

# Structure and Freedom: Existentialism

## Learning Objectives

*At the end of this chapter, you should be able to*

- define the key terms listed in this chapter and provide examples that demonstrate you understand the meaning of each term;
- analyze the role that mechanical time plays in our understanding of our duties, and understand how the principles of Taylorism can be used in practice;
- describe the dangers of an overly mechanical and conformist system;
- understand the relationship between freedom and responsibility;
- identify the key figures in existentialism, and compare and contrast their arguments; and
- apply Sartre's notions of bad faith and angst to real-life examples.

## Guiding Questions & Reflection Statements

*Before reading this chapter, take a moment to think about your responses to the following questions.*

- Is it important to fit in with the world around you? Do you consider a person who is always on time to be a better person than someone who is often late?
- Is it possible that a system can be put in place that starts to run out of control? Should we continue to try to fit in with such a system?
- Is it a fair defence to say, "I was just following orders?" Are we responsible for our actions if someone or something else is in charge of us?
- Which comes first, what we are or what we do?
- How far do our responsibilities go? Are we trapped by history, or do we make history?

## Key Terms

Industrial revolution  
Efficiency  
Taylorism  
Mega machine  
Conformity  
Eugenics  
Purity  
Fascism  
Existentialism  
Faith  
Absurdity  
Existence precedes  
essence  
Angst  
Bad faith



## Introduction

At this point, we have discussed several ethical theories in some detail. You have likely noticed that most of these theories are over 100 years old, and some are thousands of years old. In part, this is because ethics (unlike physics, biology, or chemistry) is hard to prove or disprove. While a scientific theory can be tested, and the observations that we gather can then be compared to predictions made by the theory, in the world of morality ideas are trickier to confirm. This is why we can still intelligently discuss Aristotle's notions of the relationship between drunkenness and accountability, for example, while we have long ago abandoned his geocentric cosmology that places Earth at the centre of the universe. This does not mean that we can't see progress in philosophy, however. Each new theory can build on, or run contrary to, the theories that came before.

As the Western world entered the twentieth century, we had thousands of years of cumulative wisdom at our disposal. The Enlightenment had given us political philosophies that had helped cast off the chains of oppressive regimes, the scientific revolution had transformed our supernatural and superstitious outlook on the world into a reasonable and rational one, and the transformative powers created in the **Industrial Revolution** were allowing us to bend the Earth to our liking. Many of the terrible ideas of the past (slavery, sexism, social inequality) were starting to lose ground in the face of a new outlook.

However, despite seeing some progress in vital areas throughout the last century, we also saw new difficulties, as it provided an extreme challenge to some of our most established and cherished ethical theories. The twentieth century was a time of great change, socially, economically, politically, and spiritually. In particular, there were two massive social forces that dominated those 100 years that required us to re-examine the ways we looked at morality—large-scale violent conflicts, and technological advancement. Each force is so much larger than the individual, it sometimes became difficult to even locate the individual human against the massive tides that swept through the century.

In particular, the modern, industrialized, mechanized world created new relationships between humans and the systems and structures that surrounded them. It is not surprising that, amid all of this change, some new ethical theories and ideas showed up on the philosophical scene. In this chapter, we will examine the way that the importance of individual human experience and choices has come in and out of favour as an important aspect of the human condition.

## The Tool-Using Human

One of the key attributes that separates the human from the other animals is our use of technology (although parrots, crows, apes, chimps and other animals have also been seen to make tools). One hundred thousand years ago, if you had been asked to place a bet on which species would eventually spread to every part of the Earth, you would probably not have put your money on a slow, weak, vulnerable ape with poor claws and short teeth. However, from the very beginning of our species, we have augmented our weak physical forms with what Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan referred to as our technological extensions. We don't have the claws of a bear, for example, but we extended



our claws with stone knives, spears, and bows and arrows. And we extended our soft and exposed skin with clothing.

However, these very early examples of technologies are simple tools rather than machines. The extension they provide increases only slightly the power of the user (a spear thrown by a strong human is much more effective than one thrown by a weaker one) and is highly influenced by the skill of the user. The tool responds to the abilities of the person wielding it. Other early tools, such as the plow, are still limited by the abilities of the mule, horse, or oxen to which they are hitched, while the windmill relies on the unpredictable nature of the weather to perform its work and the water mill needs to be placed next to a strong river.

It was only at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution (starting in the eighteenth century) that technology began to allow for the production of machines rather than simple tools. With the creation of the steam engine, instead of using the power created by tiring animal muscle, the predictable and powerful energy of wood and coal could be used to drive machines tirelessly, and with far less time spent in sleep or rest. This meant work could be done at a higher rate and for a longer duration. It also meant that previous ways of looking at time (which largely had to do with natural processes such as daylight and mealtimes) could be replaced by a new form of time whose heart beat to the same mechanical rhythm as the new machines. This new form was clock time. For a discussion of how important this idea is to our everyday lives, see Case Study 11.1.

### CASE STUDY 11.1

While I was writing this chapter, I took a break to take a train from Paris to London. As we sped through the tunnel under the English Channel, the train conductor came on the loudspeaker to apologize. Due to something outside of his control, we were going to be delayed. Instead of arriving in London at 1:24, we were going to arrive at 1:45. Why was the conductor apologizing? Why was 1:24 better than 1:45? For all he knew, if I emerged from the train at 1:45 I would find a winning lottery ticket lying on the ground, and if I emerged from the train at 1:24 a bird would excrete on me. But he apologized because he knew that everyone on the train had likely planned the rest of

their days with the assumption that, as their clocks indicated 1:24, they would be getting off the train.

