Topic
Philosophy, Religion & Intellectual History

Subtopic
Modern Philosophy

Existentialism and the Authentic Life

Course Guidebook

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1

How to Think like an Existentialist

This course is designed to accomplish two objectives. One is to cast the intellectual net broad enough so that you get a good understanding of the development of ideas about existential authenticity. The other is to go deep into some of the nuances. There are many thinkers associated with existentialism who are worthy of attention but not covered here. The focus here is on the philosophers who deal most directly with existential authenticity as well as key people who help put authenticity in context. This lecture touches on the historical context of existentialism and key themes such as choice, freedom, anxiety, responsibility, bad faith, and authenticity. It also addresses some of the main misconceptions about existentialism.

The Rise of Existentialism

Existentialism wasn't used to describe a category of philosophy until the mid-20th century. But existential ways of thinking had already been in the pipeline before then, especially with Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Existentialism became especially popular in the 1940s thanks not only to Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre but also to Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, Frantz Fanon, and others.

Let's take a step back to the Age of Enlightenment. The 17th and 18th centuries were a period of intellectual flourishing. The focus of philosophy was on knowledge, evidence, reason, and objectivity. Scientists were the celebrities—think Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon, and René Descartes. Enlightenment philosophers were creating systems to explain what was going on in the world and using the scientific method to investigate phenomena.

Toward the end of the 18th century, people were beginning to see that science had limitations in explaining the human experience. The Romantics emphasized the importance of art, emotions, and spirituality. Hard, sensible science can't explain the exuberant joy or devastating melancholy of existence. The existential philosophers liked Romanticism's emphasis on subjective experience, but they were skeptical of spirituality—or at least organized religion.

So, what was it about the mid-20th century that was fertile ground for existential thinking? The death of God was a big factor. Nietzsche famously declared that "God is dead. … And we have killed him." He was referring to how the Enlightenment destroyed the religious value system that used to provide meaning for most people. Since the Enlightenment, there has been a general shift away from formal religion, mysticism, and spirituality, which has created a void in modern life.

World wars were also partly why existential ideas resonated in the 20th century. Beauvoir and Sartre were children when bombs fell on Paris during World War I. When World War II hit and the Nazis occupied Paris, existentialism provided a language to talk about the absurdity and horrors of human existence. Existential philosophies celebrate our subjective experiences, the joy and anxiety of freedom, the weight of our

actions, and the responsibility that choosing thrusts upon us and that we must embrace for our lives to be meaningful. And during wartime, people's choices carried huge weight because lives were literally at stake.

Key Themes of Existentialism

Existential thinkers were interested in concrete living. They didn't want to be armchair philosophers pondering abstract things detached from life. They were interested in the practical applications of philosophy. They were looking at the nuances of their subjective experiences to try to reveal intimate truths about the human condition.

They also tended to be unsystematic. Beauvoir's skepticism of systems is one of the reasons she resisted the label of philosopher as well as existentialist. Nowadays, though, she's widely considered to be a philosopher, but she said she had no interest in joining what she thought was an elitist tradition of theoretical system building. Beauvoir was more interested in how philosophical insights might be worthwhile and applicable to life.

Many of the existential philosophers wrote fiction and published diaries, journals, memoirs, and their personal letters—which often contained philosophical ideas and reflections. They were thinking about the connection between philosophy and everyday life.

◈ FREEDOM AND CHOICE

One of the most foundational ideas of existentialism is, in Sartre's words, "Existence precedes essence." This means that we exist first. We are "thrown" into existence. We don't choose to be born. We don't choose where or how we come into the world. Sure, there are some aspects about our being we can't change, like our genes or how tall we are. But the interesting part is figuring out what the facts of our lives are and where we can exercise freedom to create ourselves, that is, our essence.

Beauvoir suggested that there is no definitive, ready-made meaning for us. We have to create our own reasons for getting out of bed in the morning. And we can live fully only by engaging in the world. We're also

creative nothings, meaning that we're free to create ourselves through our choices. As we choose our lives, our existence becomes a reflection of who we are. In Sartre's words, "We are the sum of our actions." We are also our intentions.

For the existentialists, every action is a choice. Every lack of action is also a choice. Sometimes, choices might not be pleasant, but we always have them. But many of the existential philosophers realized that if you have choices but no power to act on them, then freedom of thought is not much use. There are situations that limit our freedom of choice, such as oppression, ignorance of your choices, or living in poverty.

When we talk about freedom, it's important to note that there are two dimensions that mattered for the existential thinkers: freedom from and freedom to. The first is about liberty: Are you free from sexual, racial, or other discrimination? Are you free from fixed social roles? The second is about power: Are you free to make choices that are meaningful to you without being actively punished for your decision? Are you free to choose the life you want?

One of the most important elements of existentialism is that freedom is meaningless without responsibility.

But without a sense of responsibility, unrestrained freedom in practice means hedonism or libertinism. Responsibility is about facing up to the fact that we have the ability to make meaningful choices about how our lives pan out and that we're also accountable for the consequences of those choices—or at least that we should be.

This brings us to death. Realizing that God is dead—and that we're all going to die, too—makes our choices urgently important. Even if you believe God is alive and well, we probably have only one of this particular timeline, and that makes every moment consequential. If we were immortal, we could keep making mistakes without any consequences. We would be relieved of the responsibility of exercising our freedom. This is why death is so important to existential thinkers—because it makes life meaningful and worth living.

◈ FACTICITY AND TRANSCENDENCE

Coming to terms with these existential dimensions of our lives can cause anxiety. Anxiety is so fundamental to the existential experience that it's one of the concepts they were most famous for.

Because anxiety is uncomfortable, we may be tempted to evade responsibility. When we deny that we have choices or that there are structures that sometimes block us from making free choices, we're in what the existentialists called *la mauvaise foi*, which is French for "bad faith" or "inauthenticity." How do we avoid bad faith? For that, we need to look at another two technical terms: *facticity* and *transcendence*.

Facticity refers to the unchosen aspects of our lives, such as our parents or the situations and bodies we're born with, and the outcomes of our previous choices. We act in the context of our facticity. We transcend by making active choices about how we want to live and by striving concretely toward self-chosen goals. Transcending is how we move beyond being to becoming.

Transcending our facticity moves us beyond static existence to dynamically shape our essence.

To live authentically, we say no to bad faith excuses. We choose intentions that are significant to us and project ourselves toward them in ways that are important to us. The existential task, Beauvoir writes, is "to fashion the world by giving it a meaning. This meaning is not given ahead of time, just as the existence of each [person] is not justified ahead of time either."

◈ AUTHENTICITY

Sometimes, people talk about authenticity as discovering our true self, and when we find it, we'll be happy. But for existential thinkers, there is no true self hidden inside us waiting to be discovered. You don't find your authentic self. You create it.

Authenticity is hard because people are always pushing and pulling us in different directions. Sartre famously wrote that hell is other people because they can act like drain holes sucking our being away from us.

But we can't avoid other people. And we need them to understand ourselves, because they reflect us in ways we can't grasp on our own. And other people challenge us—in good and bad ways. But there's always a risk of becoming too dependent on other people's opinions. Being defined too much by other people is dangerous because we can become passive objects of their creation. Existential authenticity is about becoming active agents forging our own lives.

Challenges and Misconceptions

One challenge for existentialism is that it isn't a formal school with rules and systems. Many of the existential philosophers had different ideas, and they sometimes changed their minds. Another challenge is that being an "existentialist" implies an end point, a fixed label, and something achievable. But in existentialism, we're always more than can ever be summed up in a label. Many philosophers rejected the label. Both Sartre and Beauvoir got sick of opposing the term *existentialist*, so they ended up just accepting it.

One misconception of existentialism is whether it was a mood of post–World War II France and is now best studied as a historical phase. The problem we face in the 21st century is that God is still dead—or at least God still isn't able to explain everything about the universe, and science can't either, so many people are still staring into an existential abyss of why we're here and what we should do about it. Some people find faith in religion or science, and that can bring meaning to their lives. But that doesn't work for everyone.

As Beauvoir wrote in her time, and which still pertains to ours, existentialism speaks to people who are "seeking with anguish to find [their] place in a world turned upside down."

Another misconception about existentialism is that it's overly individualistic. This is oversimplifying. For the existentialists, it's only meaningful to talk about yourself in relationship with others. When we make choices, we are not only owning ourselves but also setting an example for how we want the world to be. In his 1946 lecture *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre explains, "To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen."

Still another misconception is that existential philosophy doesn't deal with ethics. But many existential philosophers were deeply concerned with ethics. For Beauvoir, we're situated in webs of relationships. We need to take others into account by virtue of the fact that we coexist. And Kierkegaard, whom you'll meet in the next lecture, pointed to ethics as a critical step toward authentic living.

2

Søren Kierkegaard on Existential Crises

Jean-Paul Sartre described Søren Kierkegaard as an “anti-philosopher” because he radically changed the ends and aims of philosophy and believed that a philosopher is a person who “seeks a first beginning.” To explore Kierkegaard’s unique approach to philosophizing, this lecture and the next look at his book *Either/Or* and other writings. The focus of this lecture is on the aesthetic lifestyle, the first of three phases Kierkegaard suggests we all go through to create a meaningful life.

Kierkegaard and Regine

The iconoclastic Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard was once engaged to a young woman named Regine Olsen. When he broke it off, he broke Regine's heart. Kierkegaard was brought up in a strict Christian household and was torn between his passionate desire for her and his pious love for God. The choice, as he saw it at the time, was "either you throw yourself into the wildest kind of life—or else become absolutely religious." He became absolutely religious.

For the rest of his life, he would think about Regine and pray for her. We know this because his journals are filled with wistful descriptions of exchanging glances with Regine in church or walking past her in the street and almost speaking to her but never following through.

It's important to know this personal context because one of Kierkegaard's first books, *Either/Or*, published in 1843, was part of a ploy to explain his behavior to Regine and to get her to hate him. He wrote that one chapter, "The Seducer's Diary," "was written for [Regine's] sake, in order to clear her out of the relationship."

Kierkegaard thought Regine wouldn't understand if he tried to explain himself to her and that breaking up would be easier for her if she despised him. Perhaps Kierkegaard wanted to avoid having an honest conversation. Maybe he was worried that Regine would understand. We'll never know!

KIERKEGAARD

Kierkegaard's Approach to Philosophy

Let's first touch on the philosophical context in which Kierkegaard was writing. In Kierkegaard's time, Hegel was the celebrity philosopher. Kierkegaard was about 18 when Hegel died. He studied Hegel at university but was not a fan. He found Hegel's philosophy too abstract and detached from real life.

Kierkegaard was also annoyed with Danish religious culture. Everyone plodded along to church like sheep. They listened to clergy dishing out sermons about what God wanted them to do. Kierkegaard thought that what people really needed was a personal, passionate interest in their own lives. This meant developing a personal relationship with God.

Kierkegaard wrote under many pseudonyms and used irony and provocation because he thought these strategies made for more engaging reading. He used indirect communication to distance himself from his writing and to prompt us to question the meaning of his words.

The effect is that when we read Kierkegaard, instead of thinking the ideas are what he thought, we should be asking ourselves what the ideas mean for us. This is how we get to subjective truth—as opposed to so-called objective truths that Hegel and the clergy wanted people to believe.

Between what Kierkegaard wrote pseudonymously and the work he did sign his real name to, we can get an idea about what he might have been suggesting. But, of course, ultimately, it's for you to decide what you think he means and what you can learn from his work.

Kierkegaard puts forward suggestions to challenge us to take on the responsibility of interpreting the text's meaning for ourselves.

The Philosophy of *Either/Or*

Kierkegaard wrote *Either/Or* by assuming the role of a fake editor named Victor Eremita, which is Latin for "victorious hermit." Victor explains in the preface how he became obsessed with a secondhand desk in a shop and eventually purchased it.

One day, while trying to open a jammed drawer, he kicks the desk. Suddenly, a secret drawer pops out, and inside is a series of letters and essays. Victor guesses that they were written by two people: an aesthete (who he refers to as "A") and an ethicist and judge (who he refers to as "B" or Vilhelm). *Either/Or* is a collection of writings by these two representations of two fundamental attitudes to life: either the aesthetic mode or the ethical mode.

"The Seducer's Diary" appears in the aesthete's collection, and Victor says it was probably based on the aesthete's real experience. And it certainly is based on Kierkegaard's real experience with Regine. But he wrote in a journal that while he himself was melancholy, his alias Johannes, the author of "The Seducer's Diary," was debauched.

Johannes is a seducer obsessed with the intoxication of falling in love. He sees himself as an artist who creates interesting situations and seeks constantly to improve himself. He loves love but doesn't care about what comes after the falling-in-love phase. So, he's a serial monogamist, limiting his relationships to 6 months.

His latest target is a beautiful young woman named Cordelia, whom he stalks like some kind of prey. Cordelia falls hard for Johannes's charms. He proposes marriage. She says yes.

Johannes persuades Cordelia that she's above petty bourgeois customs like marriage and that it's more sophisticated to remain free from matrimonial ennui. Cordelia breaks off the engagement. Then, Johannes says, Cordelia gives herself totally to him. It's ambiguous what that means, but after she has given herself to him, Johannes claims his war has been won and he needs new nourishment. He never wants to see her again. Understandably, she is devastated and confused.

Kierkegaard provokes us to ask several questions: Is Johannes living authentically? What is the cost of his lifestyle? And how might he live a more meaningful life?

The Aesthetic Lifestyle

Kierkegaard suggests that there are three stages on the path to self-fulfillment: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. Don't think of them as specific steps. They're more like phases you can expect along an existential path of creating meaning in your life.

Johannes seems to be stuck in the lowest, aesthetic realm. Kierkegaard suggests that there are different phases within the aesthetic sphere. The first phase is dreaming, when you have a vague craving or desire for something but you're not quite sure what it is. The second phase is seeking. The third is desire. But there are different levels within this realm, too. Kierkegaard thought that other desires, such as love, work in a similar way.

Maybe you've heard of the story of Don Juan. The classic opera *Don Giovanni* by Mozart is based on the same story. Don Giovanni is obsessed with sex. His days are spent trying to get different women to sleep with him. He uses a little black journal to record his victories.

Kierkegaard suggests that Don Giovanni perfectly embodies the aesthetic realm. It's a realm of adolescence and possibilities. It's all about immediate gratification and freedom from commitment and responsibility. Kierkegaard also suggests that Don Giovanni is the ultimate aesthete because he's a hedonist, obsessed with self-indulgence and sexual pleasure, with no concern for others beyond having sex with them.

To get from the aesthetic to the ethical sphere, you need to make a definitive existential choice. The most fulfilling realm, the religious sphere, requires a leap to faith.

Like Johannes, Don Giovanni is an aesthete. But unlike Johannes, Don Giovanni doesn't control his sexual impulses or reflect. Don Giovanni is less sophisticated than Johannes. While Johannes loves the psychological pleasure of love, Don Giovanni loves the physical pleasure of love.

Dangers of an Aesthetic Lifestyle

Kierkegaard's not telling us not to do this. Living aesthetically can be exciting and passionate. But he brings our attention to some of the existential risks of living only in the aesthetic mode. Let's outline five major problems with this realm.

One, loving as Don Giovanni does is faithless because the sexual encounters are repetitive and indiscriminate. Compare Don Giovanni to Hercules, who allegedly slept with 50 women a night. Kierkegaard suggests that Hercules is different because he loves and appreciates each woman he sleeps with, and he commits his whole self to her and only her. Don Giovanni never commits his whole self; he's always thinking about his next conquest. His love is soulless because he desires all women.

How do we know that Hercules's love is faithful? Because he is anxious about whether his lovers will love him back. Don Giovanni doesn't care how his conquests feel about him. Johannes's love isn't faithful, either, because his relationships are also repetitive. He breaks up with women before he's had a chance to experience a full and rich relationship with them and leaves his and his lover's souls starving.

A second issue with the aesthetic lifestyle is that it's frivolous and fleeting. Ultimately, it's empty because there's nothing concrete in it. Don Giovanni is so busy seducing and deceiving women that he has no time to reflect on what would make his life more meaningful. He doesn't grow. He's a static being, an opportunist, responding to natural instincts.

Although Johannes does reflect on and control his instincts, his lifestyle is still tenuous. He forces himself to stay aloof and disconnected from others, lost in the labyrinths of his own manipulations and conniving brain.

A third issue is that an aesthetic lifestyle is unethical because it involves exploitation of others for the aesthete's own benefit. An aesthete uses others as means to an end, instead of ends in themselves.

A fourth issue is that the aesthete is constantly running from anxiety. When Johannes isn't in love, he's bored and deeply melancholic. Kierkegaard suggests that Johannes's seduction and breaking-up cycles are why he keeps falling into existential crises.

A fifth issue that aesthetes face is that they cut short their authentic path to self-fulfillment. Don Giovanni gets dragged to hell by demons. Johannes doesn't die, but he does end up alone and sad. The main danger of the aesthetic lifestyle is that it becomes pitifully lonely and dull. The aesthete's sorrow becomes like a castle. He uses his despair as a refuge from life. The message is that if we become too detached from others, too disengaged, we live as if we're dead.

Overcoming the Aesthetic Lifestyle

Johannes knows that the existential abyss of loneliness, melancholy, and despair is there, and he tries to ignore it. But Don Giovanni hovers over it, blissfully unaware. Many of us spend a lot of time hovering over the abyss. So, how do we overcome it? We need to find a purpose in life, something that will act as a solid bridge to a more meaningful life.

Kierkegaard suggests that the solution is to make an existential choice, which is about making commitments. Instead of passively floating through life, we make decisions to become more than our animal nature. That's how we choose our authentic selves and overcome the inevitable anxiety of an aesthetic lifestyle.

But making an existential choice is only the first step. A truly transformative change calls for a leap to faith, which you'll explore in the next lecture.

