Sartre accepts it as a fact of human life.

Sources: marxists.org

13 How does existentialism connect to civil-service ethics?

Existentialist ideas about individual responsibility connect to civil-service ethics in a real way. A rule or a superior's order does not remove a person's own responsibility for a decision.

What is the takeaway?

Even inside a large institution, this tradition would say, an individual official remains responsible for the choices they personally make.

- **Condemned to be free:** "I only followed the rulebook" is still a choice.
- **Bad faith:** "The system made me do it" hides that choice.
- **Beauvoir:** an official's freedom is tied to the freedom of citizens.

Sources: marxists.org; plato.stanford.edu

Exam practice

14 Which existentialism facts are easy to mix up?

Names, dates and labels are the usual traps. Check each one against this list.

1. **Sartre declined; Camus won.** Sartre was awarded the 1964 Nobel Prize in Literature and declined it. Camus won it in 1957.
2. **1943 vs 1946.** *Being and Nothingness* came out in 1943. The lecture *Existentialism Is a Humanism* was published in 1946.
3. **Beauvoir's two books.** *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is from 1947. *The Second Sex* is from 1949.
4. **Camus and the label.** Camus denied being an existentialist.
5. **Sisyphus.** The line is "One must imagine Sisyphus happy", not "finding purpose".
6. **Christian vs atheist.** Jaspers and Marcel are Christian existentialists. Sartre is an atheist one.

Thinker	Core idea	Key work and year
Jean-Paul Sartre	Existence precedes essence; bad faith	*Being and Nothingness*, 1943
Simone de Beauvoir	My freedom needs the freedom of others	*The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 1947
Albert Camus	The absurd; revolt, not despair	*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942

The Nobel citation for Sartre praised work "filled with the spirit of freedom and the quest for truth". Camus's citation praised work that "illuminates the problems of the human conscience in our times".

Sources: nobelprize.org; plato.stanford.edu

Sources: plato.stanford.edu

Review your 6 understanding checks

Review the feedback after each answer. The score lasts only for this page session.

Reset the checks when you want another try. This score is separate from the practice MCQs below.

Questions to think through

Why can't an official escape blame by pointing to the rulebook?

For Sartre, following a rule is itself a choice. The official chose to apply it, so the responsibility stays with the official.

Why is Kierkegaard an existentialist if he believed in God?

Existentialism is not one school. It has a religious branch as well as an atheist one. Kierkegaard belongs to the religious branch.

Why did Sartre give his pupil no advice?

Sartre held that no rule of general morality can settle such a case. Only the pupil could choose, and so invent his own answer.

Why would Beauvoir say a civil servant must care about citizens' freedom?

She argued that I cannot affirm my own freedom without affirming the freedom of others. That includes a minimal standard of living and uncensored discourse and association.

Sources: marxists.org; plato.stanford.edu

Practice MCQs

1. Which French philosopher, most associated with existentialist ethics, is known for the phrase 'existence precedes essence'?

A. Jean-Paul Sartre

B. Albert Camus

C. Rene Descartes

D. Michel Foucault

See answer ↓

2. Which two thinkers openly called themselves existentialists?

A. Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir

B. Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre

C. Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers

D. Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche

See answer ↓

3. Which line is Albert Camus's famous remark about Sisyphus in The Myth of Sisyphus?

A. One must imagine Sisyphus happy

B. Man is condemned to be free

C. Existence precedes essence

D. You are free, therefore choose

See answer ↓

4. Which thinker was awarded the 1964 Nobel Prize in Literature but declined it?

A. Albert Camus

B. Simone de Beauvoir

C. Martin Heidegger

D. Jean-Paul Sartre

See answer ↓

5. Simone de Beauvoir's 1947 book on existentialist ethics is called what?

A. The Second Sex

B. The Ethics of Ambiguity

C. Being and Nothingness

D. The Rebel

See answer ↓

6. Sartre argued that because there is no built-in rulebook for life, humans are what?

A. Guided entirely by instinct

B. Bound by divine command

C. Condemned to be free

D. Naturally virtuous

See answer ↓

7. Which term did Sartre use for the common habit of pretending you have no real choice, telling yourself 'I had to do it' to avoid facing your own freedom and responsibility?

A. Groupthink

B. Bad faith

C. Ethical fading

D. Rationalization

See answer ↓

8. French-Algerian writer Albert Camus explored the tension between our human desire for meaning and a universe that offers none on its own. What did he call this tension?

A. The categorical imperative

B. The is-ought problem

C. The veil of ignorance

D. The absurd

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.** The correct answer is **Jean-Paul Sartre**. His phrase "existence precedes essence" means we exist first. We define ourselves later, through our choices. Albert Camus wrote about the absurd and denied being an existentialist. Descartes and Foucault are not linked with this phrase. ↑ Q1
2. **A.** The correct answer is **Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir**. Of the movement's main thinkers, only these two took the label. Camus denied being an existentialist. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were nineteenth-century pioneers. Heidegger and Jaspers carried the ideas forward in the twentieth century. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** The correct answer is **"One must imagine Sisyphus happy."** The line before it says the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. The other three lines are all Sartre's, not Camus's. Memory hook: Camus's word for Sisyphus is "happy", not "purpose". ↑ Q3
4. **D.** The correct answer is **Jean-Paul Sartre**. He declined the 1964 prize, just as he had declined other honours. Albert Camus is the trap: he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957. ↑ Q4
5. **B.** The correct answer is **The Ethics of Ambiguity** (1947). It argues that I cannot affirm my own freedom without affirming the freedom of others. The Second Sex is also Beauvoir's, but it came in 1949. Being and Nothingness is Sartre's (1943), and The Rebel is Camus's. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** The correct answer is **condemned to be free**. Sartre said no outside rule makes our choices for us. We did not create ourselves, yet we are responsible for everything we do. The other options all hand the choice to something else: virtue, instinct or God. ↑ Q6
7. **B.** The correct answer is **bad faith**. It means pretending you have no real choice, to escape the weight of your freedom. Sartre's example is a café waiter who treats his role as a fixed identity. Groupthink, ethical fading and rationalization are terms from other studies of ethics and behaviour, not Sartre's. ↑ Q7
8. **D.** The correct answer is **the absurd**. Camus meant the clash between our wish for meaning and a silent universe. His answer was to live fully and with integrity anyway, not to despair. The categorical imperative is Kant's test, and the other two options come from different debates in moral philosophy. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** Sartre meant the opposite. We exist first, and only later define ourselves through our choices. ↑ 1
2. **False.** Sartre named Jaspers and Marcel as Christian existentialists. Kierkegaard was religious too. ↑ 2
3. **False.** Sartre gave no advice. He said, "You are free, therefore choose, that is to say, invent." ↑ 3
4. **True.** The waiter treats his role as a fixed identity. He hides from the fact that it is still his choice. ↑ 4
5. **False.** Camus denied being an existentialist. His friendship with Sartre got him the label. ↑ 5
6. **True.** The line before it says the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. ↑ 6

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