Think about how much of your life is dictated by the time indicated by your clocks. How often do you check the time to figure out what you should be doing and where you should be? Have you ever asked someone if she was hungry, and had her first look to see what time it was? Even our hunger now has to obey the timetable.

Imagine a day in which you had no idea what time it was. How would this day be different? Would you be able to engage in all of your typical activities? How would you organize your day?

## Taylorism and the Sin of Wasting Time

As we have seen in earlier chapters, one of the main roles of ethics has always been to regulate our actions in order to be good people in our relationships with supernatural entities or communities, and our fellow human beings. However, with the increase in mechanization and industrialization came a new entity that required our ethical consideration:



time. In his 1934 book *Technics and Civilization*, American philosopher of technology and historian Lewis Mumford (1895–1990) argued that

The clock . . . is a piece of power-machinery whose “product” is seconds and minutes; by its essential nature it dissociated time from human events and helped create the belief in an independent world of mathematically measurable sequences . . .<sup>1</sup>

In other words, it is less important now that you, personally, are hungry and more important that, according to the shared time created by clocks it is now “lunchtime” and you must eat.

In order to fit into this new, ordered society, it became vital that people obeyed the mechanical time over their own personal perception of time. Think about how many clichés you have heard about the importance of time: “Time waits for no man. A stitch in time saves nine. Don’t waste time. You’re just killing time. Time flies. Time is money. Time has passed him by,” and so on. Each of these common phrases demonstrates the importance of treating time as if it were a precious commodity, and one that existed outside of your own subjective experience. If you have ever worked in a fast-food kitchen, you have already experienced the pressure of regulating your actions and motions, as illustrated in Table 11.1.

The man who took this to the most impressive extreme was the nineteenth-century industry analyst Frederick Taylor (1856–1915), who saw sin in every second not used toward productive economic activity. For example, here is an extract from his 1909 book *The Principles of Scientific Management*:

We found that this gang were loading on the average about 12½ long tons per man per day. We were surprised to find, after studying the matter, that a first-class pig-iron handler ought to handle between 47 and 48 long tons per day, instead of 12½ tons. This task seemed to us so very large that we were obliged to go over our work several times before we were absolutely sure that we were right.

Once we were sure, however, that 47 tons was a proper day’s work for a first-class pig-iron handler, the task which faced us as managers under the modern scientific plan was clearly before us. It was our duty to see that the 80,000 tons of pig iron was loaded on to the cars at the rate of 47 tons per man per day, in place of 12½ tons, at which rate the work was then being done. . . .<sup>2</sup>

**Table 11.1** Time Required to Prepare a Burger

Task	Time Required
Taking cooked burger from grill, placing it on open bun	5 seconds
Applying ketchup	2 seconds
Applying mustard	2 seconds
Placing exactly 2 pickles	3 seconds
Putting top bun on burger	1 second



Later in the same chapter, Taylor describes the principles of scientific management as:

Science, not rule of thumb.

Harmony, not discord.

Cooperation, not individualism.

Maximum output, in place of restricted output.

The development of each man to his greatest efficiency and prosperity.

In a practical sense, Taylor's philosophy translated into an extraordinary amount of attention being paid to the smallest actions and behaviours of workers, attention that included the use of a stop watch that measured down to a fraction of a second. If there were even a few seconds of time spent by the worker that weren't productive, that wasted time needed to be eliminated in the name of **efficiency**. This didn't mean the worker was never allowed to take a break; it just meant that the breaks needed to be taken at the precise times and for the precise durations that would waste the least amount of time and allow the greatest productivity. In accordance with the maxim of "cooperation, not individualism" the agency of the individual worker had to be sacrificed for the good of the mechanized system as a whole. As Taylor wrote, "In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first . . . The first object of any good system must be that of developing first class men."<sup>3</sup> To Taylorism, a man was considered "first class" if he wasted no time on his own goals, and threw himself completely into the larger system around him.

To picture how this works, imagine two hamburger restaurants. The first one relies on a cook who has carefully learned her skill over years of practice. She knows exactly when to flip the burgers and how long to leave them on the grill. Some of the patties she makes are a little larger or a little smaller than average, so she adjusts her cooking time accordingly so they are still cooked for the appropriate length of time. Then, she garnishes each burger appropriately to the customers' taste and serves up the food. The second burger restaurant is guided by the principles of **Taylorism**. In this approach, rather than relying on a skilled cook, you build a system that does not require specific skills or knowledge, just a tendency to follow the rules and guidelines. Now, all of the patties are made by machines, so they all come out exactly the same. This means they all need to cook for the exact same length of time, so you universalize the process and build a machine that beeps when the worker needs to flip the burgers. Rather than having one person complete the burger from start to finish, you have one person who does nothing but flip, another who does nothing but put the cooked patties on a bun, and a third who puts the garnishes on—this eliminates the time wasted when workers move from one area to another. And rather than counting on an individual person's view on how much mustard to put on a burger, you can build a device that always squirts out the officially-decided-on amount. The end result? The burger in the first restaurant will be delicious, but not predictable. It will likely be more expensive, and hard to reproduce at any other locations. If the cook has a bad day, or is distracted or ill, the quality of the food will suffer. In addition, if you lose your cook at the first restaurant it will be difficult to train another, so you'll need to pay her a considerable amount to stay on. The workers at the second restaurant are simply interchangeable cogs of a greater machine, and can be fired and hired without any disruption to the system as a whole. With a mechanized system in place, the restaurant will be able to make a far greater quantity of burgers, and for a much lower price. Qualities such as independence,



original thought, creativity, and initiative are discouraged, as they will only interfere with the worker's interaction with the system.

For another visual example, check out the 1936 Charlie Chaplin film *Modern Times*, in which the main character (played by Chaplin) works on the assembly line in a factory that had been Taylorized to such an extent that the owner of the factory even experiments with an automatic feeding machine to reduce the time lost to worker lunches.