3

Kierkegaard's Leap to Faith

In this lecture, you'll continue your discovery of Kierkegaard's three stages on the path to self-fulfillment. He suggests that humans can leap from the aesthetic realm to the ethical realm by making existential choices. To reach the highest realm of existence, religious love, he suggests embracing faith. But ultimately, how you leap and where you leap to is for you to decide.

Leaping to the Ethical Realm

Kierkegaard suggests that aesthetic love is shallow because it depends on sensual whims. Erotic love is immediate, meaning that it exists impulsively and pre-reflectively. Frivolously chasing our passions is a decadent and unstable way to live.

The solution, Kierkegaard suggests, is to choose yourself and leap to a new lifestyle: the ethical realm. The most important thing in ethical living is making existential choices. An existential choice is a decision that's active, reflective, and often challenging and that takes into account social norms, duties, and morals. An ethical individual's future is filled with concrete actions and tangible goals, unlike that of the aesthetic individual, who exists in the realm of possibility, never really committing to anything.

In an edifying discourse, published under his real name, Kierkegaard writes, "Purity of heart is to will one thing." Passionately committing your life to one thing helps you overcome the instability and fragmentation of aesthetic living. When you make existential choices, you assert yourself ethically. You become a more complete, authentic individual.

Choosing Despair

A critical precondition for making an existential decision is choosing despair. This means choosing to repent for exploiting others when you were living in an aesthetic mode. Choosing despair means you stop acting like an adolescent beholden to your impulses. You make mature, grown-up decisions.

Sometimes, we do drift through life pre-reflectively. Some people drift in and out of short-term connections instead of making a definitive choice to commit to a long-term relationship. Many of us shrink from big decisions because we're afraid of commitment. We want to keep our options open in case we want to change our mind later.

Of course, you can make an active choice not to choose, but passively not choosing is problematic. According to Kierkegaard, a tentative attitude is a mistake because it means we’re living like a stone skimming across the water, just hovering enough but destined to plunge into the pool of melancholy sooner or later.

Kierkegaard suggests that if we don’t choose despair, if we ignore it, it will fester under the surface of our existence. And the longer we put it off, the worse it becomes, and the harder it is to deal with. Anxiety is always there, latently. So, we have to let our souls sink into despair. Only then can we live a truly happy and meaningful life.

Kierkegaard is possibly the most important philosopher of anxiety. The difference between fear and anxiety is that fear is a psychological response to something external to you, such as danger or pain. Anxiety, or dread, is an existential response to the dizzying possibility of your own choices. Hence Kierkegaard’s famous quote, “Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.” The challenge is learning how to do anxiety well.

The Commitment of Marriage

We learn to be anxious in the right way by making definitive, passionate commitments, such as getting married. Kierkegaard suggests that marriage is ethical because it means committing to one person instead of endless sexual conquests and romances as in the aesthetic mode of living. Of course, you can have one intimate relationship without getting married, but in the 1800s, marriage was the norm.

While an aesthete might complain that marriage kills passion, Kierkegaard suggests that romantic love is like a turbulent sea. It’s unpredictable and changeable. But marriage enhances love because it preserves love over time and gives lovers a stable platform to constantly rejuvenate their passion.

While an aesthete might also complain that the duty of marriage limits lovers’ freedom, Kierkegaard suggests that it actually frees individuals. The duty to follow road rules—such as stopping at red lights—gives

everyone freedom to travel safely. Your active choice to commit to safe driving thrusts you into an ethical realm. Likewise, your commitment to one relationship also thrusts you into the ethical realm. Making an existential choice shifts your actions from animalism to humanism, from a life where your impulses control you to a life where you control your impulses.

Leap to Faith

Despite it being a higher realm, Kierkegaard suggests that the ethical lifestyle is far from perfect. Married love can be just as insecure and die just as readily as passionate love. Marriage gives a false sense of security. People change. They grow apart. They separate and divorce. Marriage doesn't cure anxiety. Also, marriage doesn't guarantee an ethical lifestyle. Married people can be just as self-absorbed as aesthetes.

Kierkegaard suggests that we overcome all these problems by persisting in our existential quests toward fulfillment to an even higher realm; otherwise, we risk being stuck in despair again, just like in the aesthetic realm. The only way to really overcome anxiety is to leap to faith.

A leap is a defining passion, a bold resolution beyond the ethical realm that gives life meaning. Kierkegaard was reluctant to tell us explicitly to leap to faith. But he suggested that religious faith can keep us on track because God is always watching us. God is the only one who can really know us and judge our true character. So, according to Kierkegaard, when we're creating ourselves, we need to keep God in mind, to become as good a human as we can be, so that he will let us into heaven.

Kierkegaard thought that Christianity was a great option because it promises eternal happiness. He suggests we have to embrace the uncertainty and make an existential leap.

The biblical story of Abraham and Isaac was one of Kierkegaard's favorites. He talks about it in *Fear and Trembling*, which was published in 1843 under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, which is Latin for "John of the Silence."

Silentio explains that Abraham "was God's chosen one and heir to the promise that in his seed all the generations of the earth would be blessed." Then, when Abraham and his wife, Sarah, finally do have a cherished son, Isaac, God tells Abraham to sacrifice him. Abraham obediently sets out on his murderous path. God stops Abraham just in the nick of time.

A leap is more than the existential choice that you make to get from the aesthetic to the ethical realm. A leap calls for an act of will to transform your life by devoting yourself to an existence that will uplift and sustain your being.

Kierkegaard suggests that Abraham's actions are beyond the aesthetic and ethical. Abraham becomes what Kierkegaard calls a "knight of faith." Abraham faces the absurd, leaves "his worldly understanding behind," and makes a leap to faith. Abraham can't explain why he's willing to sacrifice his only son. Faith begins where reflection ends.

In a journal, Kierkegaard explains,

> The absurd is an expression of despair. … To the extent that the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd—faith transforms it. ... The passion of faith is the only thing that gets the better of the absurd.

So, faith is a kind of antidote to the absurd—and to despair. Abraham did not believe that God would make him sacrifice Isaac, but if God demanded it, he was willing to.

Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, published in 1846, explains that we have to live with what might seem uncertain to everyone else. An existential leap is an inward deepening in which you recognize that the world is uncertain and that what lies ahead in life is ambiguous.

For Kierkegaard, to leap to faith is to reach a level where we're so confidently authentic that we know how to act without being beholden to our feelings and our reasons. How do we get there? Love is the key.

Leap to Love

In *Works of Love*, published under his real name in 1847, Kierkegaard writes that the path to the highest realm of existence is to embrace the Christian commandment to "love your neighbor." That's the secret to securing peaceful and happy relationships. Loving your neighbor includes loving God, yourself, and everyone around you—including your lover or spouse.

The way to fulfil the commandment is to leap to become a loving person. Instead of committing to your lover or spouse, you commit to loving. According to Kierkegaard, choosing yourself as a loving person secures love eternally because if you follow the divine commandment, your love won't change.

Not only does an existential leap to love overcome the insecurity of passionate and married loving, but also your unwavering commitment to loving everyone equally means you'll be a highly developed human being. You'll have reached the pinnacle of an existentially authentic life.

And Kierkegaard seemed to believe that we could have all three kinds of love—aesthetic, ethical, and religious—all together. Passionate (or aesthetic) and married (or ethical) love can be included in our love for all. But by the time he figured it out, it was too late for him and Regine. He remained a bachelor.

Making a Secular Leap

Kierkegaard's faith united his existence. Faith united Abraham's existence. And Kierkegaard thought that faith could, in theory, unite other people's existence. But what if you're not religious?

Kierkegaard suggested leaping to faith was a good idea but was hesitant to explicitly tell readers that they should do the same. How we make an existential leap—and where we leap to—is for each of us to figure out on our own. Kierkegaard provokes us to ask ourselves questions like, What's my subjective truth? What's that one thing that can unite my existence and bring meaning to my life? If you're not sure, Kierkegaard suggests this in the final lines of *Either/Or*:

> Ask yourself and keep on asking until you find the answer, for one can recognize a thing many times and acknowledge it, one can want a thing many times and attempt it, yet only the deep inner movement, only the indescribable motions of the

> heart, only these convince you that what you have recognized "belongs unto you", that no power can take it from you; for only the truth that edifies is truth for you.

We might envisage an existential leap to love without religion as willing our lives in a direction that brings us meaning, is important, and is good to others, too. And certainly, other philosophers, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, built on Kierkegaard's philosophy to think about secular leaps. In the next lecture, you'll see how Friedrich Nietzsche suggested that we leap toward greatness.

Whether we leap to love with or without religion, we have to keep questioning ourselves and searching. We have to make existential leaps until we figure out what our truth is.

4

Friedrich Nietzsche on Authentic Greatness

Lou Salomé, Nietzsche's onetime friend and a philosopher in her own right, said that Nietzsche's work and suffering were inversely related: "The higher [Nietzsche] rose as a philosopher toward the full exaltation of life, the lower he fell into suffering as a human being, all in consequence of his own life's teachings." In this lecture and the next, you'll examine Nietzsche's ideas and writings in the context of his life and suffering.

A Love of Fate

Is there a formula for human greatness? The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche had one. He sets up a thought experiment in his 1882 book *The Gay Science*: What would you do if you were caught in the same life, living it over and over again in an infinite loop, exactly how it is now? Nietzsche called this idea eternal recurrence.

Your reaction to this thought is going to be hugely telling. Does it sound like the worst idea ever? Or do you love the idea? Would this knowledge crush you or transform you? And will this thought change the way you live your life? Nietzsche thought that questions such as these are the most important of all.

Nietzsche writes that to be great, you need to adore the idea of eternal recurrence. You need to affirm the thought and love life, no matter what it brings. You need to have a "love of fate"—often expressed with the Latin phrase *amor fati*.

The point of Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence is to encourage us to face all of life bravely—its joys, disappointments, misery, anguish, and ugliness. If you recoil in horror at doing that, then you're negating life because you're not living as vitally as you could be. If you love your life and welcome the idea, then you've found what Nietzsche calls "the triumphant Yes to life beyond death and change."

So, the formula for human greatness, according to Nietzsche, is "that you do not want anything to be different, not forwards, not backward, not for all eternity." Accept the world on its own terms, as it is. Take fate into your own hands. Get out there and do something. And think hard about how you're going to live the rest of your life from this moment forth. Live in a way that you would love to live those moments over and over again forever.

Nietzsche's Suffering

Loving fate is a bitter pill to swallow, especially if you're living a life filled with pain and suffering. Nietzsche would have empathized with you on this one. He suffered in exhausting pain for most of his life. He had constant agonizing headaches and experienced nausea, vomiting, seizures, and paralysis. He sometimes wished he were dead.

It probably didn't help that Nietzsche's brilliance wasn't recognized during his lifetime. In 1869, at the young age of 24, he became a professor of philology at Basel University. But Nietzsche couldn't stand the bureaucratic university life, and he left academia in 1879 to focus on his writing. Over his lifetime, Nietzsche's books sold fewer than 500 copies. This put him in a lot of financial difficulty. He survived on a university pension and with help from some rich friends.

Nietzsche doubted himself at times. He initially called *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, published in volumes between 1883 and 1885, a "folly." He wasn't sure whether it was any good. A few copies had been printed, and Nietzsche tried to recall them. The book became famous posthumously.

You might have heard the phrase "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger." That's one of Nietzsche's most famous sayings. And he believed it. True to his own philosophy, Nietzsche embraced his illness and loved his fate. He even asserted that being so sick unclogged his mind. He doesn't suggest that suffering is good. But for him, pain liberated his spirit. His suffering helped him to tune into what's important and encouraged him to think more profoundly.

The Meaning of "God Is Dead"

Another one of Nietzsche's most famous statements, you'll recall, is that "God is dead." He wrote it in *The Gay Science* and in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The protagonist, Zarathustra, says it, despairing and thinking through what to do about it.

"God is dead" is usually taken to mean that with the Enlightenment, reasoning and science became guiding forces in our lives. And with the popularity of atheism, faith and spirituality faded in importance in how people live their lives on a day-to-day basis.

In Nietzsche's view, the problem with this situation is that in the Western world, we have clung to the old Christian value structure. He was disgusted that society had forgotten the ancient Greek doctrine of power, greatness, and passion and replaced it with passive Christian values like meekness, obedience, and emotional repression. Now, our lives are dominated by outdated values, and we're not thinking about whether they're still relevant to our lives.

If religion is no longer how we decide what's right and wrong or good and evil, how should we live? Nietzsche's answer was that we have to create our own values. We have to reevaluate human greatness. Once we're aware of the formula for human greatness, which is amor fati, how do we actually go about it?

Nietzsche's Übermensch

Nietzsche imagined a heroic individual who accepts that God is dead, creates their own values and morality, loves fate, lives life to the fullest, embraces life on its own terms, and becomes who they are. Such a person is called an Übermensch, which literally means "overhuman" or "overperson" but is sometimes translated as "superman."

The subtitle of Nietzsche's autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, written in 1888 and published posthumously in 1908, is *How to Become What You Are*. The answer, Nietzsche says, is that you need to free yourself from your chains and then free yourself from your freedom. And we break our chains by willing.

Greatness is about freeing ourselves not just to be ourselves but to overcome ourselves—to become our greatest selves.

But the will is imprisoned, too. We suffocate the will by obsessing over the past. Willing provides the means to free ourselves from the internal chains that hold us back, such as fear, shame, self-doubt, and regret. Willing is also the key to freeing ourselves from our freedom.

There's always the threat of returning to our chains because they can be comforting. Nietzsche says that freedom is measured "by the resistance which has to be overcome, by the effort it costs to stay aloft." Free spirits constantly challenge themselves and tear themselves away from ties that bind.

The existentialists later called this movement transcendence. Transcendence, or overcoming, is about striving passionately and creatively to become more than you are, to live your life with urgency and vitality, even if it's uncomfortable.

Zarathustra's Wisdom

Nietzsche considered *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to be his greatest work and his greatest gift to humankind. It's a fictional story about a real person. Zarathustra, or Zoroaster, was an ancient Persian spiritual leader who probably lived sometime between the 2nd millennium and the 6th century BCE.

Nietzsche said he chose Zarathustra as his protagonist because "Zarathustra was the first to see in the struggle between good and evil the essential wheel in the working of things," and he was the greatest truth-teller. Nietzsche also thought Zarathustra was "the first psychologist of the good."

ZARATHUSTRA

In Nietzsche's telling, Zarathustra is a recluse who lives in the mountains. But he's tired of being so wise. And he's lonely, not unlike Nietzsche himself. So, Zarathustra descends from his hermitage to the nearby town to look for friends—particularly companions whom he can teach and who can teach him. He looks for people who are willing to be led astray. He doesn't want followers. He wants to teach people how to beat their own paths, to become what he calls "the creators, the harvesters, the celebrants."

He finds a crowd of people watching a tightrope walker. Zarathustra gets up on his soapbox and explains how to live as an Übermensch. Here, let's focus on several things Zarathustra shares.

One, know that what is great about human existence is that we are "a bridge and not an end." Nietzsche writes that we are like a tightrope stretched between an animal and an Übermensch. One interpretation of this is that our whole life is like the rope and that our present existence is like the walker. To be fully human, we must surpass ourselves; we must keep putting one foot in front of the other along the bridge toward the ideal of the Übermensch.

But like the tightrope walker, to live is also to be in danger. The rope of our life hovers over an abyss. It's hazardous to look backward or down at the abyss below us. It's important to focus on the future, to keep working our way forward.

Two, seek knowledge and truth, but don't forget to be passionate. Greatness involves being able to cultivate and harness our passions and to learn from them to become better people.

Three, adopt a lionlike spirit to create new values for yourself. Zarathustra advises not to be too focused on what your duty is. Break free from the crowd when you need to. Don't be held hostage by other people's demands.

Great people combine rationality with passion.

An Übermensch also fights to protect themselves when they need to. But an Übermensch loves themself and others voraciously. They're kind and generous. Their soul is deep and overflows so much that they can forget themselves.

None of Zarathustra's teachings are easy. He advises that "you must wish to consume yourself in your own flame: how could you wish to become new unless you had first become ashes!" All great things are painful, like the phoenix blazing in its own flames or like giving birth.

Zarathustra struggles to find people willing to engage with him. He eventually does find people who can hear his wisdom. Ultimately, they become his followers. But Zarathustra doesn't want followers. He wants people to soak up his wisdom and venture out to live their own lives on their own terms.

Zarathustra embodies the notion that the Übermensch is a receding goal. He fights his inner demons on the path toward greatness. He says that eternal recurrence is his "most abysmal thought." Zarathustra is great because he faces reality head on, amidst life's terrors and uncertainties, and sees reality lucidly.

Will to Power

We can all strive to be the Übermensch if we want to. Nietzsche suggests that human nature is driven by the "will to power." Some of us master our will to power better than others. Some harness it and direct it toward goodness, truth, and creativity. Others use it for evil. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes that using our power for kindness is much better than doing bad things.

One of the best ways to direct our will to power is toward overcoming ourselves. Zarathustra provokes us to construct our own life bridges or tightropes and our own goals, not to be obedient followers. This is why Nietzsche wrote that the Übermensch is a longing for a future destination.

So, back to the eternal recurrence thought experiment. What if you had to live your life over again and again in exactly the same way? What does the thought suggest to you about the way you've lived your life up until now? And looking to the future, what will you try to do better in this life? How might you challenge yourself to stretch your being toward the ideal of the Übermensch? In what ways might you take Zarathustra's teachings on board?

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Nietzsche on Creating Super-Relationships

For Nietzsche, the best relationships are those that challenge you, that encourage you to grow beyond yourself and become a better person. But building and maintaining these relationships can be a challenge in and of itself. In this lecture, you'll explore Nietzsche's views on friendship and marriage and his advice for making them successful.

Great Friendships

In his 1886 book *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche warned,

> He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you.

Nietzsche knew how easy it is to spiral in anguish when we think about life.

