

# Handout 1: Introducing existentialism

At one time, existentialism was a very popular philosophy that influenced a large number of people. These days its influence is far weaker, but it still plays an important role in shaping both academic thinking and everyday life, albeit often indirectly. The main idea behind existentialism is that human beings are not fixed entities (or 'essences' to use the technical term). Rather, we are constantly moving, changing and growing. This is captured in the idea put forward by leading existentialist thinker Jean-Paul Sartre: 'existence precedes essence'. By this he meant that what we do (existence) comes before what we are (essence). An example of this would be someone behaving in a cowardly way (existence) then being regarded as a coward (essence), rather than someone having a cowardly essence (being a coward) that makes him or her behave in cowardly ways.

Superficially this may sound as though it is simply playing with words, but in reality it has far-reaching implications. It means, for example, that we cannot excuse our behaviour by saying something like: 'I can't help it; it's my nature'. Why we do something will be down to a range of complex factors in most cases, usually involving a number of choices, rather than simply one causal factor: 'my nature' (or 'essence'). A further important aspect of this is the recognition that reality is not given to us in a pre-formed way (as an essence) – we must construct our own sense of reality based on our life experiences and how we make sense of them. This is where spirituality becomes an important issue. In existentialist terms, spirituality is not a matter of finding a pre-existing meaning (finding the 'true' essence), but rather of creating a framework of meaning based on our experiences (including the social context in which our lives are carried out). In this way, the existential challenge we all face is to make our lives meaningful by creating our own authentic understandings rather than looking for a pre-given set of understandings.

This is a complex philosophy, and the key idea that there is no fixed meaning to life and no ultimate Truth has unfortunately given rise to a number of misunderstandings – chiefly the following:

1. The result must be despair and hopelessness.
2. There can be no morals and so 'anything goes' – it justifies immoral behaviour.
3. Religion is not possible without predefined truths.

Each of these is incorrect:

1. The freedom involved in being in a position to make sense of our lives can be the basis of hope, not despair.
2. Not having essentialist morals is not the same as having no morals.
3. Kierkegaard, another very well-known existentialist, argued that religion does not have to be a matter of following set rules unthinkingly, but rather of conducting ourselves in ways that involve rising to the challenge of behaving ethically without such guidance. Religion (in the sense of sharing a meaningful worldview), morals and hope are, in existentialist terms, challenges to rise to rather than givens.

## Handout 2: The 'Empty Raincoat'

The image of the 'empty raincoat' is drawn from the work of Handy (1995) who explores the impact of an open-air sculpture in Minneapolis by Judith Shea, called 'Without Words', on his thinking about meaning and purpose in the workplace. The sculpture involved a bronze raincoat standing upright, but empty, with no one inside it. Handy comments:

*'To me that empty raincoat is the symbol of our most pressing paradox. We were not destined to be empty raincoats, nameless numbers of a payroll... a cog in someone else's great machine. The challenge must be to prove that the paradox can be managed and that we, each one of us, can fill that empty raincoat.'* (p2)

(Cited in Moss, B., 2007, 'Towards a Spiritually Intelligent Workplace', *Illness, Crisis & Loss*, 15(3), pp261-71). This article provides useful background reading to this exercise.