## Lewis Mumford Issues a Warning

To Lewis Mumford, it was not a coincidence that this form of "scientific management" emerged around the same time as the world was thrown into two of the worst conflicts in our history. The kind of system that Taylorism prescribes is described by Mumford as a "mega machine"—a massive system that becomes so efficient that the human element exists to serve the purposes of the system rather than the system existing to serve the humans in it, and it begins to carry on from its own momentum rather than from any external purpose.

This becomes more likely, according to Mumford, because, as we saw with the hamburger restaurant example, the qualities that allow a Taylorized system to work well and that are rewarded and encouraged by that system are obedience, instruction-following, conformity, and uniformity. None of these qualities contribute to original thought or critical analysis. Therefore, the people who do well within a Taylorized system are precisely those people who are unlikely to criticize the system.

Mumford's views were heavily influenced by the massive war that broke out in 1914, when he was nineteen. World War I (or the Great War or the War to End All Wars, as it was called at the time) was the first massive mechanized and industrialized conflict, and a war that even now historians struggle to make some sort of sense out of. It was, to put it bluntly, a stupid war fought for stupid reasons stupidly. To Mumford, the war became a mega machine, fuelled by the blood of soldiers.

Mumford was not the only philosopher to compare the war to a machine, and to criticize the ethics of industrialism and efficiency. In his 1915 short essay "The Meaning of the War," French philosopher Henri Bergson compares the war to a familiar story:

... day by day the machine grew in complexity and power. But in the process it yielded automatically a result very different from that which its constructors had foreseen. It is the story of the witch who, by a magical incantation, had won the consent of her broomstick to go to the river and fill her buckets; having no formula ready to check the work, she watched her cave fill with water until she drowned.<sup>4</sup>

War has always been brutal, and unit cohesiveness has always been an important part of military actions, going back as far as the ancient Romans and Greeks with their defensive shield and spear strategies. However, there had never been a mobilization as massive as World War I, and mechanized technology had never played so large a role. Traditional forms of combat (such as forward marches and cavalry charges) had been made obsolete by defensive trench warfare, and individual characteristics such as bravery and marksmanship were less important in the face of massed machine-gun fire. Rather than strategy, the battles were fought on the basis of simply killing as many of the other side's soldiers as efficiently and cost-effectively as possible, whether through mass



artillery bombardment and machine-gun fire, or simply by sending wave after wave of bayonet-wielding soldiers at the enemy lines. To Mumford, this new mechanized warfare was the natural and horrifying end to a moral system that valued efficiency and mass production over all else:

For war is the supreme drama of a completely mechanized society. . . . The difference between the Athenians with their swords and shields fighting on the fields of Marathon, and the soldiers who faced each other with tanks, guns, flame-throwers, poison gases, and hand-grenades on the Western Front, is the difference between the ritual of the dance and the routine of the slaughter house.<sup>5</sup>

The war ground on until 1918, by which time almost 40 million humans had been efficiently and mechanically killed on the battlefields of rational Europe. For a decade or so after the war, there was a backlash against the mechanical perspective. In physics, quantum theory and relativity were tearing down the idea of an ordered universe that operated like a clock and proposing in its place a universe of chance and indeterminacy. In visual art, cubism, surrealism, and Dadaism were challenging traditional notions of artistic worth and perspective. Musically, the free-form improvisation of jazz was growing in popularity in cities ranging from New Orleans to Berlin. However, the idea that the human should be obedient to the larger system in the name of efficiency was about to make a considerable, and horrifying, mark on the twentieth century.

## Purity and Cleansing

Around the same time that there was an industrial movement against wasting time in factories, there was a social movement to try to reduce “inefficiencies” in the human population. Driven by a misunderstood conception of Darwinism, and by the history of colonialism and the false evidence provided by “scientific” racism, the poisonous and biologically incorrect notion spread that there were different human races, and that some of these races were morally preferable to others.

In an attempt to make the human race as “pure” as possible, many suggestions were made concerning how to keep the “races” from mixing. In the United States, for example, there were laws passed making “miscegenation” (or marrying someone from a different “race”) illegal in all but nine of the states. In Canada, the Indian Act of 1876 ruled that an Indigenous woman who married a non-Indigenous man would lose her status as an Indigenous person. The act also allowed the creation of residential schools, in which Indigenous children were taken from their homes to be re-educated. In addition, racist and violent organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan had chapters in both the United States and Canada by the 1920s.

It wasn't just along racial lines that the cleansing of the human species needed to occur, according to early-twentieth-century eugenicists. The **eugenics** movement was an attempt to weed out “undesirable” aspects of the human race, through either forced sterilization methods to prevent certain people from reproducing or through the removal of such people from society. In two Canadian provinces (Alberta and British Columbia), people were sterilized against their will, and the eugenics movement in general was very popular in North America and Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. People were sterilized based on mental illnesses, developmental disabilities, and low IQ scores.



In Europe, these ideas had inspired a man who was hoping to reshape his country to fit in better with notions of conformity, obedience, and **purity**. The country was Germany, and the man was Adolf Hitler.

## Fascism and the Holocaust

**Fascism**, as a political idea, is all about eliminating any aspect of the society that is considered subversive or unproductive. A fascist government is a one-party dictatorship with close to absolute power. The population of a fascist country is kept in line with strict punishments and a constant stream of misinformation from the state-controlled media outlets. In a nutshell, fascism is an attempt to take a large human population (which tend towards diversity, complexity, and variety) and make them uniform, cohesive, and driven by the singular goal of serving only the state.