Let's say you share your anxieties with a friend. A great friend might reality-check your concerns, share alternate perspectives and opinions, and challenge your assumptions. And to be a great friend yourself, you might listen to your friend and try to understand them, even if you ultimately disagree. Sharing with great friends helps us put things in perspective: Either our anxieties don't seem so bad after all or, even if they are bad, good friends can help us feel better prepared to face the world. This is the type of friendship that Friedrich Nietzsche thought was great.

Nietzsche thought that the best types of friends can help pull each other out of the abyss. Really great friends help one another to become better people through what he refers to as "a shared higher thirst for an ideal above them" and "an arrow and a longing for the Übermensch." Recall that the Übermensch is a person who stretches to overcome themselves and become a better person.

But being a great friend isn't easy. Great friends have to be harsh sometimes to help each other out of the abyss. A friend might have to tell you that you're being self-indulgent and shallow or that, if you're not happy, you need to do something about it. Nietzsche says great friends "must be capable of being an enemy."

Nietzsche's Relationships

Nietzsche's views on friendship seem to form the basis of his thinking about what makes for great relationships more generally. Nietzsche wanted to marry. He fell in love with 23-year-old Mathilde Trampedach. She loved talking with him, and he loved talking with her.

After their second date, Nietzsche was so excited that he wrote Mathilde a letter in which he proposed marriage. Only one other person knew Nietzsche was going to propose: Hugo von Senger, Nietzsche's friend and Mathilde's piano teacher. Nietzsche asked Hugo to deliver his love letter to Mathilde. Not only did she turn Nietzsche down, but she also later married Hugo.

But Nietzsche stayed on the lookout. In 1882, his friend, the author Malwida von Meysenbug, set him up with Lou Salomé. Salomé was the beautiful and brilliant 20-year-old daughter of a Russian general. Nietzsche was quite taken with her and loved that he could discuss his ideas with her, and she seemed to understand him.

NIETZSCHE

According to Salomé, a few days later, Nietzsche proposed. She said no. He waited a while, then proposed again. And again, she said no. They tried being friends, but it didn't work out, and the relationship eventually ended.

There is also a theory that Nietzsche was homosexual, but this is pure speculation. In his era, homosexuality was illegal.

Nietzsche's Critique of Marriage

Nietzsche spoke exclusively about heterosexual coupling. Nevertheless, much of his critique and advice can apply to other relationship variations. Nietzsche suggested that marriage is a value that desperately needs revaluing.

The first issue Nietzsche had with love marriages is that romantic love is fleeting, which makes marriage unstable. He says that "sensuality often makes love grow too quickly, so that the root remains weak and is easy to pull out." Our biological excitement encourages us to act impulsively. But the feelings don't last. This is why, Nietzsche says, so many couples start out obsessed with each other and then one day realize they're bored.

All this makes love a weak and irrational foundation for a long-term commitment such as marriage. Zarathustra says, "And your marriage makes an end of many brief follies with one long stupidity."

A second issue Nietzsche had with marriage is that traditional gender roles hold people back from striving toward the Übermensch ideal. Nietzsche criticizes both men's and women's behavior.

Becoming an Übermensch means going out in the world to find challenges and striving to be a better person. But marriage invites spouses to coddle and infantilize each other. Nietzsche suggests that "perhaps our trees fail to grow as high on account of the ivy and the vines that cling to them," implying that great people fail to be as great as they could be because of the people around them holding them back, smothering them, and getting in the way. Men and women block each other from reaching for the ideal of the Übermensch.

Nietzsche thought it was ridiculous to base a rational decision such as a lifelong relationship on an irrational feeling like love.

Cutting those ties can be incredibly difficult and painful. Nietzsche challenges us to think of great people who were unmarried: "Heraclitus, Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Schopenhauer." And, of course, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were single, too. But there are also many great people who were married, such as Socrates.

Nietzsche suggests that a big advantage of any deep relationship is challenging each other. To him, a great relationship should make you uncomfortable. In *The Will to Power*, a selection of notes published posthumously by his sister, Elisabeth, Nietzsche writes that the happiness derived from quiet comfort is "a herd ideal." Real pleasure lies in dissatisfaction, opposition, and resistance. If we want to strive for the Übermensch ideal, Zarathustra urges us to be creative, and that means caring more about challenging than safeguarding ourselves, even if we risk failure.

Nietzsche's Advice for Marriage

Of course, you don't need to get married to have a challenging relationship, but Nietzsche saw value in the institution of marriage because he thought of it as more noble than romantic relationships. Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche thought that marriage raises love to a higher level.

So, let's say you do decide you want to marry and go for a noble relationship where you both strive to become Übermenschen. How might you go about it?

Nietzsche didn't create a set of instructions. And some of what he says is contradictory. But he provides ideas to provoke us to create relationships on our own terms rather than following unquestioningly along the same problematic path that people have taken for ages.

One problem that we need to tackle is that romantic feelings do fade. Nietzsche's advice is not to get carried away with lust. Strong-willed people moderate their passions—but love is a tough challenge for even those with the strongest wills.

One practical test Nietzsche suggested to keep the commitment of marriage in perspective is for lovers to imagine how the other will look in a few years. If you love them no matter what they look like, then that's a good omen for a strong relationship. In fact, Nietzsche suggested that relationships might be stronger when people have "a slight physical antipathy" toward each other. This helps people focus less on the superficial (physical) elements of attraction and more on intellectual attraction.

Another of Nietzsche's practical tests for marriage is to ask yourselves this: Are you going to enjoy talking with one another for the rest of your lives? Nietzsche says, "Everything else in marriage is transitory, but most of the time you are together will be devoted to conversation." So, if lovers can stimulate each other not only sexually but also intellectually, then that's another good sign of a strong potential match.

Nietzsche's next piece of advice is to make sure you only make promises you can keep. You can't promise that your love hormones will still be whizzing around your brain in 20 years, just like you can't promise someone you'll be friends forever.

But you can promise to continue the actions associated with love. You can promise to take care of one other when you're sick. You can promise you'll live together, eat dinner together, go on adventures together. You can promise to take care of children or pets together. You can promise to grow old together.

The implication is that if you do decide to make a lifelong commitment, be realistic in setting expectations so that you can live up to what you promise. It might not be romantic, but at least it's honest. And it's possible that carrying out the actions associated with love might generate feelings of love.

A good reason to get married, Nietzsche thought, is to raise children. He urges us to consider marrying someone who might be able to raise new generations of strong, well-educated children who themselves can reach toward the Übermensch ideal. And that's a great role for parents. Nietzsche knew his philosophy was risky, but he might have been horrified if he knew his words would later be twisted to support Nazi propaganda about creating a master race.

Another of Nietzsche's suggestions to create a strong relationship is to make sure to give each other space. Relationships are like an engraving. When you touch it too much, the intricacies of the original design fade. Distance is important in any relationship. Sometimes, we must take a break from other people to clear our heads and to see the truth of our situations.

And if we can get past the obstacles that tempt us to hold one another back, love has the potential to be particularly conducive to helping us strive toward the Übermensch ideal. Love is a type of relationship in which we care deeply about what the other person thinks and strive to be a better person for them and in the world.

Perhaps Nietzsche's most important advice is that all great relationships are founded on great friendship.

Ending Relationships

Even after all this advice, Nietzsche knew that some relationships are just bad. Zarathustra explains how a woman told him that she broke up her marriage, but only after the marriage broke her. Zarathustra also reflects that in bad relationships, spouses aren't the only ones who suffer; miserable people tend to project their misery onto everyone else around them. Some relationships become so toxic that it's not worth sticking at it for the sake of keeping a promise. Sometimes, you do have to break your vows, and it's better to walk away than to have a relationship full of misery.

It's understandable that people do change and grow apart, and sometimes that means we take different paths in life. And it's OK for relationships to end. Just because it doesn't last forever doesn't mean it wasn't worthwhile or authentic. We can still respect one another and respect the sanctity of the time we had together.

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Martin Heidegger on Authentic Being

Martin Heidegger was particularly taken with Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence. He liked how the idea brings people's attention to how they live each moment of their lives. But as you'll see in this lecture, while Nietzsche's focus was on becoming, Heidegger was more concerned with the meaning of being. And while Heidegger's work is long and difficult and his past is fraught, you need a thumbnail of his ideas because his work was so important to many other philosophers.

Tensions in Heidegger's Work

In the 1920s, Martin Heidegger was one of the most popular teachers at the University of Marburg. Feeling pressure to publish, as is common in academia, Heidegger rushed to publish what he had written so far of *Being and Time*, which would become his most famous work. By 1928, his teacher and friend Edmund Husserl was retiring, and Heidegger took over Husserl's role at the University of Freiburg.

By 1933, Heidegger became the rector of the university. A requirement of the role was to join the Nazi Party, which he did and took seriously. He was also required to dismiss Jewish faculty, including Husserl, who had kept a retired position. Allegedly, Heidegger attended Nazi book-burning events. His journals were filled with anti-Semitic messages, and he gave pro-Nazi and pro-Hitler speeches. But within a year, Heidegger became critical of the Third Reich, resigned as rector, was put under harsher surveillance until he was deemed "dispensable," and, in 1944, was assigned to trench digging until the war ended.

Some might argue that it's an ad hominem fallacy to criticize Heidegger's work on the basis that he was a Nazi or that his view of National Socialism was different to Hitler's. Others suggest that his nationalist views are so deeply ingrained in his philosophy that you can't untangle them.

There are many other tensions in Heidegger's work. For example, *Being and Time* is unfinished. Given the rush of publishing the first volume, he said that he couldn't publish the second volume without rewriting the first but saw the first part as still necessary. And his language is notoriously convoluted. He apparently wrote in obscure ways because he wanted to cut loose from traditional philosophical language and challenge readers.

The Phenomenological Method

Heidegger uses the phenomenological method, inspired by Edmund Husserl, who first outlined his method in a work called *Logical Investigations*. Husserl's view was that philosophy is a science that studies phenomena, that is, things that appear to us and the way we experience those things. Phenomenology is the kind of analysis where we describe and interpret the structures of what appears to us, through lived experience, to uncover truths and meanings.

Epochē is an ancient Greek term meaning "to withhold judgment." Husserl thought that bracketing off assumptions, beliefs, presuppositions, habits, heuristics, and other distractions helps us to better tune into "things themselves," how things really are. We can start to examine our assumptions and beliefs, too, so that we can be clear about what's true and what's false.

To start analyzing something phenomenologically, we might ask these kinds of questions: What thoughts am I having about this phenomenon? What images are popping into my brain? How am I feeling about it? How am I responding to it through action, interaction, and communication? All these ways that our consciousness engages with phenomena reveal the meaning and content of the experience, from our point of view.

Heidegger credited Husserl for familiarizing him with phenomenology. But whereas Husserl's phenomenology focuses on consciousness, Heidegger's phenomenology focuses on being. And Heidegger rejects Husserl's use of epoche, which is bracketing off assumptions and beliefs to tune into what's really going on. We are always steeped in the world. The matter and our judgment of the matter, matter. Instead of bracketing off things, which could warp our analysis, we should attend to our relationship with them. And attending to them would include asking questions about our judgments of them.

Types of Being

Heidegger's goal in *Being and Time* is to disclose the meaning of being. Being is tricky to translate, and translators disagree about how to best represent whether to capitalize it. The important thing to know is this: For Heidegger, there's an ontological difference between *Sein* and *Seiende*. *Sein* means "Being" in general, sometimes translated with a capital *B*, but not to be confused with essential Platonic forms, which also capitalize nouns. *Seiende* means "entity," traditionally translated as "being" with a small *b*. *Seienden* are particular human entities emerging in space and time and manifesting into their beingness and exploring being.

The kind of being (*Seiende*) that's central to Heidegger's analysis is *Dasein*. *Dasein* is usually translated as "being-there," as in, we are beings (*Sein*) who find ourselves there (*da*), in the world, existing. Part one of *Being and Time* is all about analyzing *Dasein*, that is, focusing on the being of the questioner. Part two was supposed to be about the question of being (*Seinsfrage*), but that's the part Heidegger never completed.

***Dasein* is a human who realizes they are there and who is asking questions about it.**

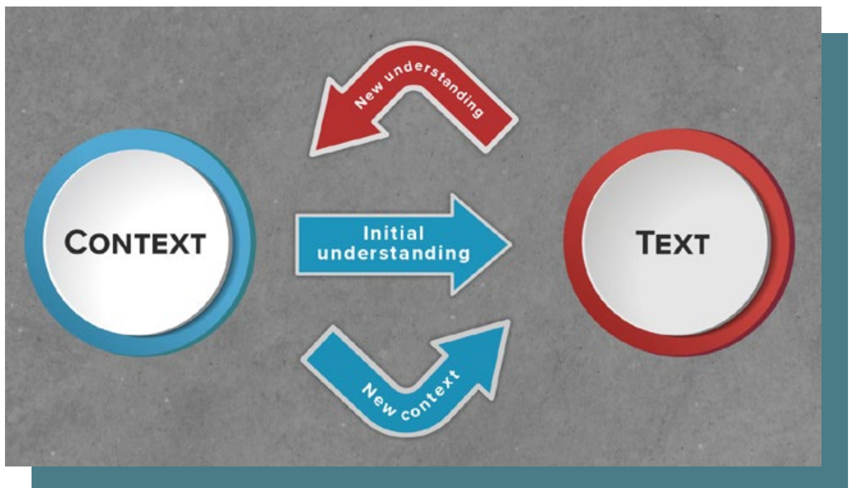
In *Being and Time*, he states that philosophers have forgotten two important things. One, they have forgotten the question of being (*Sein*) and how they might approach it. And two, they've forgotten that they've forgotten.

All of us should be concerned with being. How would you explain being? Heidegger's concern was that we tend to ignore the question of being because we assume it's self-evident. We all know what it is, even if we can't define it, right?

Wrong. Heidegger was perplexed about how little we understand being. Not knowing only makes the question more urgent. It is a problem to talk about something we don't really know the meaning of, especially when it's the foundation of our entire existence.

The Question of Being and the Hermeneutic Circle

To ask about the question of being, we need to be transparent about the being who is doing the questioning. But how can we know about the being who is doing the questioning without knowing about being? Do we get caught in a circular problem of whether the chicken or the egg comes first? Heidegger argues no. When we question our own being, it matters that we are questioning being in the mode of being. This is a mode of "relatedness backward or forward."



This relatedness is what's called a hermeneutic circle. Heidegger didn't come up with the idea, but he developed it. It refers to a type of circular understanding of the whole by looking at the individual parts as well as our understanding of the parts through the whole.

We can begin to understand the whole of reality by attending to individual everyday experiences. We can't understand being without reference to our context, and our context can't be understood without reference to being, and all of this is related to how each of us interprets being and context.

We start questioning being by attending to being in its everydayness, in time. We concern ourselves with how we're related to the world specifically, how we coinhabit the earth generally, and how we're connected to other beings. As we participate in existence, we contribute to and learn about the everyday understanding of our existence. We inherit certain understandings about the world. And we generally share understandings with other people. Heidegger calls this general understanding *das Man*. Sometimes, *das Man* is translated as "one," as in "one doesn't slurp one's coffee." The "they" includes general public opinion and social norms.

Our daily lives are full of chaos that both veils and unveils things to us. Life is like a fog. Sometimes, it's hazy; sometimes, it's clear. Our being in the world is shaped by the question of being, even if we sometimes forget about it. Forgetting the question about being fogs our ability to ask it.

Dasein is, Heidegger says, a "clearing" that reveals our existence through moods, interpretations, and discourse. He writes, "*Dasein* brings its 'there' [*Da*] along with it. … *Dasein* is its disclosedness." Disclosedness, or disclosure, is about how the world opens up to us. *Dasein* is this opening up of the world.

Authenticity and Inauthenticity

So, what does all this have to do with authenticity? Heidegger points to three ways we can exist: authentic, inauthentic, or indifferent. You'll focus on authentic and inauthentic here.

It's important to wake up, eat, work, play, relax. This is what Heidegger calls the "mode of average everydayness." You're immersed and dispersed. You're one of the masses. This mode of everyday *Dasein* is the "they-self." We're all mostly in this inauthentic mode because we're inextricably bound and involved with the world and one another. And that's not a bad thing. Our "everydayness and averageness" is the foundation of our existence. The "they-self" is different to the authentic self. Heidegger writes that the authentic self "has explicitly grasped itself."

He says that the "disclosing of *Dasein* always comes about by clearing away coverings and obscurities, by breaking up the disguises with which *Dasein* cuts itself off from itself." Heidegger points to three key ways that the world is obscured from us. We fall prey to inauthenticity through curiosity, idle talk, and ambiguity.

You might think curiosity is a good thing. But Heidegger understands curiosity as greed for newness. If our curiosity prompts us to leap constantly from one novelty to the next, we're effectively abandoning ourselves to the world. When we're "constantly uprooting" ourselves, Heidegger says we end up "never dwelling anywhere. Curiosity is everywhere and nowhere."

Idle talk affects our curiosity because it dictates what we're curious about. We all get curious about the latest fads, for example, just because everyone is talking about them, and we want to show that we are up with the current trends.

Authentic being isn't about detaching ourselves from the "they." For Heidegger, authenticity is about modifying our relationship to the everyday.

Everyday discourse is mostly exchanging these kinds of superficial understandings of the world. The problem, Heidegger explains, is that idle talk distracts us from genuine understanding. Social media is a prime example. Think of all that noise, misinformation, and manipulation.

Ambiguity clouds genuine understanding. With so much ambiguity everywhere, it becomes harder to figure out what and who is authentic and inauthentic and what's true and false. This confuses how we understand the world, one another, and ourselves.

Idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity suck us ever deeper into the inauthentic realm. Plus, Heidegger says, "busyness" alienates us from our "ownmost potentiality." There's nothing authentic about our actions—we're just doing the same as everyone else.

Opening Up to Possibilities for Authenticity

Heidegger proposes ways we can break free from the things that conceal our authentic possibilities. He wants to challenge us to modify our relationship to everyday discourse: away from a "mode of groundless floating" and toward genuine discovery, innovation, expansion, and complexity.

