

Themes of Existentialism

from T. Z. Lavine, *From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest*

1. Existence precedes essence, has primacy over essence. Man is a conscious subject, rather than a thing to be predicted or manipulated; he exists as a conscious being, and not in accordance with any definition essence, generalization, or system. Existentialism says I am nothing else but my conscious existence.

2. Anxiety or anguish, a generalized uneasiness, a fear or dread which is not directed to any specific object. Anguish is the dread of the nothingness of human existence.

3. Absurdity. To exist as a human being is inexplicable, and wholly absurd. Each of us is simply here, thrown into this time and place—but why now? For no reason, without necessary connection, only contingently, and so my life is an absurd contingent fact. From Blaise Pascal:

When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of space of which I am ignorant, and which knows me not, I am frightened, and am astonished at being here rather than there, why now rather than then.

4. Nothingness or the void. If no essences define me, and if, then, as an existentialist, I reject all of the philosophies, sciences, political theories, and religions which fail to reflect my existence as conscious being and attempt to impose a specific essentialist structure upon me and my world, then there is nothing that structures my world. I am my own existence, but my existence is a nothingness.

5. Death. Nothingness in the form of death, which is my final nothingness, hangs over me like a sword of Damocles at each moment of my life. Death is my total nonexistence. Death is as absurd as birth—it is no ultimate, authentic moment of my life, it is nothing but the wiping out of my existence as conscious being. Death is only another witness to the absurdity of human existence.

6. Alienation or estrangement. Apart from my own conscious being, all else is otherness from which I am estranged. We are hemmed in by a world of things which are opaque to us and which we cannot understand. We are also estranged from human institutions — bureaucratized government on the federal, state, and local levels, national political parties, giant business corporations, national religious organizations—all of these appear to be vast, impersonal sources of power which a life of their own.