There are many reasons why Germany saw the rise of the fascist National Socialist, or Nazi, Party in the 1930s. After World War I, Germany, having lost the war, was responsible for paying for it. The resulting financial burden left Germany in severe economic difficulty, which resulted in inflation to such a great degree that the German currency (and the savings and buying power of the German people) was basically destroyed. Wealthy industrialists were concerned about the further spread of communism after the 1917 Communist Revolution in Russia. Fascism was on the rise in Italy and Spain (and had its proponents in the United States and Canada, as well).

"Scapegoating" refers to the practice of distracting a population's attention by supplying them with a person or group of people to blame for their problems and fears. And in the post-war climate of uncertainty and change in Germany, a political party offering a scapegoat was tempting to a considerable percentage of the population. Through the use of skilled propaganda, the Nazis were able to convince much of the German public that there was a disease that needed to be removed from the body of Germany, and that disease was comprised of racially and politically undesirable people. By the 1940s, there was a full, industrialized, mechanized, bureaucratized program in place to murder as many of those people deemed undesirable as possible, as efficiently as possible.

The Holocaust would eventually claim as many as 11 million lives, including those of Jewish people, communists, Roma, and people with developmental disabilities. There had been massacres before in human history (for example, the germ warfare used against Indigenous people in Canada, and the genocide of the Armenians in Turkey), but the Holocaust was an industrial project, involving thousands of guards, file clerks, train drivers, doctors, politicians, and other everyday people. To make the process as efficient as possible, the Nazis kept elaborate records of the genocide, and tattooed identification numbers on their prisoners in order to make record-keeping easier. It was, in short, a modern industrial massacre. Technology played an important role in both the computerized filing systems and in the new forms of poison gas that were used. One man in particular, whom we mentioned in Chapter 5, Lieutenant Colonel Adolf Eichmann, personified the combination of horror and organization that defined the Holocaust.

## Obedience and the Banality of Evil

As we have discussed, Adolf Eichmann was considered one of the chief architects of the Holocaust, tasked as he was with organizing the practical matters of relocating large amounts of people to the ghettos and then to the extermination camps. As such, his job



was largely one of applying a Taylorist approach to the problem of mass transportation, trying to move as many people as possible in the least amount of time using the fewest resources necessary.

While Eichmann was found guilty of his crimes and hanged, political philosopher Hannah Arendt argued that he did not appear to be an evil monster. Instead, he was an uninteresting bureaucrat, doing his job well in a larger system. His interests were not psychotic or evil; he simply wanted to follow authority and felt a tremendous sense of duty toward the leader of his country. According to Arendt, the unimaginable crimes Eichmann committed were born of a kind of intellectual laziness—he simply did not consider what the consequences or implications of his actions were, instead concentrating on the mundane day-to-day tasks he was performing:

He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing. . . . He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.<sup>6</sup>

While he was one of the highest-profile examples, Eichmann was by no means the only Nazi official or prison guard who adopted the defence that he was “just following orders.” As part of a larger system, how could they be expected to be anything else but obedient?

Eichmann’s defence inspired an American psychologist named Stanley Milgram (1933–1984) to perform an experiment to see what the limits of duty-based obedience were. He constructed a now-famous experiment in which volunteers were brought in under the false pretense that they were taking part of a test to see the effects of punishment on learning. They would be working in groups of two, with an observer watching and recording the results. One volunteer would be assigned the role of the “learner,” and the other the role of the “teacher.” The teacher would read off pairs of words that the learner then had to remember and repeat. The learner was placed in a room, out of the sight of the teacher, and hooked up to electrodes (see Figure 11.1). These electrodes would give the learner a shock if he or she answered incorrectly. The shock would be administered by the teacher, and each time the learner was incorrect, the intensity of the shock would increase.

However, this experiment was not what it seemed. The only person being tested was actually the teacher. The “learner” was an actor, not really hooked up to the shock machine and getting the answers wrong on purpose to see if the teacher would continue to turn the shock machine up to dangerous levels. The actor was also instructed to complain, beg, and finally scream as the “shock” levels were turned up higher and higher. The observer would stand by, and if the teacher tried to stop, would simply ask the teacher to continue for the good of the experiment. Of the 40 people initially tested in this way, 26 turned the shock dial all the way up.

Milgram published his findings in a 1974 book titled *Obedience to Authority*, in which he made the claim that

The social psychology of this century reveals a major lesson: often it is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will act.<sup>7</sup>

There were other experiments in this area over the next two decades, including the Stanford Prison Experiment (in which college students acting as guards and prisoners