When we can admit that death is a real possibility, we start to become authentic.

Where might we start? Listening. Listening is *Dasein*'s way of opening up. Listening gives *Dasein* a chance to reveal itself and opens up a space for anxiety (*Angst*). Anxiety frees us from our public, everyday inauthentic mode of being. Through anxiety, possibilities become "undisguised," concrete.

Like Kierkegaard's dizziness of freedom, Heidegger also thought that it's terrifying to discover the scope of possibilities that are available to us. It's not fun because it pushes us to come face-to-face with our human condition as *unheimlich*, often translated as "uncanny." Most people try to ignore the feeling because it's disconcerting.

The authentic mode of existence is what Heidegger calls "being-toward-death." Although death is an everyday occurrence, Heidegger was concerned that we tend to dismiss it as something that doesn't really concern us, at least not at the moment.

For Heidegger, realizing we're going to die is anxiety-inducing. It's depressing to think about how our time is limited. But Heidegger thought that it's exactly this angst that opens up possibilities for authenticity between now and our death.

Dasein is thrown (*geworfen*) into existence. In other words, *Dasein*'s origin story, or birth, is thrownness (*Geworfenheit*). We didn't choose to be thrown; we find ourselves thrown. And we continue to find ourselves thrown about in our everyday world.

The authentic mode of care about our lives can give us some constancy amid the thrownness. Authenticity, as Heidegger defines it, is "anticipatory resoluteness." Resoluteness is about decisively accepting accountability for our being. And the anticipatory part is about constantly choosing ourselves and running ahead into possibilities as we anticipate death.

Authenticity involves owning up to our existence by acknowledging that we are finite, fragile, and vulnerable beings. Facing up to our mortality beckons us to accept responsibility for our choices, which we won't have when we're dead. We resolve to attend to our existence by reminding ourselves to question our being, to listen carefully, to perceive clearly, and to notice when we fall back into inauthentic ways of being.

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José Ortega y Gasset on Authentic Destiny

José Ortega y Gasset was the most influential Spanish intellectual of the 20th century. He was a professor of philosophy, but he also wrote for newspapers, founded a magazine, and was a politician for a while. Like most of the other existential philosophers, he didn't explicitly consider himself an existentialist. But he deals with many of the same themes. In his day, he was a well-known philosopher writing about important issues of the time—a bit like Noam Chomsky or Judith Butler. This lecture explores Ortega's views on philosophy and his ideas about what it means to live an authentic life.

Authenticity in Modern Life

For José Ortega y Gasset, philosophy is like plunging into a cold, deep, dark swimming pool that you didn't choose to be in but were thrown into. He argues that we philosophize because we're desperately curious about the world and acutely aware of our ignorance. He thought that we can't not sense that we don't understand human existence in the world. We're going to be disoriented. We're going to wonder how deep it is.

Ortega pushes back on Aristotle's view that we philosophize because we have the mental tools to remember, infer, abstract, and compare. For Ortega, just because we are capable of doing something doesn't mean that thing defines us. His view is that our cognitive ability to philosophize is a means to an end. The end is to make sense of the human condition as fragmentary beings in an insufficient world. Philosophizing is the search for a stable intellectual foundation for our lives. And that makes every one of us a philosopher.

In his 1914 essay collection *Meditations on Quixote*, Ortega articulated one of his most famous statements: "I am I and my circumstance." What he meant is that human existence isn't just about me—it's about me in relationship with the world.

In *Revolt of the Masses*, his most famous book, Ortega distinguishes between authentic and inauthentic philosophizing and living and discusses the challenges that modern life presents to living authentically. He points out that the 19th century brought revolutionary changes to humanity. Science, medicine, innovation, information, technology, industrialism, and liberal democracy transformed human existence. Ortega was talking about the European context specifically.

According to him, these transformations opened up a huge array of possibilities for many people. Thanks to mechanization, industrialization, and everything else that expanded the scope of our lives, people started to have many more choices than ever before in history. Human life became filled with superabundance and lavishness.

The downside of this transformation is that although we live in a world full of vital possibilities, it's hard to know what to do with so many choices. Existence presents each of us with multiple potential trajectories. Our life is a decision between various potential selves. Our circumstances present a horizon of possibilities.

Ortega writes, "To live is to feel ourselves fatally obliged to exercise our liberty, to decide what we are going to be in this world." Prefiguring Sartre, Ortega says that it's bizarre to be condemned to constantly choose which trajectory to take. And even when we just go with the flow, we're still choosing.

It's tempting to abandon ourselves to fate. After all, we can't live all the possibilities available to us. Anticipating Sartre's notion of bad faith, Ortega notes that many of us go to great lengths to escape "the fearsome pulsation" of anxiety and retreat into security. We look for certainty in habits and other distractions. Ortega says we shield ourselves with the "curtain of fantasy" or use diversions "as scarecrows to frighten away reality."

The Common and the Noble

Ortega pointed to two types of people in the world: common and noble. He isn't talking about social classes here. Noble minds exist among working class people, he says, and educated bourgeois people are often tediously common.

For Ortega, common people make up "the masses." These "mass" people are average, generic, undifferentiated. Mass people distract themselves with "fickle caprice." Ortega sometimes refers to a mass person as Mr. Satisfied, someone who thinks he knows everything and never doubts himself.

The problem with mass men is that they tend to become tyrannical. One of Ortega's favorite books was John Stuart Mill's 1859 philosophical essay *On Liberty*, in which Mill examines how the "tyranny of the majority" oppresses minority groups. Ortega echoed Mill's concerns. He was worried about how the brutal empire of the masses creates hyperdemocracy—which occurs when the crowd grows and gains so much power that experts get ignored. General, uninformed opinions dictate public opinion and legislation.

Ortega complains that "the mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select." He says this is especially the case in the United States, where "to be different is to be indecent."

The authentic alternative to being a mass person is nobility. Nobility now usually refers to a title people inherit, but originally, nobility meant excelling at something that makes you famous. Ortega uses *noble* in this original sense, that is, a life of activity and striving, with an eye toward surpassing your current self and committing to stretch goals that you choose. Hereditary nobility can be authentic if it inspires the descendant to keep up the noble effort of their ancestor.

The first step toward becoming noble is to let yourself feel lost. Like Kierkegaard, Ortega thought an authentic life calls for us to face this existential anxiety. The authentic person will let themselves feel lost in the chaotic, jumbled, baffling, disorienting mess of life. And once you feel shipwrecked, then you can start to face the world with brutal, lucid sincerity. Ironically, a person who doesn't ever feel lost will be forever disoriented because they are avoiding the reality of the world.

Finding Your Authentic Vocation

In a preface to *Historia de la Filosofía*, a Spanish translation of a book by Émile Bréhier, Ortega argues that some people pursue philosophy as a profession to pay the bills and not because they're genuinely interested in it. But when philosophy—or any other pursuit—is mechanized, it becomes inauthentic.

When Ortega talks about being mechanized, he means that we find ourselves immersed in traditions and ready-made philosophies that set us on autopilot mode. He thinks it's tragic that we're constantly encouraged to follow traditional ways of thinking and to take for granted the standard methods of problem-solving. Social pressures constantly lure us toward the inauthentic status quo.

Authentic philosophers do their own philosophy, which takes effort. But authentic philosophers don't worry so much about being original. Sure, they learn about philosophers of the past and present, and they innovate and initiate new ideas. But importantly, they also strive to disassemble philosophy, just like you'd disassemble a machine to see how it works, and they let themselves feel lost in the parts. Once you've let yourself feel lost, then you can face the world with lucidity and pursue your authentic vocation.

In *What Is Knowledge?*, a series of lectures delivered between 1929 and 1930, Ortega proposes that one way to discover your authentic "life project or program" is to imagine different possibilities and note "which ones … would annihilate or cancel out [your]self." Which possibilities vex you? Which feel least genuine? Which would make you feel like you're renouncing yourself? Ortega believed that unless you've thought about your life program, you'll miss out on the most profound and satisfying truth and happiness.

You may already be noticing some limitations to this approach. One is that imagining different vocations requires understanding what the options are. If you're wondering about being a scientist, you need to know what that involves before you can know whether it's your authentic vocation. Finding out takes time, effort, experience, and money.

According to Ortega, the greatest plot twist of life is that we don't have to stick to the script that tells us what we're supposed to say and do. We can improvise.

Another question is where the feeling of authenticity comes from. Being unhappy or getting a feeling of it not being right is a good indicator. But what if you can't imagine what would make you happy? Or what if lots of different things would make you happy?

ORTEGA

Ortega seems to be alluding to authenticity as a fact of our existence that some people exercise and some don't. For later existential philosophers, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, authenticity is a creative process, a function of our transcendence and not our facticity, as Ortega seems to suggest.

Prioritizing the Future over the Past

Once you've found your authentic vocation, it's time to orient yourself toward building the future with others. Imagine a billiard ball on a table. On its own, you see its color and shape and proximity to other balls. But only when the balls are in play do you see how that ball responds to the cue, how it bounces off other balls and reacts to the contours of the table.

Ortega thought that it's the same with people. Each of us is responsible for our own survival and for giving our life shape. But we have to join the game of life. Our character is revealed in how we engage with other people and react to objects. And how we engage now and in the future is much more important than how we've engaged in the past. Ortega says, "Really to live is to be directed toward something, to progress toward a goal."

Consider the context in which Ortega was writing this. The year was 1929. Europe was politically tumultuous. Fascism was on the rise. He worried that the world was "suffering from a grave demoralization." The source of that demoralization was, in Ortega's view, the "rebellion of the masses," which sucks morality and culture out of life.

Like Nietzsche, Ortega thought we need a new moral code to fuel greatness in the world. Ortega dreamed of Europe as "a great national State," and "a new European code" would spark "inspiration toward a new program of life."

Ortega specifically rejected fascism and refused to support José Antonio Primo de Rivera, founder of the Spanish fascist party, and he later rejected the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. Ortega's issue with their approach was that they were too focused on the past. He explains, "In defending the nation we are defending our tomorrows, not our yesterdays." What defines and unites a nation isn't a common past but rather a common future.

So, what type of political system best achieves great unity? Although it might not be the "best imaginable" solution, Ortega argued that "liberal democracy based on technical knowledge is the highest type of public life hitherto known." He believed that liberal democracy could provide humanity with strong roots so that we can all evolve to a higher level of authentic existence.

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Karl Jaspers on Authentic Communication

The German philosopher Karl Jaspers loved the ocean because it reminded him of life's possibilities. Like José Ortega y Gasset, Jaspers was fond of the metaphor of philosophy as what you do after the disorientation of getting shipwrecked. For both philosophers, being marooned can be a bewildering and humbling experience, but one that is worth the effort. In this lecture, you'll look at Jaspers's approach to philosophy, his ideas on how it should be taught, and his emphasis on communication as "the path to truth in all its forms."

Existenz, Freedom, and Transcendence

In 1901, Karl Jaspers started studying philosophy and law. But academic philosophy felt alien to him. He wanted knowledge, facts, and reality, so he switched to medicine, specializing in psychiatry. However, he was disappointed with the way psychiatrists diagnosed and treated mental illnesses. He'd been taught to observe patient behaviors and diagnose them objectively, but he believed that the subjective experience of mental illness was crucial. He found that much of psychology was "scientific mischief" lacking clarity and validity.

When World War I erupted, Jaspers said that the naïve life of prewar times was gone forever and "philosophy, with its seriousness, became more important than ever." He then dove deeper into trying to understand what he called *Existenz*. Jaspers used the term to describe the reality of the subjective mode of being human. *Existenz* is a state of authentic being.

Jaspers's psychology also ventured into what he called *Existenz* clarification, which, he explains, involves creating an

> outline of the potentialities of the soul which holds a mirror up to man to show him what he can be, what he can achieve and how far he can go.

For Jaspers, philosophy is a quest for truth in which we embark on a process of thinking that transcends the objective world to become authentically and lucidly aware of *Existenz*.

Freedom is crucial to this perspective: the freedom to choose what we can achieve and the freedom from psychological gymnastics, such as self-deception and self-defensiveness. These evasive strategies can give us a sense of security and certainty amid our dizzying freedom, but they also become self-imposed cages.

We realize our authentic selves when we break out of these cages. The key to breaking out of our mental cages is a theory that Jaspers called *Grenze*, which means "limit" or "border" in German. *Grenzsituationen*—or "limit situations"—are extreme situations that throw us into a state of anxiety, instability, and questioning.

Think about a shipwrecking experience—maybe a breakup or a near-death situation—that has left you questioning your life. These kinds of circumstances disorient us. They force us to face our limits, adapt ourselves in new ways, confront authentic possibilities, and transcend toward new realms of *Existenz*.

When we leap from who we are toward who we can be, we project our being into transcendence. Like Kierkegaard's leap to faith, Jaspers's transcendence is the ineffable mode or dimension of being that can't be explained by science. It's not an objective or static thing that reveals our being; transcendence is "a chance of freedom." It's also a process or, more specifically, "a series of transcending steps."

Jaspers suggests that ciphers provide the link between *Existenz* and transcendence. Ciphers can be anything, but usually they're significant images related to our personal backgrounds. For Jaspers, the ocean was a kind of cipher. For others, it might be a tree, a scent, a sound, or a sunrise through which we feel, in his words, "the soul of things."

In Jaspers's time, universities weren't offering this kind of perspective on philosophy. But he wanted to try. In the 1920s, just before he turned 40, he switched back from medicine to philosophy permanently. But his clinical training and experience continued to deeply influence his philosophy.

Influences on Jaspers's Philosophy

During the 1920s, Jaspers and Martin Heidegger had been good friends. They both believed that philosophy needed reinvigorating. In 1933, Heidegger visited Jaspers. They talked about the rise of Nazism. Heidegger said, "One must get in step." Jaspers was appalled but didn't say anything. Soon thereafter, Jaspers was forced to retire and banned from publishing because he was married to a Jewish woman. When Heidegger supported the Nazi Party, Jaspers and Heidegger's friendship collapsed.

After the war, Jaspers was on what was called the White List, a register of people unaffiliated with Nazis. White List people were tapped to help play a public role in rebuilding Germany. And he did play an important public role, including being reappointed to his role as professor. He also published essays providing moral guidance in postwar Germany. He wanted to change the way philosophy was taught so that it would appeal not only to our intellect but also to our "existential conscience."

In his 1941 essay "On My Philosophy," Jaspers talks about how we can ask all sorts of questions about our existence, but those questions are always in context. Questions spring from an individual who is doing the asking and who also springs from a historical tradition. So, he thought that authentic existence must acknowledge our historical foundation. We need to understand what came before us so that we have a solid footing for understanding where we are now.

Jaspers wanted to teach people how to engage with past philosophers. Past philosophers provide a springboard for understanding the world. But they can't provide us "with readymade truth." To get to the truth, we need to update ideas of the past so that we can grasp them in the present. Jaspers worried that formalizing philosophy in schools and institutions ruins that. The problem with academic philosophy is that it often attempts to erase the subjective dimension and context of philosophizing.

Philosophizing is a process of self-development, of unfolding ourselves, of disclosing our very being—and that's best done in collaboration with others. Jaspers writes, "Communication leads to our brightest moments and lends weight to our life." He credited everyone close to him for the

content of his philosophizing. Philosophizing is discovering together "what they want and what they are." Philosophizing is no less than the practice of grasping the ineffable "consciousness of being." Although we can't know everything clearly, philosophizing allows us to hold these ideas in tension.

Jaspers credited both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche for exposing the absurdity of existence. They gave a voice to the pain of coming to terms with nothingness. Jaspers thought Kant had asked some great basic philosophical questions, such as, What can we know? What should we do? What might we hope? What is it to be human? True to his way of philosophizing, Jaspers was rethinking these questions in the early 1900s, when science and technology were becoming more important and radical than ever.

"In a world that has cast doubt on everything, philosophizing is our attempt to hold course without knowing our destination."

—Karl Jaspers

The Encompassing

Science enhances our factual knowledge, but it does not connect us with the totality of our existence. For example, science can't answer the questions of ethics or tell us what's valuable and important or what goals to set for ourselves. Philosophy does explore these questions.

Our desire to communicate with others suggests to Jaspers that there's more to truth than just what we can grasp intellectually. Communication operates at and beyond the boundary of science and reveals more than what simple correctness can. According to Jaspers,

"Communication is the path to truth in all its forms." Truth becomes clearer through discussion. This is one of the reasons that Jaspers did a lot of public philosophizing through radio, television, and writing for general audiences.

Another big concept in Jaspers's philosophy was the encompassing, which is a source of truth but different to the objective things that science can reveal to us. We can point to or suggest what it is, even if we can't explain it.

The encompassing is like the infinity of a magnificent ocean view. Jaspers writes,

> All that is solid, all that is gloriously ordered, having a home, being sheltered: absolutely necessary! But the fact that there is this other, the infinity of the ocean—that liberates us.

The essence of philosophy is beyond what's solid. The beyond part is the encompassing. Awareness of the encompassing can feel scary, even barbaric. But it's there that the fullness of being exists. We become aware of the encompassing through dynamic thinking, even though we can't fully grasp it as a thing. But it's important because it's how we increase our lucidity about the depth and possibility of being, to reveal truth and reality, in a way that objective, scientific "determinate knowledge" can't.

The Importance of Authentic Communication

When science can't give us answers and we can't communicate, things get confusing. Some people suspend thinking and conform to rules and regulations. Jaspers wrote about this in 1941, after the Nazis had dismissed him from his university professorship and were watching his publications closely.

At the core of Jaspers's philosophy is that we can't be human all by ourselves. Only through communication with others can we become authentically ourselves.

Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Ortega, Jaspers was concerned with mass mentality in which individuals connect functionally but not in any poignant, meaningful way. Jaspers saw how empty and lonely people had become without meaningful communication. He was aware of the supreme importance of making an authentic connection. Alone, we slide into a dreary abyss. With other people, our authentic selves start to emerge, because in interacting with people, we learn about ourselves.