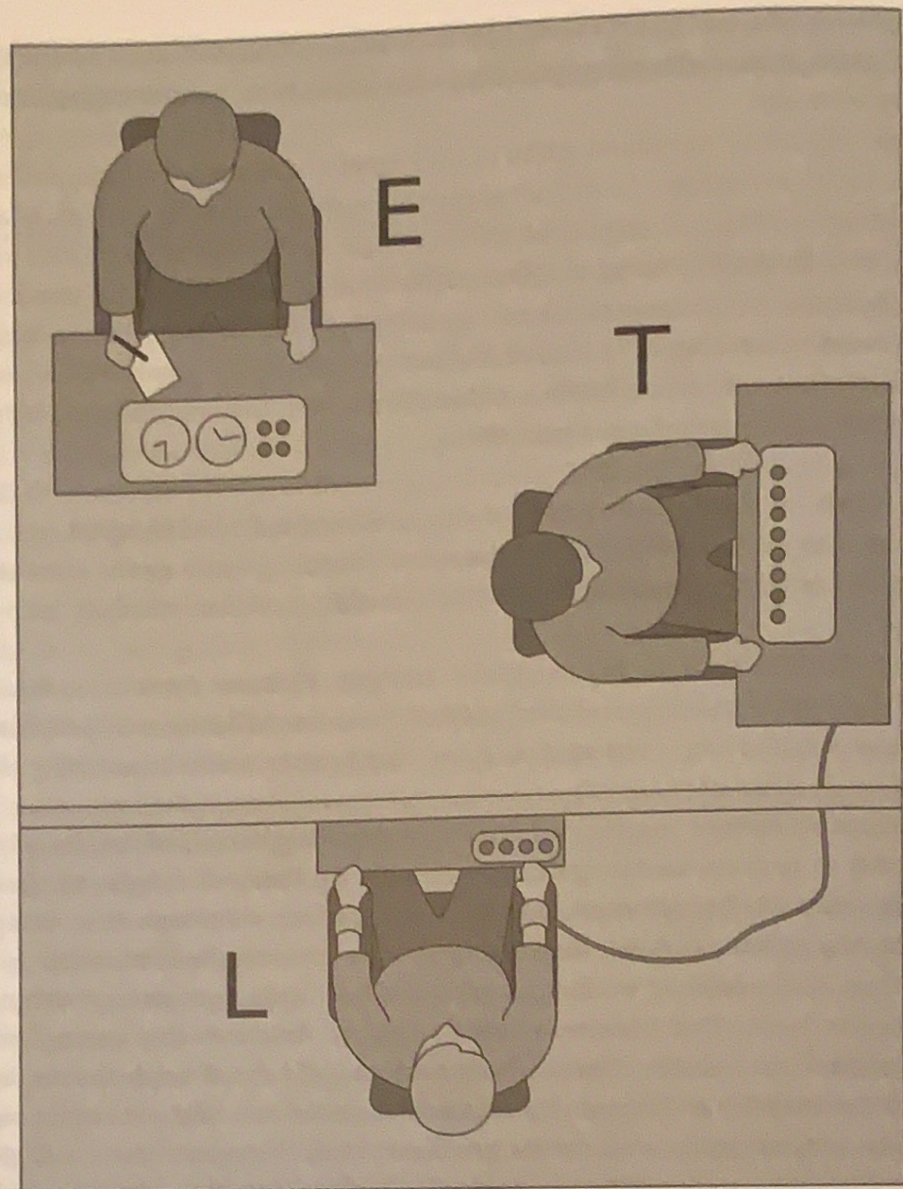


Figure 11.1 Milgram Experiment

in a fake prison started behaving sadistically and having nervous breakdowns after the experiment had been running for only a few days; see Chapter 1) and the Asch Experiment (in which subjects agreed with an observation that was obviously untrue, so they wouldn't stand out from the rest of the group). All of these experiments have something in common with the defence adopted by Eichmann and other Nazis—they all seem to make the argument that *structure* (the situation a person finds him- or herself in) has much more influence over actions than *agency* (the free will of the person in the situation). This has tremendous impact on our investigation into ethics. How can people be blamed for something that, ultimately, they have no control over? It appeared to many theorists that the systems a person is part of, be they technological, political, or economical, decide who that person ultimately is. See Case Study 11.2 to reflect on how you respond to social, systemic pressures.



## CASE STUDY 11.2

In all three of the social psychology experiments we have looked at in this section, a large percentage of the people being tested took an unethical or factually incorrect position, in order to conform with the needs of the situation. Certainly, we can find countless examples throughout history where the same thing happened to much larger groups of people. Indeed, this is the only way that events such as mass murder can take place.

Now, put yourself in the position of a subject in these three experiments. If you had been hired to take part in the Milgram shock experiment, what do you think you would have done? Would you have gone along until you “killed” the learner, or would you have resisted against the observer and ended the experiment when you first started hearing the cries for help?

What if you were a guard in the Stanford Prison Experiment? Would you have turned sadistic or stood by while other guards became sadistic toward the prisoners, or would you have stood up for the prisoners and let them go once it became clear that the experiment had gotten out of hand?

If you were in a room in which everyone was telling you something that your own eyes clearly saw was incorrect, would you go along with the rest, or would you stand against the group?

If you said you would go along in each case, how does that make you feel? And if you would fight back against the situation in each case, why do you think you chose a different reaction than the majority of the people who were tested in those experiments?

## The Beginnings of Existentialism

At the same time that changes in technology and politics seemed to be dismissing human agency, there was another philosophical theory that would put agency at centre stage again. This philosophy, called **existentialism**, has its roots in two main European thinkers of the nineteenth century—Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Possibly the most important thing to know about the Danish-born Kierkegaard (1813–1855) is that, as a young man, he fell madly, passionately in love with Regine Olsen. The feeling appeared to be mutual, as she accepted his marriage proposal. However, he then broke off the engagement (despite there being plenty of evidence in his writings that he was still madly in love with her).

Kierkegaard found himself in a terrible and contradictory situation. He loved Regine, but he had broken off his engagement with her. He wanted to get back together with her, but she was with another man. His love for her filled him with tremendous joy, and with terrible pain. He knew that he would get her back, even though there was no way he would be able to.

He finds a comparable situation in the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham loves his son Isaac, and loves God. God, however, tells Abraham to murder his son. This is an impossible situation, which on the surface appears to have no hope. Does he murder his son? Does he refuse God? How can he murder someone he loves? How can God tell him to do such a thing? Nothing about this situation makes any sense, and it could lead a person to deep despair.

For Kierkegaard, the answer in both situations is not logical reasoning or evidence. It is **faith**. However, it is not the rational mathematical faith of Blaise Pascal, who argued in the famous “Pascal’s Wager” that you were better off believing in God, because if you



were correct you would win eternity, and if you were incorrect you would lose nothing. Instead, Kierkegaard's faith is a leap, and a choice. The reason that Kierkegaard considers Abraham such a heroic figure is that Abraham was willing to commit himself completely to the idea of God, and to do something that seemed rationally **absurd**. Of course, in the Biblical story, Abraham's faith is rewarded, and at the last moment an angel is sent to stop Abraham from killing Isaac. In Kierkegaard's life, however, he never won back Regine.