While communication is often hostile and defensive, authentic communication is a mature engagement in which we lay down our weapons of attack, embrace the possibility of profoundly connecting with another, and question everything.

At the heart of Jaspers's view of authenticity is the idea that who we are is always in question. The mere fact that we can put ourselves in question gives some certainty to our existence. But we can never grasp our authentic self because we are always a potentiality. We strive incessantly to order our existence into a unity, but it's impossible. Becoming aware of ourselves involves becoming aware of our fragmentary nature and our inability to realize ourselves completely in a cohesive way.

Authentic communication gives us a way to open ourselves to limitless thinking—philosophizing—which can point to the truth of existence. Authentic communication is risky because it calls for vulnerability. But it's also a pleasure because it reveals that we are connected to others. And only in authentic communication can we live in fulfilling ways.

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Albert Camus on Authentic Happiness

What would you do if you inherited a large sum of money? Would you quit your job? Travel? Buy a house? Relax for the rest of your life? What would you make you happy? This is the central question of French philosopher Albert Camus's first (unpublished) novel *A Happy Death*, which is about the pursuit of an authentic mode of contentment called "conscious happiness." In this lecture, you'll explore some key takeaways from the novel that highlight Camus's views on happiness and a life well lived.

Camus won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957 and is one of the most famous philosophers of the 20th century.

A Happy Death

Written between 1936 and 1938, *A Happy Death* wasn't published until 1971, 11 years after Camus's death. He was notoriously critical of his own work, and *A Happy Death* seems to have evolved into *The Stranger* (sometimes translated as *The Outsider*), which would become his first published novel in 1942. Happiness was a theme that Camus kept returning to throughout his works but never as directly, deeply, or in as much detail as in *A Happy Death*.

Camus was born into a poor working-class family in French colonial Algeria in 1913. His father was killed in 1914 during World War I. Albert, along with his mother and brother, went to live with his grandmother, who was quite stern and regularly whipped the young boys. Nevertheless, Camus later described his childhood as a happy one.

The main character in *A Happy Death* is a man named Patrice Mersault, and the book opens with him murdering another man, Roland Zagreus. Or perhaps it's assisted suicide. It depends on your perspective.

Zagreus, who had both his legs amputated after an accident, worked hard and became rich, but he's still unhappy. He wants to die but doesn't have the courage to kill himself. Zagreus tells Mersault that if he pulls the trigger for him, he can have all his money. A couple of days later, Mersault returns. The gun and suicide note are ready. He pulls the trigger and takes Zagreus's money. No one suspects any wrongdoing.

Until the murder, Mersault had been living a life of poverty. He's depressed and bored. The murder is a radical action that prompts him to do something about his unhappy predicament. In the first part of the novel, Camus explores the conditions of happiness set out in Zagreus's advice to Mersault in their conversation a few days before the killing. In the second part, he tests Zagreus's theory in practice.

Zagreus's Conditions for Happiness

According to Zagreus, money is a precondition for happiness. To believe you can be happy without money is stupid and a type of "spiritual snobbery." But being rich doesn't automatically make you happy. Lots of rich people are unhappy. But money does make happiness more accessible.

Zagreus's second condition of happiness is time. "Time can be bought," he explains. Money frees you from the drudgery of work.

> To be or to become rich is to have time to be happy. ... For a certain class of beings happiness is possible, provided they have time. … Having money is a way of being free of money.

His third condition for happiness is being healthy and able-bodied. He believes his infirmity makes him "only half a man" unable to live a happy, full, and meaningful life. He feels that his life is not only diminished but ruined. Zagreus tells Mersault, "With a body like yours, your one duty is to live and be happy."

Yes, Zagreus's comments are ableist. Many people with disabilities live meaningful lives. But at age 17, Camus himself was diagnosed with tuberculosis, and he was sick most of his life. In 1938, he applied to take the exam that he needed to become a teacher. Even though he passed the medical tests, the authorities rejected him because they didn't want to risk having to pay a medical pension. So, Camus was intimately familiar with what it's like not to have a body that supports personal thriving.

Another of Zagreus's conditions for happiness is willing. He argues that Mersault's frustration with life is partly because he's poor and partly because he lacks the will to be happy and submits to his poverty. Zagreus's point is that we have to choose happiness. To will happiness, we must be passionate about it.

One lesson that we can take from *A Happy Death* is that authentic happiness must be consciously and deliberately planned. And once we've decided to choose happiness, we must then figure out what makes us happy and go do that.

Mersault's Quest for Happiness

Now having time, money, and his health, Mersault sets out to pursue authentic happiness. He quits his job, breaks up with his girlfriend, and then goes traveling. In an essay called "Death in the Soul," Camus writes of the strong link between travel and happiness. Solo travel especially can enlighten us because it untethers us from our normal situations, securities, and distractions.

Mersault's first stop is Prague—one of the most enchanting and culturally rich cities in the world. But he's sick. He can't stand the smell of pickles sold on the streets, and he feels bitterly alone. These things get in the way of his happiness. So, he travels to Vienna and indulges hedonistically in music, dancing, elegant women, sex, sunsets, and rich foods. Although he loves all the decadence, he's still not happy.

Mersault wonders if happiness is to be found in good weather. He travels to Italy, where he smolders in Genoa's sun, sea, olive trees, and women. Still, he misses genuine human connection.

He wonders if happiness is being with good friends. He visits friends in Algiers, staying in a house on a hill with a spectacular view of the bay and mountains. The house is filled with joy, affection, sunshine, and cats. But after a while, Mersault craves his own space.

He wonders if happiness is to be found in settling down. He marries a woman named Lucienne, although he's not in love and is very flippant about it all. He buys a house in a sunny Algerian coastal town but won't let his new wife live with him. He tells himself that solitude makes him happy, but he is still not happy.

Mersault asks Lucienne to visit and is happy with the familiarity and company. But 2 days later, he's bored. Lucienne asks if she can live with him. He says no. She asks if he loves her. He says no. She asks if he is happy. With his hand on her neck, he responds, "I have to be. With this night, this sea, and this flesh under my fingers?" The next day, Lucienne leaves. The following day, he realizes he can't stand himself and goes to visit his friends, his ex-girlfriend, and his wife.

Takeaways for Authentic Happiness

One of Mersault's epiphanies in his exploration of authentic happiness is that, at least in the beginning, he hadn't been trying very hard. The happiness he experienced while traveling—visiting beautiful cities, eating great food, sleeping around—was a sort of frivolous, stumbling, restless kind.

This brings us to another takeaway about authentic happiness: Quit with the excuses as to why you can't be happy. Mersault comes to believe that Zagreus was wrong about money being a foundational condition of happiness. Is he being the "spiritual snob" that Zagreus talked about? Maybe. It's easy to say you don't need money to be happy when you have it.

But Mersault's attitude seems to reflect Camus's broader view that there's much happiness and beauty all around us. At some point, we have to stop ourselves from striving and hoping for more happiness and start being happy with our lives as they are now. Happiness can be found in minimalism. We can nurture our own happiness in the simplest of things—and we must be patient.

We also must appreciate the natural beauty around us. For Camus, the Mediterranean sunshine, sandy beaches, and sensual pleasures were a big part of his happiness. The truth of Mersault's happiness in *A Happy Death* is his ocean swim every morning. Camus writes, "They gave his entire day a flavor of abandonment and happy lassitude."

Even if you don't have easy access to beautiful spots to swim, you can still appreciate the earth around you: a flowery garden, a sunny beach, or a starry night. None of those things require a lot of time or money, but they do require getting out and appreciating them. Whenever we can make the time is a great time to appreciate nature.

Another takeaway is to include the truth of your happiness into the rhythm of your life. In an essay called "The Desert," written mostly in 1937, Camus wrote, "But what is happiness except the simple harmony between a man and the life he leads?"

Mersault harmonizes himself into the routine of getting up early every morning for a swim. He says that the "deliberation and strangeness" of the rhythm of his new life is not so different from when he was poor. What's different now is that he's more lucidly aware of owning time.

To stabilize our happiness, we need to accept that what we have is enough.

Many of us struggle with finding the space to include happiness in the rhythm of our lives. Given that many people are pulled in so many different directions, it's important to do what we can to take control of our time and create space for happy rhythms wherever we can.

It's also important to find a friend. It doesn't have to be a spouse, although it can be. Mersault found a local friend named Perez. Sometimes, they played pool or went fishing and cooked their catch and ate dinner together. With Perez, Mersault had as much solitude and company as he wanted. It's lucky that he found someone whose rhythm was similar to his own and that their desire for simple company matched.

A final lesson for us in *A Happy Death* is—as the title of the novel would suggest—to face death with the same honesty and conscious will to happiness with which you face life. When Mersault gets sick with pleurisy (a painful infection of the lungs), the doctor gives him adrenaline to take if he feels like he's going to pass out. But Mersault wants to experience death lucidly: He doesn't want to miss his own death.

People are afraid of death when they feel they haven't lived fully. Zagreus was sad about dying because he felt he couldn't live fully. Mersault is happy about dying because he is grateful for his life; he has willed so much happiness and feels he perfected his duty to be happy. Camus reflects, "What did it matter if he existed for two or for twenty years? Happiness was the fact that he had existed."

When you come to the end of your life, will you be happy that you've lived fully? If not, get out there and exercise your will to authentic happiness!

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Camus on Absurdity

Camus didn't consider himself to be an existentialist or a philosopher, but most people beg to differ, and it shouldn't stop you from studying his works from a philosophical perspective. In this lecture, you'll examine his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he confronts the question of why do anything if everything leads to death. Specifically, you will look at what it means to be in the space of absurdity, how you might respond to absurdity in your life, and why Camus believes you should embrace the absurd rather than avoid it.

Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*

In his 1942 essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus recounts Homer's ancient Greek story of Sisyphus. Jupiter punishes Sisyphus for betraying a secret and orders him to be chained up by the god of death in the underworld. But Sisyphus tricks Death and returns to earth. After refusing calls to return to the underworld, Sisyphus is taken back by force.

The penalty is that Sisyphus is condemned to roll a huge rock up to the top of a mountain and watch it roll back down, over and over again, forever. Camus is interested in the moment that Sisyphus walks down the mountain toward his endless torment. That is the moment of reflection.

Camus states,

> That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.

Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus* in the depths of World War II. He looked around and found that the only truth he could rely on was absurdity: a world devoid of meaning, or at least a world that blocks our access to meaning. Having no idea whatsoever about why we're here makes us a stranger in the world.

Inauthentic Responses to Absurdity

Absurdity is the feeling of alienation in the cracks between a person and their context. In these cracks, we find "waterless deserts." Camus wondered, What do you do once you find yourself in a waterless desert of absurdity? Is it possible to stay there? There are many responses to absurdity, but not all of them are authentic, according to Camus.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus's fundamental question is "whether life has a meaning." For Camus, the book was personal. In it, he reflects on reasons for living amid the chaos and pain of existence. The book opens with his famous quote, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide." Why? Because the most urgent philosophical question is whether life is worth living. Everything else, all other thinking about life, flows from there.

Suicide is the most important question because, Camus says, no one seems to be killing themselves over ontological arguments. Ontology concerns the nature of being. He argues that people do die because they decide life is not worth living. People are also killed for ideas that make their life worth living. "What is called a reason for living," Camus writes, "is also an excellent reason for dying."

Suicide is one possible response to the absurd, but it's not one that Camus recommends. According to him, suicide, at its core, is a confession that life is overwhelming or incomprehensible. Choosing death shows that a person sees hope as ridiculous and suffering as useless. The person who decides on suicide affirms that life isn't worth it.

But if life has no meaning, does that mean life isn't worth living? For Camus, it's a hard no. Just because life is absurd doesn't mean you have to kill yourself. Suicide is an inauthentic response to the waterless desert because it's an escape from facing reality and being lucid about life.

Another response to the absurd is to slip into habits. Even poor reasons to live make the world more comfortable. We each have our own attachments to life, and, Camus says, "The body shrinks from annihilation." The habit of living is stronger than the habit of thinking, and the body confuses us and leads us astray. Distracting ourselves with habits is inauthentic, too.

Hope is another "fatal evasion." The clichés "Everything happens for a reason" and "It will all work out in the end" are examples of this kind of hoping. We hope that there is some meaning in the world so that it all might make sense to us at some point. Distracting ourselves with hope is inauthentic.

Camus considered the existential leap to be a form of hope and thus another escape from the absurd. To him, the existential leap is "philosophical suicide." He writes, "The abstract philosopher and the religious philosopher start out from the same disorder and support each other in the same anxiety." A leap can be anything that negates, hides, or escapes from the absurd. Even atheists, upon realizing that the world is without inherent meaning, turn around and make up meaning. For Camus, that's paradoxical and inauthentic.

Authentic Responses to Absurdity

The authentic response to absurdity, in Camus's opinion, is to lucidly accept that absurdity is our reality—and then rebel against it. Camus says, "Being able to remain on that dizzying crest—that is integrity and the rest is subterfuge."

Camus wants to know whether he can live with what he knows, without hope, without a god, without reifying the absurd into a deity. He knows that the state you need to be in to do this is full of vagaries and unknowns. But his answer is that the only authentic attitude is "to live with one's ailments."

Camus wants to preserve what's true. He wants to stay vigilant to the rift between his mind and the world. What it takes to live like that is persistence, permanent "metaphysical revolt," lucidity, and hopelessness. Camus says, "This darkness is my light," and a "determined soul" can find other solutions.

Hopelessness doesn't mean despair; it means clear thinking. Instead of leaping into abstractions, Camus recommends we "take up the heart-rending and marvelous wager of the absurd." Without meaning, we can live better because we're accepting life on its own terms, fully embracing life's "crushing fate" and rejecting resignation. It takes a kind of discipline to do that, though. Authentic living means staying and questioning the space of absurdity.

We must accept the absurd not out of resignation but in rebellion against the desire to escape to salvation.

Awareness of the Absurd

Absurdity is elusive and hard to put into words. Most days, we live on autopilot. We have our routines. Camus says that "time carries us." There's no profound meaning in that, but also no existential crisis.

But imagine you get home from work, you're exhausted, and you stop for a moment. Perhaps you wonder why you're on this treadmill. At this physically exhausted moment, your consciousness is ripe for awakening. You might also question someone else's life, perhaps a stranger you see doing something ridiculous, but the sense of absurdity intensifies when you're the subject of the absurd situation.

Has anyone ever asked you what you're thinking, and you answered, honestly, "nothing"? Or have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror or in a photo, seen your face, and thought that it looks so familiar yet so strange? These discomforts are the absurd. They're moments when you encounter the void that disrupts everyday monotony and your connection to the world.

Like Jaspers, Camus believed it's human to want to understand our existence. We can touch, see, feel, smell, and hear the water, grass, and air. Camus gives a nod to Husserl's phenomenology for showing us how it's important to pay attention to what's beyond cold hard facts and rationality. At the limits of thinking, when reason and science can take us no further, we come to face the irrational.

The absurd is the disconnect between our heart (meaning our feelings), our desire to understand, and the lack of understanding available to us.

Living amid the Absurd

How do we live in between the cracks, in the waterless desert? Sisyphus is powerless, but he's also rebellious because he is aware of his condition. Lucidity is supposed to be torture, but it's also his victory. Scorn crowns Sisyphus's triumph. He refuses to accept the meaning that the gods are

trying to give him. Camus says, “One must imagine Sisyphus happy,” because to be melancholy is to let the rock win. To be unhappy is to let absurdity win. And once you have a taste of absurdity, Camus thought that “it becomes a passion, the most harrowing of all.”

No wonder many people want to escape from the state of absurdity. But for Camus, running away is an “insult to existence.” The truth is not always comforting. It’s better to remain in lucid despair than to lie to ourselves, to hide from it, or hope. Camus doesn’t use the word *authentic* in this context, but this is what he’s getting at.

In pre-absurd days, you might set goals, choose a career, plan for a good life, or create some project to direct your life. But once you encounter the absurd, all that’s disrupted. Once you face the absurd, you’ll realize that your freedom is meaningless. The consequence, Camus explains, is an attitude of “indifference to the future.”

For Camus, an absurd life encourages us to live fully in terms of maximizing our quantity and variety of experiences. “What counts,” he says, “is not the best living but the most living.” No particular experience is particularly important. And it doesn’t matter who you are. A postal worker and a conqueror are equal if they’re both lucid about the absurd.

Another possibility for coping with the absurd is artistic creation. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus proposes, “The absurd joy par excellence is creation.” Camus agreed with Nietzsche that “we have art in order not to die of the truth.” Through creation, we find human dignity. Creation demonstrates revolt against the absurd. It’s not the artwork itself that’s important. What’s valuable is the dogged effort and lucid thinking of creativity that gets us closer to reality.

And creation can also play an important role in rebellion. Camus writes, “[The artist’s] very vocation, in the face of oppression, is to open the prisons and to give a voice to the sorrows and joys of all.” Art can’t establish justice and liberty on its own, but culture can give values a form amidst the jungle of society. As Camus explains, “This is why any authentic creation is a gift to the future.”

The Myth of Sisyphus is important because it shows us that, in the words of Camus quoting Nietzsche, "What matters … is not eternal life but eternal vivacity."

Camus lived a short life but was eternally vivacious. In 1960, at age 46, he died in a car crash. His publisher, Michel Gallimard, was driving. They were traveling at high speed. Camus had an unused train ticket in his pocket for the journey he had decided, at the last minute, to take by car. Camus's final creation, the draft manuscript for his next book, called *The First Man*, was in the trunk. Absurd indeed.

11

Camus on Authenticity amid Chaos

This lecture discusses Camus's novel *The Plague* and explores some of the ways he provides a language to think through calamities such as plagues and wars. You will consider how people can respond differently to crises yet still unite in a shared rebellion against despair. You'll also look at how the novel can be read on a few different levels: as a plague, as a criticism of Christianity, and as a metaphor for fascism.