For a modern example, imagine you are a fan of a hockey team that never has a chance of winning (if you are a fan of a certain Toronto hockey team, you will not have to imagine very hard). Why do you continue to cheer for them? Do you have rational evidence that they will win? If anything, you have plenty of evidence to the contrary. Will you personally benefit, even if they do win? You are separated from them, and don't have direct access to the players. However, despite the absurdity of cheering for your team, you do so. It transcends logic and reason. It is a choice.

And in the case of God, or a lost love, it is not an easy choice. It is a choice that will cause despair, loneliness, fear, and uncertainty. You could become ostracized, or even punished for violating the rules of your society. But to Kierkegaard, if you want to truly live, it is the path to take. As he wrote in his 1844 essay *The Concept of Anxiety*, "Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom."

Kierkegaard saw this vitality and aliveness as missing from the organized religion of his day, in which he saw the despair, choice, freedom, and faith that he thought were so important to human existence replaced by systematic rituals and comforting phrases. People might consider themselves to be good Christians if they went to church, sat quietly in the pew every week, and then went home again, but Kierkegaard felt that if one were actually to believe in God, it would, and should, consume one's entire being and every waking moment. The good life wasn't the life spent quietly conforming to the systems of one's society; the good life was one of choice, freedom, and courage of one's convictions.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) was born in Germany, and it is uncertain if he ever read Kierkegaard (whose works were not translated into German at the time). However, Nietzsche would likely have agreed with many of Kierkegaard's ideas, even if the direction in which Nietzsche took those ideas was radically different.

Like the Danish thinker, Nietzsche was reacting to a society that, in his opinion, had become dull and lifeless. But whereas Kierkegaard found salvation in the choice of faith in the face of absurdity, Nietzsche faced down a world without God in it, and confronted the implications of that position.

In the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* by the nineteenth-century Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the character of Ivan Karamazov claims that "Without God . . . everything is permitted." In other words, without an all-powerful being in charge of setting the moral laws of the universe, with the ability to punish or reward those who either break or follow those laws, how can there be any conception of right and wrong?

Many people have considered this possibility, and decided that there must therefore be a god, as the idea that everything is permitted is too alarming. Nietzsche, on the other hand, looked at things from the opposite perspective. What if God was dead? What if, rather than God creating man, man had created God in order to explain the existence and order of the universe, and then, as our increasing understanding of the universe made the idea of God unnecessary, we had killed him? What would the implications be for human beings?



Many people found this concept to be very distasteful, of course. If God were dead, how could there be any meaning to the universe? How could anything we do even matter? So, to try to understand why Nietzsche could look at the absence of God as a liberating idea, let's look at a non-religious example. You are in school right now, and so probably have some student loans to pay back. By the time you graduate, you will likely have some reasonably serious student loan debt. In addition, you may also have a considerable amount of credit card debt. You will not be able to pay that debt back right away, and so you will likely spend years and years making minimum payments to the banking companies (money that, let's face it, you would probably much rather spend on something else).

But what would happen if you woke up one day to the news that the banking computers had all been erased? How would you greet this news? Would you think, "Oh no, this is terrible. I should still probably keep sending them my minimum payments every month"? Or would you think, "Hooray! Now all the stuff I bought with my credit card is really mine, and the money I would have given to the banks every month I can spend any way I want"? Your reaction would likely be the second one.

Now, switch the banks for God. Rather than lending us a few thousand dollars, God would have lent us all of the universe and existence. How could we ever repay that? Of course we could not, so instead we would make minimum payments, which in Christianity (the religion Nietzsche was most familiar with) would involve going to church on Sundays, paying the church part of your income as a tithe, worrying about sin and trying not to commit any. But if God is dead (as Nietzsche writes in his story "The Madman"), then this universe is not His, but ours. It is no longer necessary to obey Christian morality, or worry about "sin." Instead, we must confront the alarming but liberating fact that our existence and our morality are now our responsibilities.

While Kierkegaard was a strong believer in God, and Nietzsche was a strong unbeliever, their views shared certain characteristics. Both men placed responsibility at the feet of the individual. Both were reacting to a society that they felt had become too structured, too predictable, and too mediocre. And both thought that there was a price to pay for being courageous enough to confront the reality of the human condition, but that this price was well worth paying.

## Existentialism: Existence Precedes Essence

The philosophical term *existentialism* was first coined by the Paris-born philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980). While Kierkegaard was reacting to the overly systematic religion of his day, and Nietzsche was reacting to the mediocrity and timidity of his, Sartre found himself up against a far more terrifying and dangerous structure—the Nazi occupation of France during World War II.

Now that we've come across the originator of the term *existentialism*, it is an excellent time to explain what, exactly, it means. Basically, it refers to the idea that **existence precedes essence**, which is a short but very complicated sentence. In order to understand the implications of this statement, let's first look at the opposite idea: **essence precedes existence**.

When the first toaster was built, it was because someone had the idea of a machine that would lightly burn bread in order to make it warmer and tastier. The actual device was then built so it would accomplish that task. Before the toaster existed, its essence (or plan, or blueprint, or nature) was already present in the mind of the inventor. Obviously,



it would be weird if we looked at the toaster any other way—for example, if someone built the machine, and only afterwards thought, “Hey, you could put pieces of bread in this and toast them.”