Camus's *The Plague*

In the opening of Camus's 1947 novel *The Plague*, he presents the French Algerian port city of Oran as a tough place to live. The architecture is hideous, and there are few trees. The weather varies wildly, and you need to be in good health to live there. Residents work hard and go about their daily business as people do in pretty much every other city.

Out of the blue, dead rats start showing up. At first, people dismiss them as a prank. But there are so many of them. People try to ignore them, but it's impossible. They can't help but step on rats, and the streets are splattered with rat blood. The death rate escalates. The authorities are hesitant to call it an epidemic because they don't want people to panic.

The human voice amid the chaos is a doctor named Bernard Rieux. He convinces the city's decision-makers to proclaim a state of plague. The town gates close. The city will be locked down for 10 months. Sick people isolate in hospitals. Schools become makeshift hospitals. Coffins become a hot commodity as the daily death rate climbs. The many thousands of deaths mean that "[bodies] were flung into the death-pits indiscriminately."

Camus challenges us: What if our lives amount to a decaying mass, unidentifiable from other decaying masses? How do we live given the possible fate of being reduced to generality, stripped of our uniqueness, and left in a heap, with no one there to honor us? This is what calamities such as plagues and wars do to many people. What responses are moral?

Disruptions bring us face-to-face with the absurdity of existence. They provoke us to realize that the universe is indifferent, and we're abandoned here on earth without any given meaning. Camus suggests that this predicament can sap us "to the point of futility."

Responses to Chaos

Different characters in *The Plague* respond in different ways. Initially, people are in denial. Anxiety takes hold of many. Panic, fear, and mass hysteria are common. Some detach from society. Some exploit and profit from the crisis. Some try to escape.

Camus's characters' various responses to the crisis are not unlike what we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some are stubborn in their denial; some retreat into isolation. (We'll get to the heroes in a moment.) What these different responses have in common is anxiety. Whether anxiety comes from fear of disruption to the everyday and a desperate desire to continue as normal or fear of illness and death, it is one of the things that unites us despite our differences.

At the start of the novel, journalist Raymond Rambert is in Oran doing research for an article. When the city goes into lockdown, he feels like he doesn't belong. For him, absurdity manifests in a more concrete way because he is already an outsider to the city.

He is so anxious to be away from the woman he loves back in Paris that he plots an escape. Dr. Rieux learns of Rambert's plans but doesn't try to stop him, saying, "I, too, would like to do my bit for happiness." The underlying suggestion is that it's important to squeeze out happiness wherever we can. But can happiness be found in the midst of a horror show such as a plague?

Camus suggests it's not only possible but vital to love life and the joy it can bring, even in the midst of dreadfulness. The foundation is, Camus suggests, "the frantic desire for life that thrives in the heart of every great calamity." This doesn't mean we should be happy about the plague or other disasters but that it's possible to snatch nuggets of happiness even in calamities.

Two of the main characters in the novel, Jean Tarrou and Cottard, sometimes go out in the evening. They would, in Camus's words, "let themselves be swept along with the human herd toward resorts of pleasure whose companionable warmth seemed a safeguard from the plague's cold breath."

Later in the novel, Rieux and Tarrou take a secret night swim in the ocean. Momentarily, they're free from suffering and free from the plague. That moment is a rebellion against despair and their tortured world. They are reminding themselves of life's beauty. Their friendship gives them the courage and strength to face the world in all its horror and still love it.

One of the things that can fuel our feelings of connectivity is realizing that the human condition is absurd for everyone.

Rebellion through Solidarity

Recall Rambert, who is desperate to escape Oran. At first, the risk of carrying the virus out of the city is of little concern to him. He thinks it's worth it to be with his loved one. Eventually, though, he comes to realize that it "may be shameful to be happy by oneself." And so, Rambert decides to stay and join the volunteer efforts to fight the plague.

This is one of Camus's strongest messages in the novel. And it's a key point of departure from *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *A Happy Death*. Camus said that while *The Myth of Sisyphus*'s focus was on solitary rebellion, *The Plague*'s focus is on shared rebellion, "in the direction of solidarity and participation."

There are very few frontline workers available to help take care of sick people and manage bodies. Tarrou volunteers to help, and with the support of Dr. Rieux, they organize what they call sanitary squads. Why do people like Tarrou and Rieux willingly accept such a high risk of death? Rieux takes his job seriously. Even if he can't cure people, he can still try to ease their pain, distribute vaccines, and give patients the best chance at recovery.

Is Rieux a hero? Does doing your job constitute heroism? It's not easy for Rieux to accept the fate of the deadly epidemic. He does all he can to heal others, but ultimately, he loses everyone he loves, including his wife. Doing the right thing doesn't guarantee a happy ending for anyone. But Rieux knows that's no reason to do nothing.

For Tarrou, the volunteer work is not his job. But doing nothing is unthinkable. To him, the sanitary squads don't feel heroic or deserving of merit. Volunteering, for him, is "common decency." Tarrou is our everyday hero. And he dies of the plague, making him a tragic and authentic hero as well.

The Plague as a Critique of Christianity

Camus's novel can be read as a story about a literal plague. But he also said it was his most anti-Christian work. Christianity promises that the possibility of paradise justifies the suffering of this world. Camus disagreed. He thought that hoping for something better in the afterlife doesn't justify giving up on making this world less hellish. He also objected to Christianity's use of blame and punishment.

In the novel, when the plague hits, a priest named Father Paneloux organizes a Week of Prayer. For the first session, a large audience crowds into the church. In his sermon, Paneloux tells the congregation that the plague is their fault and that they deserve it: It is God's punishment for their sins. Paneloux says that God wants everyone to attend church more often and pray harder. God will take care of those that do. Paneloux convinces some people, but his lecture makes many others even more aware of the absurd world.

Paneloux isn't all bad. He volunteers for Dr. Rieux's sanitary squads because he sees it as his duty to help. His faith is tested when he watches a child struggle against the plague. Paneloux prays to God to spare the child. God does not. The child endures a long and agonizing death.

As he faces the absurd, Paneloux must make a seminal choice. He can either hate God for allowing such misery or love God wholesale. Loving God wholesale means consenting to all the suffering in the world, loving everything we can't understand, including the excruciating pain of children slowly dying. Paneloux chooses God. When he falls ill, he refuses Rieux's care but does what he is told to protect others.

Camus disagrees with the Christian view that people are to blame for phenomena like plagues. If the people were guilty of anything, it's of forgetting that a plague was possible. They kept going about their lives as if they were free.

The Plague as a Critique of Fascism

In a letter to Roland Barthes, Camus said, "*The Plague* is more than a chronicle of the Resistance. But certainly, it is nothing less." He wanted to capture and expand upon the intensity of their suffering, threat, exile, and moral anguish during the war.

In France, Nazis were called *la peste brune*, "the brown plague," referring to the Nazi's brown uniforms. In *The Plague*, Camus hints that there are some similarities between war and plague. Plagues and wars are equally common throughout history, yet both still take people by surprise.

Both can seem like nightmares that we might wake up from at any moment. Both seem too stupid, too absurd, to last. But they do last. And many people don't wake up. A plague, like war, cancels the future. Both put us on unstable ground with no clear way forward.

Oppression, too, is like a disease spread through people. But unlike a disease, human choices lie at the heart of fascism. A plague is impersonal, devoid of agency. Fascism is not. This was Roland Barthes's problem with reading *The Plague* as a critique of fascism. But despite the parallels, Camus doesn't say that fascism is natural.

Another limitation of the metaphor is that *The Plague* doesn't give context around what started the plague. How did the rats get infected in the first place? To what extent did human actions create the dire

situation? Context around what creates crises is important. Human actions, events, and situations created Nazism and enabled fascism to take hold. This was the gist of Simone de Beauvoir's critique. Beauvoir loved Camus's voice, but she saw *The Plague* as abstracted from history.

When *The Plague* was published, Jean-Paul Sartre felt similarly to Camus and admired its rebellious themes. Sartre later thought they were wrong to use a plague as a metaphor for oppression. Sartre came to believe that absurdity isn't to blame for oppression. People are to blame. It's not only leaders who are culpable but also individuals, in what they accept and what they rebel against. How all of us behave and go about our everyday lives will contribute to spreading or containing a virus or oppression.

Camus teaches us that just as there will always be new strains of viruses, there will always be new groups of people fighting. Whether it's plague or war, there are no final victories. They lie dormant for a while. But they always rise again. And when they do, it's up to each of us to push back against them, as Sisyphus does.

12

Camus on Authentic Rebellion

Through his play *The Just* and his essay *The Rebel*, Camus explores different perspectives on rebellion and whether violence and murder are ever justifiable. This lecture dives into those topics as well as what it means to be an authentic rebel and how authentic rebellion can be constructive rather than destructive.

Camus's *The Just*

Albert Camus was fascinated by the story surrounding the 1905 assassination of Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich. He was particularly intrigued by the assassin, the Russian poet Ivan Kalyayev, who was a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party's Combat Organization. In 1949, Camus wrote a play called *The Just*, sometimes translated as *The Just Assassins*, in which a group of Russian revolutionaries plots to overthrow the czarist regime.

The Myth of Sisyphus asks whether suicide is justifiable. Camus's answer was no. *The Just* asks whether murder is ever justifiable. His answer in this play, as well as his 1951 essay *The Rebel*, will again be no. He started writing about this topic right after World War II. Camus saw how ideologies justify murder and crime under the guise of justice and revolution.

The Just opens with a group of rebels discussing their plan to kill a tyrant. One member, Stepan Fedorov, says that he joined the group to defend the ideal of justice. Another member, Alexis, explains that speaking out against injustice is important, but it only takes us so far; doing something about it is the next step.

A third member of the group named Ivan Kaliyayev—nicknamed Yanek—is based on the real-life Kalyayev. Yanek says he joined the "revolution for the sake of life—to give life a chance." He loves living and wants to create space for beauty and happiness and good living, things that he says are impossible under a dictatorship like the Russian Empire.

The only female member, Dora Doublebov, a former chemistry major, makes the bombs. She points out that, as assassins, they are embodying the opposite of Yanek's ideal. Killing takes away chances at life.

Even though the members of the group don't like each other, they realize they are united in their goal, which is to free people from despotism. As in the real story, the assassins of Camus's play plan to ambush the tyrannical grand duke while traveling in his carriage. Yanek agrees to throw the bomb. Later, he explains to his comrades how the carriage

approached, and he ran toward it. Suddenly, he saw children sitting in it with the grand duke. He hesitated. The carriage continued to the theatre, unharmed.

The assassins debate whether Yanek was right not to throw the bomb, given that children would have been killed. Some say Yanek was right because they had agreed to murder one tyrant, not innocent children. But in Stepan's view, collateral damage is the cost of revolution. Killing two children now will save millions of others from starving in the future.

Dora counters that a revolution that condones killing innocent people is bound to fail because people don't like child murderers. Stepan wants to force people to accept a revolution regardless of who dies because he loves humanity in general, not individuals. Dora tells Stepan, "Love does not look like that." Dora seems to echo Camus's own concerns. Yanek also disagrees with Stepan. Yanek's attitude is no, it is not justifiable to kill people now so that others will have a better future.

The team regroups for the grand duke's next trip to the theatre. This time, there are no children in the carriage. This time, Yanek does throw the bomb and kills the grand duke. No innocent bystanders are harmed. In the real story, the driver died, too. Yanek starts making speeches in the crowd about the revolution and is arrested, as per his plan.

Camus does not endorse the assassins' actions. He thought violence and murder were wrong. Murder, even of a tyrant, is unjust. But he respects the rebels for their care and thoughtfulness. Most of the assassins are just because they tirelessly question their motives and actions. They're plagued with anxiety about their goals and methods. They're willing to be held accountable for their actions. The rebels pay more than they owe because they offer themselves up for punishment on the gallows. If violence is unavoidable, then, Camus says, it must always be tied to "personal responsibility." Yanek did tie his violence to personal responsibility. This is why he's an authentic rebel.

Camus's Objections to Violence

In *The Rebel*, Camus writes, "In that every action today leads to murder, direct or indirect, we cannot act until we know whether or why we have the right to kill." We also need to know whether we have the right to let others be killed. Our actions and inactions can both condone murder, even if we're not the ones doing the actual killing.

Camus was worried that we live in an age of premeditated murder where philosophy is used to justify wrongs. He was thinking philosophically about how far resistance fighters should go to combat tyranny. Is it OK to punch a Nazi? Or what about killing a mass murderer? Is the death penalty legitimate? What's the logic and morality underpinning such questions?

Between 1954 and 1962, an Algerian nationalist group called the National Liberation Front, the FLN for short, struggled long and hard for independence from France. Camus witnessed many rebels' bombings, in which many innocent people were killed. French authorities retaliated with extensive torture and killings. Camus did not support the Algerian rebels and their tactics. He opposed public executions of murderers and even agonized over the role of the death penalty for Nazis after World War II. He objected to all these forms of violence.

Authentic Rebellion

Rebellion is fundamental to humanity. In rebellion, we find values that don't appeal to religion or other dogmas. It provokes us to question how we might orient our lives in authentic ways. Camus's rebellion is constructive, creative, and collaborative. Camus's rebel says yes to clarity, unity, and order amid what he calls the "humiliating adventure" of human existence. His rebel says yes to the value of human life—both their own and others'.

When a rebel dies for their actions, they're sacrificing themselves for something that transcends them. That something is "a common good," by which Camus means rights and values that we share with one another.

Camus turns rebellion into the foundation of life: "I rebel—therefore we exist." But you don't have to be oppressed to rebel for a common good. You can act against injustices being done to others.

This is exactly what Yanek and the just assassins are struggling with. *The Rebel* suggests that the assassins are right in their metaphysical rebellion—or, in other words, in the way they draw a line in the sand against absurdity. They're also right to rebel against tyranny. The assassins are fighting for the common good, but in Camus's view, their violent strategy leads them astray.

There are a few solutions that Camus argues for in *The Rebel*. You'll learn about three here: art, nonviolence, and moderation.

First, art. "To create, today," Camus writes, "is to create dangerously. … The greatest opportunity for authenticity is, today, the greatest defeat of art." Art that questions is dangerous. The greatest opportunity is the greatest defeat because revolutionaries tend to kill critics who question the new reality. And this is why revolutionaries are often hostile to artists. Art is dangerous because it's a call for unity.

Artistic creation is a way of concretely manifesting elusive beauty, which helps us see possibilities for a better existence. Artistic creation can remind us of the original justifications for rebellion.

A second solution is nonviolence. Camus argues that destructive rebellion is illogical. Revolt that endorses murder undermines its original justification. Murderous revolt cannot transcend the cycle of violence. In *The Rebel*, Camus analyzes rebellion throughout history and finds that when tyranny rears its ugly head, people like the assassins rebel against it to affirm human dignity. If the rebels are successful, a revolution begins. Once that revolution has created its own new, unified regime, anyone who threatens it becomes a criminal. Murder is now justified in the name of unity. And so, a new tyranny arises. Inevitably, terrorism emerges again among those seeking to rebel against the new tyranny now denying their existence. It's an endless vicious cycle.

An authentic rebel rejects murder and breaks the usual cycle of tyranny that goes from injustices to rebellion to revolution to a new regime to new injustices.

In *The Rebel*, Camus points to Prometheus as "the first rebel." In Greek mythology, Prometheus is a demigod of fire. He stole fire from Zeus and gave it to humans. As punishment, Prometheus is chained up, and every day, an eagle eats his liver. Every night, his liver grows back. Eventually, Heracles saves Prometheus.

Camus understood the legend of Prometheus to be relevant to modern rebellion because, he says, "In the twentieth century power wears the mask of tragedy." Those in power quickly default to murder and oppression. Prometheus valued human life and fought against Zeus's tyranny and punishment. Camus suggests we take a similar approach: "Rebellion, in its very first manifestation, refuses to recognize punishment as legitimate."

A third possible solution is moderation. Camus wasn't interested in punishment but rather in a justice that could restore balance. Moderation exists in the tension between excess and deficiency. Authentic rebellion embraces this philosophy of moderation. Camus

says authentic rebellion "is a perpetual conflict, continually created and mastered by the intelligence. It does not triumph either in the impossible or in the abyss. It finds its equilibrium through them."

Camus's view was that many religions and political systems create hell on earth while promising a future utopia. "Real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present," Camus says. He isn't advocating for mindless indulgence in the moment. Nor is he advocating for us to become martyrs by sacrificing ourselves to some imagined future.

Yes, we should rebel against injustices, oppression, and tyranny. Yes, we should do what we can to create a just world. But a perfect world will forever be out of our reach. Our best efforts can still fail. The future is never guaranteed. So, what do we do? We strive to minimize suffering. We think and act with lucidity and generosity.

13

Frantz Fanon on Restoring Human Dignity

Like Camus, Frantz Fanon was another philosopher of rebellion who was also deeply interested in the Algerian war of independence from France. Both Camus and Fanon grappled with how to overcome exploitation and oppression in a way that doesn't create new injustices, but as you'll see in this lecture, they had very different ideas about how to go about it. While Camus favored moderation and condemned violence, Fanon was a member of the National Liberation Front and argued that revolutionary violence is, sometimes, justified.

Non-European Philosophers

The focus of this course up until now has been almost exclusively on White European men. A big part of the reason for this is patriarchal sexist and racist ideas about who counts as a philosopher—and who has been allowed to study, write, and publish.

Professor Lewis Gordon, one of the most prominent existential philosophers of the 21st century, says that it's wrong to assume only Europeans can be existential. While some Black writers had read Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and other early existentialists, many were already thinking about liberation, humanity, and agency long before then. African folk stories are filled with existential themes. Gordon explains that "problems of existence emerge wherever there are people confronting their freedom and degradation."

He writes that in 19th-century Europe, people were bored and worried about the future. White Americans were too confident and too focused on the future to be bored or face much anxiety. But Black Americans were steeped in existential dread. In Gordon's words, "Anxiety, dread, and despair [were] in the modern world's underside."

Many Black writers unveiled roots of the modern world by sharing the lived experiences of blackness. Existential themes of freedom, liberation, anguish, and agency are acutely related to slavery and, more generally, to suffering and oppression.

FANON

White Masks and Black Inferiority

Frantz Fanon grew up in the French colony of Martinique. After Hitler occupied France, Fanon—still a teenager—joined the Free French army to fight against Nazism. But Fanon was deeply shocked at the anti-Black racism from both White soldiers and the local communities they were fighting for. After the war, he won a scholarship to study dentistry in France but soon moved to psychiatry. Fanon approached psychiatry with a courageous attitude, and his focus on human dignity was revolutionary.

Fanon's first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, published in 1952 when he was 27, mixes psychoanalysis with his own self-critical streams of consciousness, literary criticism, and metaphors to expose uncomfortable truths about racism from different angles. He was concerned that so-called legitimate, traditional methods of treatment block truth because they're founded on colonialism and racism.

One fundamental truth that Fanon saw was that White Western culture has inflicted an "existential deviation" on Black people. It does this by imposing White Western culture as the universal. Fanon explains that Black and White people are assessed in terms of how well they assimilate into White culture. Any deviation from the standard White norms and ideals is judged as obscene. Seeing themselves through the White gaze, as not quite human, Black people objectify themselves and internalize a sense of inferiority.

Being treated as inferior, and feeling inferior, estranges and alienates people. This is what Fanon calls a psycho-existential complex that disorients people and encourages them to fear and devalue their authentic selves, adopt rigid archetypes, and annihilate their individuality and presence. Inferiority fuels a neurosis of self-accusation, which provokes "humiliating insecurity" that ends in despair and sometimes pathological delirium.

In one chapter of the book, Fanon presents a second fundamental truth: Racism robs people of their subjectivity. The existential desire to find meaning amid the absurd world is something Fanon felt acutely. But when he looked around for meaning, he says, "I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects."

Fanon relates how once, as he was boarding a train in France, a young child pointed him out to his mother and yelled that he was frightened. The child's fear and dehumanizing attitude came from the false myths that children learn growing up, such as that Black people are, to use Fanon's words, "savages, brutes, illiterates."

The normal response to being stereotyped, Fanon says, is "shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea." He describes his attempts to escape from these feelings: "I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility. Look, I will accept the lot, as long as no one notices me!" But Black people can't escape because of the way people judge them by their skin.

The Importance of Mutual Recognition

Fanon wanted to eradicate the poison of oppression. His remedy involves people exercising their own freedom but also demanding humanity from others. And here is where Fanon turns to Hegel's master-slave dialectic. Hegel argues that we become self-conscious only when other people acknowledge us. It's like a piece of our being is missing, and the other person has it. If we could only reclaim that chunk of ourselves from them, we'd be whole.

If both people treat each other as equals, then they can form a reciprocal relationship. But this usually doesn't happen. More often, the encounter leads to "a life-and-death struggle." And if one dominates and the other submits—either willingly or because they were overpowered—then they form a master-slave dialectic. The one who wins the battle becomes the "master," being-for-themselves. The one who surrenders becomes the "servant," being-for-the-other. But the servant has power, too. The master needs the servant to establish self-certainty as a master.

Reciprocity lies at the heart of Hegel's dialectic. If someone fails to reciprocally acknowledge another person, then they are effectively denying that person their humanity. Each needs the other to recognize them as valuable, as human, as seen, as a being who matters in this absurd world.

Fanon showed how racism excludes people from these intersubjective dynamics. When oppressed people try to engage in the dance of mutual recognition, they find themselves not even getting the basic acknowledgement of being an other. Oppressed people find themselves dehumanized and excluded from any kind of relationship where people can start to relate ethically to one another.

Through mutual recognition, we give each other dignity.

Authentic Upheaval

Fanon could have stayed in France, but he wanted to go to a colonized nation where his work would have more impact. In 1953, Algeria was already in a violent and tumultuous struggle for independence from the French. So, Fanon took a job heading up the psychiatric department at a hospital in Algiers, where he was in charge of 2,000 patients.

When he arrived, he found Arab and Berber patients shackled to their beds and in straitjackets. He unchained and untied them immediately. Apparently, some of the patients continued to behave as if they were still chained.

Fanon thought that psychoanalysis could help people understand behavioral patterns in both their personal and social environments. Normal children growing up in normal families will become normal people. But for a person of color, Fanon says, growing up in a normal family "will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white

world." A Black person will experience "psychic trauma" in a racist environment. But Fanon remained optimistic about possibilities for "an authentic upheaval."

A core dimension of authentic upheaval is raising patients' awareness of their freedom. Fanon wanted to help people understand and seize possibilities for choosing their lives. To this end, he created spaces where patients could practice being agents in their lives, for example, playing team sports, publishing a weekly journal, and desegregating spaces.

In a racist context, being Black means you're expected to be passive. So, to be an agent in your own life is to be disobedient. Standing up to the world calls for personal rebellion. It means becoming the author of your own life, recognizing yourself as worthy of being fully human and refusing the "amputation" of other people's objectifying gaze.

Instead of aggression, which is a movement toward conquest, Fanon prescribes the "ethical orientation" of love. When we love, we validate our own and one another's humanity. In Fanon's view, we need to restructure exploitative societies that assert the superiority of some races over others. We need to transcend racism and create a human world of reciprocal recognition.

Oppressed people can start to love authentically when they overcome their inferiority complexes, and oppressors can start to love authentically when they overcome their superiority complexes.

Justification for Violence against Oppression

During the Algerian revolt that began in 1954, amid the French military's horrific human rights abuses, including torture, executions, bloodbaths, and annihilation of local Algerians, Fanon treated both the torturers and the tortured. He taught revolutionaries how to cope with anxiety, withstand torture, and resist interrogation.

Karl Jaspers's essay "The Question of German Guilt" inspired Fanon. Jaspers proposed that by virtue of our shared humanity, we bear joint responsibility for injustices, especially those that we know about. If we don't do anything to combat injustice, we are complicit. And we should be ashamed.

In his final work, *The Damned of the Earth* (also known as *The Wretched of the Earth*), published in 1961, Fanon goes further into the need for revolutionary action. The most famous part of the book is the section on violence. Fanon's view is that continuing colonization and racism is violent. Overthrowing colonization and racism is violent. Violence is inevitable.

For Fanon, decolonial violence is justified morally because it equalizes the colonizers' violence. Violence is also justified psychologically because it's an assertion of agency. Violence restores the humanity of the oppressed and reminds oppressors that we're all mortal. And violence is justified practically because colonial structures need to be removed to clear the path for new paradigms.

But instead of striving toward a single notion of humanity—as embodied in whiteness—we should be looking for more creative possibilities. Instead of defining themselves by White standards, Fanon suggests that Black people "strive unremittingly for a concrete and ever new understanding of man."

Although Fanon argues that violence can be justified, he doesn't actually advocate for violence. But he knew that appeals to reason, respect, and dignity don't always work. His point is that seizing freedom must sometimes be violent because oppression is violent.

The path to disalienation involves refusing to be a slave to the past and refusing to be locked into the present. It means saying no to subjugation and yes to affirming human dignity. Sure, the past informs and influences us, but it shouldn't determine our future. Fanon writes, "My black skin is not the wrapping of specific values."

In his thirties, Fanon was diagnosed with leukemia. Doctors said he had only months to live and advised him to go to the National Institutes of Health in the United States for the most innovative treatment. Fanon was deeply reluctant to go to America because of its history of vicious racism. But he became so sick that he eventually agreed to go.

By the time he was finally admitted, he had double pneumonia and acute anemia and required multiple blood transfusions. Fanon died on December 6, 1961, the day after arriving at the hospital. He was only 36 years old. The following year, Algeria won its independence.

14

Jean-Paul Sartre on Why Hell Is Other People

You can't escape other people's opinions of you, and while that can be frustrating at times, it can also be a good thing. In this lecture, you'll explore Jean-Paul Sartre's views on the important role other people play in your understanding of yourself. By seeing what you cannot see on your own, others give you perspectives that can deepen your insights. The presence of others also provokes you to reflect on your actions and question your own existence.

Sartre's *No Exit*

In 1935, Jean-Paul Sartre wanted to hallucinate—for research purposes, of course. Specifically, he was researching dreams and perception to understand new ways of looking at the world. He wanted to draw on personal experiences, too. A friend of his, the psychiatrist Daniel Lagache, suggested he take part in a study of mescaline—a psychedelic found in several species of cactus.

Under Lagache's supervision at Sainte-Anne Hospital in Paris, Sartre was injected with the hallucinogen. Lagache warned that it could be "mildly disagreeable" but not dangerous. Sartre's experience was mostly filled with horrifyingly distorted objects—among them, a swarm of crabs.

For a long time after that experience, Sartre would still see crabs trotting along behind him. Eventually, he sought the advice of psychotherapist Jacques Lacan. Sartre reported that "we sort of concluded that it was fear of becoming alone." Simone de Beauvoir got sick of Sartre complaining about the crabs and told him to stop talking to them. Eventually, he did as Beauvoir advised, and the crabs left him alone.

Sartre learned that whether it's crustaceans or people, it's hell to have too much company, but it's also hell not to have enough company. While ignoring the crabs made them go away, the same was not true of other people. Other people are always there, whether we like it or not. As the character Garcin says in Sartre's 1944 play *No Exit*, "Hell is other people!"

In the play, Garcin and two women, Estelle and Inez, find themselves locked in a small room together. It's literally hell. There are no mirrors in the room; each of them can only see themselves through the others. They become one another's psychological torturers. They go round and round, finding new ways to pick at one another's vulnerabilities. It's toward the end of the play that Garcin declares, "There's no need for red-hot pokers. Hell is other people!"

Sartre's point is that we can't escape other people's judgments and opinions of us. But also, we don't really want to escape others because they are valuable for understanding our being. There is "no exit" from

this hell because, even when given the chance to leave, many of us stay of our own accord. At one point in the play, the door to their room opens. None of them leave. Perhaps because they've realized that the alternative—being completely alone—would be much worse.

As mentioned earlier, there are no mirrors in the room. What does a mirror do? It reflects who we are, superficially, at least. It gives us proof of our existence. In Sartre's play, each character needs the others to look at them and talk to them so that they can try to validate and understand their existence. But just as mirrors can be distorted, so, too, can the reflection of other people be warped.

In a later interview, Sartre said that what he meant by "hell is other people" was that "If our relations with others are twisted or corrupted, then others have to be hell," and "Fundamentally, others are what is most important in us for our understanding of ourselves." We can't escape the gaze of the other, but we also can't see everything they see.

SARTRE

Other People See What We Cannot

How might we understand all of this in light of Sartre's philosophy in *Being and Nothingness*? If a goal of life is to know who we are, then how do we learn? Sartre distinguishes between three main types of self-knowledge: spontaneous perception, reflective consciousness, and reflection through the gaze of others.

Spontaneous perception is when you see or do something but don't focus on it. Reflective consciousness is when you're aware of something and evaluate it. But, Sartre says, "One would not know oneself without the Other." We need reflection through the gaze of others to access deeper insights of our being.

Why can't we see ourselves on our own? According to Sartre, to examine your own self-consciousness, you must be able to objectify it. You must be able to put yourself "outside of being." But you can't be a subject and objectify yourself at the same time.

Subjective reflection is one thing, but we're fooling ourselves if we think we can be truly objective about ourselves. We can't be impartial. But the viewpoints of others help give us additional perspectives.

Consider this example. Many of us go to jobs because it's what's expected, and we need to pay the bills. We might be fully aware that we're working but not think too much about it (spontaneous perception). But say an incident—maybe a conflict with a coworker or being overlooked for a promotion—triggers you to enter a deeper reflective state. You wonder what you're doing with your life and whether spending your time in this role is worthwhile.

How do you think through what to do? Well, you can do a lot of soul searching on your own (reflective consciousness). But it can be even more valuable to have people to talk to, to understand their perceptions. They could have ideas about where your skills and passions might be applied and flourish.

The gaze of the other can reveal aspects of your being, possibilities, and challenges that you can't see on your own.

This example assumes that others have our best interests at heart. But how do we know whether the friend we're talking to isn't just telling us what we want to hear? Or what if they have ulterior motives for encouraging us to leave our job or stay?

Sartre's answer is that we can't know for sure. And that makes other people hell. Sartre says, "We resign ourselves to seeing ourselves through the Other's eyes; this means that we attempt to learn our being through the revelations of language." But people misunderstand one another; they miss nuances, hints, and suggestions. And people lie. And so, through language, he says, "often one does not unravel it."

Being-for-Itself versus Being-in-Itself

The role of the other is more than just sharing opinions. It's fundamental to Sartre's view of existence. In *Being and Nothingness*, he proposes that there are two primary modes of existence: being-for-itself and being-in-itself.

A being-for-itself is conscious. You are a being-for-itself (or "for-yourself") because you can consciously change yourself and the world around you through your choices. As humans, Sartre writes, "we are a choice, and for us, to be is to choose ourselves."

A being-in-itself is not conscious. A rock is a being-in-itself because, as far as we know, rocks can't reflect on their existence or question themselves in ways that humans can. Rocks can't make choices about their being. Humans have possibilities. Rocks do not.

Sartre says that for humans "to act is to modify the shape of the world; it is to arrange means in view of an end. … We should observe first that an action is on principle intentional." Humans act with intentionality in ways that rocks cannot.

This gap between what you are now and what you are becoming is "nothingness."

In addition to being conscious, another feature of being human, being-for-ourselves, is that we are always more than what we are. We are the sum of our past actions and choices, which is our "being." But that's not all we are. We're also our intentions and projects, which are nothing. We're a lack of our possibilities. We're not only being—we're also becoming because we're forever incomplete.

Death completes us because that is the point at which there are no more possibilities. Sartre writes,

> At the moment of death the chips are down, there remains not a card to play. Death reunites us with ourselves. … By death the for-itself is changed forever into an in-itself in that it has slipped entirely into the past.

To be human is to strive toward becoming complete, and it's human to want to be secure in the knowledge of what we are and what we're becoming. But we can't predict the future, and that's anxiety-inducing. It can be frustrating to realize that part of our being will always be lacking until death.

We surpass our being toward becoming a "totality," that is, a cohesive, fulfilled, "perfect being." But we'll never be that perfect being until it's too late. Sartre defines this project as wanting to be the ultimate all-powerful creator of our universe. What he's really saying is that we want to be our own God.

Sartre accepted Hegel's idea that the acknowledgment of others is fundamental to our self-consciousness. But Sartre is more pessimistic than Hegel. Sartre described the presence of others as a drain hole because people steal the world from him. Sartre says, "I attempt to lay hold of the Other so that he may release to me the secret of my being."

The challenge is to hold our being in tension with others so that neither slides into the master or slave role. But Sartre doubted it would be possible to overcome wanting to control the other. Other people want us to be safe and subservient to them. We tend to want others to be safe and subservient to us.

Other People Provoke Us to Reflect

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre talks about spying through a large keyhole. Alone, maybe you don't judge yourself. You're simply looking. Sartre says you "simply live it." This is spontaneous perception. In this situation, we are pure consciousness of things and unable to know ourselves. A total nothing moment.

Now, you hear someone behind you. You wonder if they've seen you. Sartre suggests that shame creeps in only when other people are there, or when we imagine other people are there. Sartre says, "I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other." The other "suddenly pushes me into a new dimension of existence—the dimension of the unrevealed." We feel shame in the presence of others because they impose their own values on the world and modify our perspectives of situations. They provoke us to reflect on whether what we're doing is right or wrong, good or bad, or something to be ashamed of.

But how our situations are modified is entirely individual. Do you accept the other's judgment, ignore them, or challenge them? We can choose our response to this. "The value of the Other's recognition of me depends on the value of my recognition of the Other," Sartre says.

Perhaps you don't know or care about the person who has seen you. In that case, you might say hello and go back to your peeping. But Sartre says that to ignore other people entirely is inhuman. He wanted to avoid solipsism, which is the idea that only you are real and everyone else might as well be imaginary.

The most valuable contribution of other people is that their very existence throws our being into question, and our existence throws everyone else's existence into question, too. If you care about someone, you'll care what they think. And the more you care about them, the more you'll worry about what they think and care about their judgment of you. And the more power they have over you, the more you'll want to try to control what they think. This is the battle of consciousnesses. This is why Sartre says, "Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others."

Sartre's life was filled with conflict, and he attracted plenty of critics. Some thought he was too negative. And while he can be negative, there are also optimistic possibilities within his work. One dimension of his thinking where this ambivalence shines through is in his views on intimate relationships, which is the subject of the next lecture.

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Sartre on Sex and Sadomasochism

One of Sartre's key tensions of love is that you can never truly know what the other person is thinking. For this reason, love is always infused with anxiety. This lecture examines Sartre's views on strategies lovers use to navigate this tension, including physical pleasure and pain. It also looks at how his ideas about authentic love evolved over time in his writings.

Sensuality

Romantic lovers are often the ones who know us best because we're more intimate with them than, say, coworkers—at least normally—and romantic lovers are intimate sensually. For Sartre, sex and sensuality provide deeper possibilities for intimacy and communication.

Simone de Beauvoir wrote that she and Sartre had given up sexual relations after a couple of years. "Love was not very successful," she explained, "chiefly because he does not care much for sexual life." Beauvoir described their lifelong relationship as being more friendship than love. Sartre's view was that sensual connections, even if they didn't involve sexual organs, were critically important.

For Sartre, deep and tender relationships with women propelled him (and, he implies, his lover) toward authenticity—to be themselves, uniquely and incomparably. He found this and more in his relationship with Beauvoir. Being with Beauvoir, intimately and over time, enabled him to understand his life, past, and context in an organized way. He thought the same was possible for other relationships, too.