So, when Sartre claims that existence precedes essence, he is saying that humans are not like toasters. As he writes in his 1945 book *Existentialism and Humanism*,

What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes himself. There is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it.<sup>8</sup>

What does this mean? It means that Sartre, like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche before him, is making the argument that the key aspect of the human condition is one of freedom. And for Sartre, this freedom entails responsibility.

In the case of existentialism, this responsibility is that of creating your own essence. To understand what this means, let’s look at one example from two different perspectives. The first is from a person who does not believe that existence precedes essence; she believes that essence precedes existence. That person is walking past a house on fire, and she hears a person calling for help from inside. This person thinks to herself, “My essence is that I am a coward. As a coward, I can’t run into that house and save that person. Therefore, I’m not going to go inside.” The second person believes in existentialism, and therefore thinks that his existence precedes his essence. He might also not go in, but he thinks a different sentence: “I am choosing not to go into that burning house, thereby *making* myself a coward today.” From the existential perspective, each person could make the choice to go into the house. They are not cowards (or heroes) until *after* they make the choice. If they choose a heroic action, they make themselves heroic. If they choose a cowardly action, they make themselves cowardly.

For clarity, here are the two sentences again:

1. (non-existential sentence) I **am** this sort of person, so I cannot **do** this action.
2. (existential sentence) I choose not to **do** this action, so I have **made myself** this sort of person right now.

Is it possible to do away with freedom entirely? The thought experiment in Case Study 11.3 will help you consider this question.

## CASE STUDY 11.3

Imagine you are not a fan of freedom and the responsibility that comes from making choices. So, instead of being free, you decide to let fate decide your actions for you. Taking a six-sided die, you come up with six different actions and decide that whatever the die

lands on, that’s what you will do. Let’s say the six choices are:

1. Eat a sandwich
2. Go to the movies



3. Prepare for class
4. Take a nap
5. Murder someone
6. Go for a jog

You roll the die, and it lands on five. Does this mean that you must now murder someone, and that it is no longer your responsibility? You would probably point out that you are still choosing to obey the dice

roll, so it is still your responsibility. What if there were a crowd of people watching you, and they would boo and hiss if you didn't obey the roll? You might point out that you are still choosing to obey the die, and that you could also choose to risk the wrath of the crowd instead. But what if there were a person with a loaded gun to your head who was going to shoot you if you didn't obey the dice roll? Are you still free to choose in this situation?

## Bad Faith and Angst

Imagine yourself standing by the railing at the top of Niagara Falls (or, if you have never been to Niagara Falls, picture standing at the railing of a 20-storey-high balcony). What do you think as you stand there, looking over the precipice? If you are like many people, you have thought to yourself, "You know, I could jump over this railing . . ." How did it feel to think that? Did you feel a little weak in the knees, and maybe you gripped the railing a little tighter, or even took a few steps back? This is because you have just experienced existential **angst**, which can be described as a sudden realization of your own agency and freedom.

This may seem strange at first, that freedom causes such discomfort. But think back to an angst-filled part of your life, for example, your first unrequited crush on another person. Think about the agony you went through thinking about that person. The worst part of the agony wasn't that you *couldn't* tell the person how you felt toward him or her. The agony was caused by the fact that you *could* tell the person, but didn't.

One of the main ways we try to escape the angst of the awareness of our freedom and choices is through what Sartre referred to as **bad faith**. This occurs when we lie to ourselves and deny that our existence is what creates our essence. For example, imagine two people sitting together on a couch. The first person says to the second person that she is sad that the two of them can't fool around because he is married.

This is an example of bad faith. Not wanting to confront the truth, which is that the two consenting people *can* fool around, the first person claims that fooling around is impossible, as the second person's essence (being married) prevents the possibility of fooling around. A more honest thing to say would be, "We want to fool around together. And, as free humans, we can choose to fool around. However, if we do so, you will either have to lie to your wife afterwards, or tell her the truth in the hope that she will be okay with what we've done. Either way, your life, and my life, and your wife's life will all likely be much different afterwards."

This is part of the reason we tend so frequently to hide within bad faith—it's easier and quicker than facing the truth of the situation, and the truth about ourselves. But the main reason we hide in bad faith is that it removes the angst, as it gives us the illusion we are no longer forced to make the decision for ourselves. As Sartre writes in *Existentialism and Humanism*,



If you are born cowards, you can be quite content, you can do nothing about it and you will be cowards all your lives whatever you do; and if you are born heroes you can again be content; you will be heroes all your lives, eating and drinking heroically. Whereas the existentialist says that the coward makes himself cowardly, the hero makes himself heroic; and there is always the possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero.<sup>9</sup>

The example in Case Study 11.4 deals with the concept of bad faith in a context that should be very familiar to you.

## CASE STUDY 11.4

Imagine this situation: You are sitting in a lecture at your school. You are bored, and are looking forward to the class being over. Perhaps you are also hungry, and looking forward to going down to the cafeteria for lunch as soon as the class is over.

In part because of your hunger, and in part because you are not as interested in the subject matter as you should be, you find that you are taking in very little of what the prof is saying.

You look up at the clock (as you have been doing fairly frequently for the last hour or so). There is another 45 minutes left in the lecture. You fidget in your seat a little, but you know you can't leave before the class is over.

Then you notice that the professor has stopped speaking, mid-sentence. Instead, she is staring out into the crowd of students. A few seconds tick by. There are now 44 minutes left before class is over.

You turn to your friend sitting beside you, and nudge her with your elbow. "We can't leave!" she says. "Class isn't over yet!"

Is your friend in bad faith for thinking this? Are you free to leave? Would you feel better about leaving if other students did it first? If so, what does that say about your decision-making process?

Why are you still sitting in your seat?

## Existential Ethics

At this point, we still haven't established what, exactly, existentialism suggests we do. The advantage of most other ethical theories is that they can be used to figure out an action that is, according to that particular system, the most moral course of action. However, existentialism denies the possibility of finding an objective, external source for our ethical decision making. Many existentialists are atheists, and while some existentialists (such as Kierkegaard) are deeply religious, they believe that there is an infinite divide separating us from God. You can pray, but you should not expect any divine guidance.

Not only that, but Sartre points out that other ethical theories are deeply flawed. For example, after Sartre spent his time in a German prisoner-of-war camp at the beginning of World War II, he (along with friends and fellow existentialists Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus) chose to help the French Resistance fight back against the Nazi occupation. In one example included in *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre tells the story of a student of his. The student's brother had been killed by the Germans during the invasion of France, and he wanted to avenge his brother's death by joining up with the



Free French Forces to fight back against the German army. However, his mother (already despairing over the loss of one son) would not be able to bear the loss of her second son, and she needed help surviving the German occupation of her country.

What would a utilitarian suggest? Staying with his mother would certainly help her, and cause her happiness. However, the German occupation of the country would cause untold misery. As one man, he could have only the slightest effect on the occupation if he joined the Free Forces, and could easily be killed. Should he directly cause one person to benefit, or work to try to benefit millions in a less direct fashion?

What would Kant suggest he do in this situation? According to Kantian ethics, we should never use anyone as a means. If he stayed with his mother, he would be treating her as an end, but treating all the other people fighting against the occupation as a means. If he leaves, he is treating his mother as a means and the greater goal of French liberation as an end. It seems as though there is no way out of the situation.

Sartre's existential reply to his student was simple: "You are free, therefore choose—that is to say, invent." The young man was faced with two main options. He could create a world in which he tried to help his mother, or create a world in which he tried to fight the occupation. It was his choice, and his responsibility as to which of those two worlds he was going to try to bring about. But he couldn't look to any ethical system, or divine guidance. When it is time to choose and act, we are alone. So the student could only choose, and act. This does not mean that we will succeed—there are too many possibilities that are completely out of our control, and any of these events can easily prevent us from reaching our goals. Knowledge of this truth can lead to despair. We should therefore, according to Sartre, "act without hope." But it is immoral to not act, or to hide in bad faith and tell yourself you are incapable of taking action.

Many people accused existentialism of being pessimistic (and the use of terms such as *despair* and *angst* probably didn't help), but there is a tremendous optimism to existentialism. If there is no human nature, that means that each of us is free to make ourselves through our actions. Talk is cheap. If a person claims to value the truth, but incessantly lies, then that person has indicated he or she actually values lying. If a person preaches poverty and chastity, but lives an extravagant and promiscuous lifestyle, that person has demonstrated that his or her values lie with extravagance and promiscuity. But regardless, you can never take a measure of a person until that person has died and can no longer take action. As long as there is life, there is the possibility of changing yourself, or of inventing yourself again. In short, as Sartre claims, "you are nothing else but what you live."

From the existential point of view, you are responsible for your actions, and your actions dictate who you are. Therefore, you are responsible for who you are.

## The Greater Existential Responsibility

For the existentialists, there is another responsibility, and an even larger and more serious one than your responsibility for yourself.

We have already seen that the existentialists believed that an individual person is nothing but the sum of his or her actions. This is also true of the human race in its entirety. There is no "human nature" as such. Whether humans turn out to be vicious, or kind, or foolish, or wise depends entirely on what the population of humans choose. This means that when you choose an action, you are not simply inventing yourself, but as a representative of the human race, you are choosing for all humans.



Imagine that the human story comes to an end somehow—through a natural disaster, perhaps, or possibly through our own misadventures with destructive technologies. Only after the last human has died will someone (an alien being, presumably) be able to look at the grand total of all human choices and actions, and say “that is what the human being was.”

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we looked at the early to mid-twentieth century and how this time period saw many changes, most of them driven by technology or politics. As the century dawned, and industrialism demanded greater obedience to mechanical time, it seemed as though the individual human being was destined to exist as a pawn in a greater system. However, after the horrors of the two World Wars, individual choice and responsibility came back to the forefront in the guise of existentialism. Drawing on the earlier work of fiery individualists and enemies of systematic thought such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre and other philosophers put the choices and actions of the individual human front and centre in our understanding of ethics, using the concepts of freedom, angst, and bad faith. And while existentialism does not offer any specific answers to the complex problems and situations that we find ourselves in, it does place the responsibility for considering ethical questions back in our hands. It is less a system, and more an attitude—the attitude to have the courage to be responsible for creating ourselves and, by acting as its representatives, humanity as a whole.

## Discussion Questions

1. Taylor argued that all inefficiencies in time must be eliminated, even if it was just a matter of a few seconds. Is anything lost when efficiency is valued to this degree? Is it worth losing this for the sake of increased production and reduced cost? Explain why or why not.
2. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche had radically different attitudes toward God. In what ways were their beliefs similar? With which thinker do you most disagree, and why?
3. Do you consider Sartre’s philosophy to be pessimistic or optimistic regarding the human condition? Explain.

## Further Resources

*Philosophy Now*—Thomas Wartenberg: “Films and Existential Angst”  
[https://philosophynow.org/issues/27/Films\\_and\\_existential\\_angst](https://philosophynow.org/issues/27/Films_and_existential_angst)

*Sentient Developments*—George Dvorsky: “The Top 10 Existential Movies of All Time”  
<http://www.sentientdevelopments.com/2009/06/top-10-existential-movies-of-all-time.html>

What do the films *American Beauty*, *Fight Club*, *Being John Malkovich*, and *The Matrix* have in common? Aside from the fact that they are all great films, they also all explore