Sensuality is important for a few reasons. For starters, language is limited, and sensuality adds a new dimension to communication. Sartre says there are ways of communicating without language that open up when you're involved sensually: "Relations that are literally sexual allow for the objective and the subjective to be given together more easily."

Second, sensuality is important because it invites a special type of openness from each person. The presence of another makes it brutally clear to us that, in Sartre's words, "I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt, that I occupy a place and that I can not in any case escape from the space in which I am without defense."

We know that we might be a means to another's ends that we're unaware of. But sensuality, because of the depth of nakedness—literally or metaphorically—on both sides, seems to be able to ease this anxiety.

For Sartre, love's ideal, motivation, end, and unique value is unity.

And third, sensuality is important because it brings people together so closely that it can feel like a unity. Part of this unity is being able to say "we," as in "We love each other. We are together. We are building a future." But when you say "we," it raises a question: yourself and who? To be able to say "we" means that you need to have an awareness of the other. Language helps. Sensuality helps. Vulnerability helps. When both people are vulnerable, when they can be present with the other and reveal themselves, it can help them be more authentic.

Is Sartre suggesting that sensuality can overcome the hell-is-other-people situation? Not quite. The problem is that you can't have a good awareness of what the other is. While you might identify with another person in terms of doing activities together or having similar aims in life, you can't know whether the other person is truly having the same experience as you. There will always be a risk and danger. But Sartre said that to completely overcome the struggle might be to destroy love itself.

Appropriation and Assimilation

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre proposes that there are two primary attitudes in love: appropriation (possession) and assimilation (subservience).

First, assimilation. The fundamental problem with love is that it's about wanting to unite with the other, but you also don't want the other to lose their otherness because then you'll lose their objective insights into your being.

So, you want your lover to be free but not *too* free. You don't want them to be free to love someone else or to leave you. Sartre explains,

> The lover does not desire to possess the beloved as one possesses a thing; he demands a special type of appropriation. He wants to possess a freedom as freedom.

Lovers want one another to be the "unique and privileged occasion" of limiting their freedom for one another. When you each become one another's "supreme value," "the whole World" for each other, then there's no need to worry that you're a means to ends you aren't aware of. Sartre says that this feeling explains the joy of love—because you're no longer anxious that the other is a threat.

But the joy of secure love can't last. Anxiety will always creep back in, and lovers will be disappointed. Sartre proposes that "disappointed love leads to masochism." Masochism is a strategy to become submissive to the other person to try to merge with them. It's like turning yourself into a robot and letting the other person control you. But it's a paradox. You're still using your lover to get access to their objective opinions. And you can change your mind. So, really, you still have some control.

Seduction

The real goal of love is to find out what the other thinks of you. Love becomes an attempt to fascinate your crush so much that they are enchanted with you.

Sartre was an expert at seduction from an early age. He discovered his strength was language. He understood that seduction "was a matter of capturing the world in words; capturing it for my companion; making it exist more strongly and beautifully."

Sartre imagined himself "a scholarly Don Juan, slaying women through the power of his golden tongue." In his *War Diaries*, Sartre talked about flirting and how he loved the game of seduction more than its culmination.

> I was less keen on the woman than on the play-acting she gave me the opportunity for—since I'd not have agreed to obtain her by just any old means. … Possessing her counted for less than the prospects of possession.

From a philosophical perspective, seduction aims at getting the other to love you back while not demanding to be loved. Demands and force destroy love. And even if you could control your beloved's feelings, it'd be like turning them into a robot. You can't get any valuable insights into your being from a robot, or someone who always tells you what you want to hear.

Caresses and Sadism

Consider this question: Once you've had sex with a lover, do you stop desiring them? Maybe temporarily, in a physical sense, but usually not in a psychological sense. Sartre thinks that this phenomenon means that there must be another goal of sexual love. Sartre proposes that the goal of sexual love is the "radical incarnation" of the other's freedom. And caressing is the way to do this.

You know how cream rises to the top of the milk bottle? Sartre thought that caressing does a similar sort of thing to our bodies. Bodies are like milk. Our freedom, our subjectivity, is like cream. When you caress a body, the other's subjectivity is revealed through their gestures and expressions. When the other person is writhing in pleasure, it can seem as though their movements reveal exactly what they're thinking.

But Sartre realized that even if a person's subjectivity was revealed through their ecstatic body, that still doesn't tell us much—if anything—about their innermost thoughts and intentions. All it tells us is what they look like when they're sexually aroused.

Sartre also pointed to sadism as another strategy that people use to try to incarnate the other's freedom. When caressing doesn't work, sometimes people try to force the cream of subjectivity out of the other with violence. Coercing people into obscene positions and awkward acts can momentarily seem as though the sadist has captured the other's freedom.

But sadism fails to reveal the other's freedom because the person on the receiving end of sadism can, at any time, deny the sadist the satisfaction of responding. That lack of recognition alienates the sadist. So, even

if you torture the other person, all you're really going to know is what they look like when they're in pain. And even then, it's not guaranteed because some people are better at tolerating and concealing pain than others.

Caressing and sadism are both ways of using bodies as instruments to try to reveal someone's subjectivity, but they both fail. While the body plays an important role, sexual loving can't be purely physical. For Sartre, sex is clearly psychological.

Sexual love is a battleground, where lovers try to close the distance between themselves to unite. But unity is impossible. Any feeling of oneness is insecure and unreliable. Our struggle to grasp for secure love creates constant tensions. Sadomasochism and other strategies come into play, but they're doomed to fail. This is why Sartre says love contains the seed of its own destruction. He concludes, "The Other is on principle inapprehensible." So, what do we do about this?

Although love is the attempt to connect with people to understand our beings, Sartre thought that there is always an "ontological separation"—a kind of wall—between us.

Authentic Love

Sartre suggests that just because love is doomed doesn't mean we shouldn't try. We can't retreat into a cozy cocoon for two because we're situated in a world brimming with other people, possibilities, and obstacles. So, love is a tension between wanting to hold tight to the other but also needing to let them go to pursue their own authentic projects.

Is he suggesting that the process of trying and failing and trying again defines love or is at least a necessary component of love? Perhaps. But he's also suggesting something else about the ethics of love.

Sartre had intended to write a book about existential ethics but never managed it. However, his notes were published posthumously as *Notebooks for an Ethics*. One of the notes says, “An original structure of authentic love [is] to unveil the Other’s being-within-the-world, to take up this unveiling, and to set this Being within the absolute.” And here’s the really important part: “to rejoice in it without appropriating it; to give it safety in terms of my freedom, and to surpass it only in the direction of the Other’s ends.”

Sartre suggests that love is a mutual project of revealing one another’s being, and this attitude is a lot less self-absorbed and more optimistic than his views in *Being and Nothingness*. And when he says that authentic love is not about possession but rather giving the other safety and being joyful about their existence, he also seems to see a lot more possibilities for overcoming the vicious cycle of sadomasochistic love.

In the notebook, Sartre goes on to say that “desire desires the other in his being-there,” suggesting that love isn’t about extracting information from the other person about our own being or trying to incarnate their freedom like cream on top of milk. Rather, love is appreciating the other just as they are. Sartre also admitted that “deeper recognition and reciprocal comprehension of freedoms” was missing from *Being and Nothingness*.

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Sartre on Authentic Work

In this lecture, you'll explore Sartre's views on the pursuit of meaningful work. To him, work is but one component of one's life, and it's important to strike a balance between doing something that's fulfilling but not so demanding that you lose or betray yourself along the way. You'll look at his method of existential psychoanalysis as one way to examine the choices you've made throughout your life and determine whether you are being authentic in the pursuit of your goals.

Less Seriousness, More Playfulness

Lots of organizations call for people to make work the most important thing in their lives. But for Sartre, taking a role too seriously is a problem because it means you're giving more value to external reality than your own reality—you've essentially turned yourself into a robot. Serious people hide their freedom and treat themselves like objects instead of subjects. Sartre called such a denial of freedom "bad faith." For him, *not* turning yourself into a robot is part of what defines authentic work.

So, one lesson here is not to forget that there's more to you than your work. While you might share goals with your employer, it's inauthentic to give your whole being to a job. Not that you shouldn't work and pay your bills. As Heidegger observed, sometimes you have to be inauthentic, and that's OK.

A second lesson is to remember to be playful! Sartre says that "play … liberates subjectivity." Exercising your freedom is inherently playful. And although work is not playful in a purely whimsical sense, often requiring a certain amount of technical skill, there's still space for creativity in the way you organize yourself and connect yourself to the task. Not all jobs have huge spaces for creativity, but to be denied that space entirely is objectifying and alienating.

Many of us are guilty of objectifying other people. Sartre suggests that we often try to imprison people in their roles and reduce them to their function. Thinking about ways we can be a bit more playful—and appreciate other people's playfulness—is a good step toward avoiding a bad faith attitude of objectifying ourselves and others.

For Sartre, it's bad faith to be so serious about a role that you forget that there are other dimensions to your existence.

Your Fundamental Project

What if you find yourself stuck in a dead-end job? Or maybe your job is good enough, but you're still not sure if it's really what you want to be doing with your life. How do you figure it out?

Sartre suggests that at some point in your life, you will have made an original choice about who you are. That original choice—or fundamental project, as he sometimes calls it—guides the decisions you make, even though you might not be fully cognizant of it.

Maybe you look back on your career, with all its different roles, and it feels chaotic. Still, Sartre would suggest that there is a pattern, a guiding thread, through your choices. Beneath all those fragments of your life is a decision you made about how to create yourself. That unique choice of "you" underpins your motives and actions and organizes the meaning in your life. Sartre writes that "free choices are all integrated—even if they are successive and contradictory—within the unity of my fundamental project."

Usually, this original choice happens early because people will ask, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And when you finish school, you need to do something, so you choose to pursue a vocation through college or an apprenticeship or something else. Ideally, you would choose a vocation that's meaningful to you—or at least meaningful enough.

Some people are OK to clock in and out of a job that doesn't provide meaning in their life. That kind of attitude gives you a lot of options. But if you're in a job that requires you to do things you don't agree with or find boring, insignificant, or soul sucking, it could be that the role doesn't align with your original choice. If you were doing tasks that contributed to the kind of vocation you want, you probably wouldn't react so viscerally.

The original choice isn't a spontaneous decision. It unfolds over time. Nor is the original choice always a happy one. Maybe you acquiesce to it. Maybe you do it because you don't know what else to do. Maybe your big choice is not to do anything in particular. No problem. Your original

choice isn't fixed. You can reinvent yourself. But such a massive shift in your way of being in the world gives rise to the anxiety you feel when you make big changes to your life.

Existential Psychoanalysis

In his 1957 essay *Search for a Method*, Sartre discusses a type of existential psychoanalysis called the progressive-regressive method. The regressive part of the method is digging into your past—your childhood, family life, and other stuff external to you that shaped your situation. The situation we find ourselves in is our "historical conditioning." Sartre says that historical conditioning "exists every minute of our lives." Note that Sartre isn't talking about determinism. Rather, our past and context habituate us to certain ways of being but don't determine us in an absolute sense.

The progressive part of the method is digging into your lived experiences—your patterns of behavior, active choices, and intentions. This dimension is all about what you do with what's been done to you. In Sartre's words, "you become what you are in the context of what others have made of you."

Existential psychoanalysis is about continually questioning until you come across those unique events that are core to your very being. We get there by asking questions like, What is the project of my whole being? On what basis have I chosen to live? What primordial choices have I made?

Existential psychoanalysis aims to reveal your fundamental project and the ways you're pursuing it and then make you think about whether it's authentic to continue or to assertively choose a different and more authentic goal.

This process gets to the heart of authenticity. There are two core dimensions to an authentic vocation: An authentic vocation is a meaningful one that you've actively chosen with lucidity and one that you actively choose to pursue in ways that are meaningful to you. So, it's inauthentic to pursue a goal that someone else pressured you into or that you're doing because of historical or social conditioning. And pursuing a goal that maybe you did choose but in ways that someone else dictates is also inauthentic.

Keep in mind that digging into the roots of your life is a huge undertaking that is tough to do on your own. But Sartre believed that giving some thought to this approach can reveal hints about our original choices.

Sometimes, you leave a particular path—as Sartre did with shifting from teaching philosophy to writing it. Often, you have to do something before you realize it doesn't fit into your original project. And sometimes, something provokes you to reflect and pivot to a more authentic vocation.

But being aware of your original choice won't tell you what to do. There is rarely going to be a simple or "right" answer to big choices and major life decisions. We will always be making choices with incomplete information and will have to create our own solution. For Sartre, we draw our own portrait. We perpetually make ourselves. And yes, it's really, really hard. Sartre says, "We ourselves decide our being. And with this abandonment goes anguish."

Freedom in the Workplace

Another way that Sartre's philosophy can help us think about work is with respect to how much freedom we have in the workplace. In his 1960 book *Critique of Dialectical Reason,* Sartre develops his own brand of existential Marxism.

Marxism posits that objective forces and abstract trends shape our situation and determine our future. Sartre argued that people—subjective forces—shape our economy, history, and society. Sartre also argued that the Communists had perverted Marxism, and he wanted to rescue Marxism's good parts and ditch the dogmatism.

Sartre scholars have wildly ambivalent opinions as to whether his Marxist views in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* contradict his existential philosophy in *Being and Nothingness*. But for now, let's assume that the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is a modification of Sartre's philosophy in *Being and Nothingness*, not a rejection of it.

For example, is it not possible that we are shaped by our past and also free to choose our future? You might have been brought up in a family of doctors, and that's a clear path for you, too, but you can also choose against that and do something completely different.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that we're radically free to choose whether to get up for work, as long as we lucidly face up to the consequences. Later, Sartre realized that for many, it's not so easy. A lot of people are just trying to get by, and there's a high price to pay for exercising radical freedom. The worker who was born into a working-class family and lives from paycheck to paycheck will be focused on survival.

To his credit, in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre does say that one of the big questions to ask yourself is, "Doubtless I could have done otherwise, but at what price?" You could choose not to go to work, but if the cost is getting fired and not being able to pay your rent and eat, then it's not a meaningful choice. And conversely, if your job is so awful, maybe it's worth the risk to leave.

It's bad faith to do nothing to try to change your situation. But it's also bad faith to ignore the limits around you. The reality is that some people are channeled into restrictive roles to survive and there's little they can do about it—at least in the short term.

Sartre's progressive-regressive method is about reflecting on not only how our past has shaped who we are now but also how our choices and intentions shape us.

Some people enjoy the privilege of being able to pursue an authentic vocation from an early age. Others start on track for one life but escape to another. Still others try to do a good job and to flourish while seeking a meaningful or at least decent vocation to occupy their limited time on this earth. And finally, there are those who are born into a working-class life and struggle to make authentic choices about their careers.

By doing nothing to change our situation, we're choosing not to choose, but that's an understandable decision given exploitative circumstances. The key takeaway here is this: Let's try not to take work too seriously and stay open for spaces of playfulness to exercise our freedom. Our lives are an infinite playground.

17

Richard Wright on Overcoming Alienation

What would you do if given the chance to walk away from the life you have now and start afresh? What if you were drowning in debt and obligations and had disappointed everyone around you? What would it really mean to take on a new, radically individual life, cutting free of all ties?

As you'll see in this lecture, this is the existential dilemma faced by Cross Damon, the protagonist of Richard Wright's *The Outsider*, published in 1953 and which has been called "the first existentialist novel written by an American."

Richard Wright's Life and Times

To put the novel in context, it's helpful to know a bit about Richard Wright's personal background. In his 1945 autobiography, *Black Boy*, Wright explains he was born in 1908 in Mississippi into an oppressive, abusive, and racist Seventh-day Adventist community. He tells of how his mother and grandparents beat him and how he spent some time in an orphanage. Despite very little schooling because of chaos in his home life, Wright excelled when he attended. He eventually left school and moved to Memphis, Tennessee.

Wright found living in racist America suffocating. In 1927, he moved to Chicago in hope of a fuller, less hostile, and more dignified life. He worked as a postal clerk until the Great Depression and then as a street sweeper, publicist, guidebook writer, and other jobs. In 1932, he joined a Communist literary group aiming to use art for revolutionary causes. And in 1933, he joined the Communist Party. But after suffering years of slander, betrayal, and violence at the hands of party members, he became disillusioned and quit.

In 1937, he moved to New York City. By then, he had already published poems and stories and drafted his first novel. In 1938, he published a collection of novellas titled *Uncle Tom's Children*, which won a *Story* magazine prize. In 1939, he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship.

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Another prominent African American author, Ralph Ellison, pointed Wright to French existential theatre and Jean-Paul Sartre's work. In 1944, Wright asked his friend Dorothy Norman, a journalist and intellectual, to teach him about existentialism—especially Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. In 1946, Wright met Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre in person, and they became friends and influenced each other's thinking.

Wright was already thinking in existential terms about freedom, alienation, authenticity, and how to find meaning in an absurd world before having read any of the existential or proto-existential thinkers. He moved to Paris permanently in 1946, which broadened his thinking about racism, colonialism, and fascism.

"Dread" and "Dream"

The Outsider is divided into five chapters—"Dread," "Dream," "Descent," "Despair," and "Decision"—each of which parallels an existential theme in Cross Damon's life. When we first meet Cross in Chicago, he's in a deep state of dread. He sleepwalks through his job sorting mail but does it because he is forever in debt and stuck in the quicksand of obligations. To numb his feelings, he drinks too much.

Cross is bound by marriage. His wife, Gladys, throws him out because he hit her, which he did precisely so that she would throw him out. As punishment, Gladys won't divorce him or let him see his three sons.

Cross is also bound by desire. He meets a young woman named Dot, who claims to be 17 years old. They flirt. He tells her he's married but doesn't live with his wife. She says it doesn't matter. They start sleeping together. After Dot becomes pregnant, Cross finds out she's only 15. Dot threatens to charge him with statutory rape if he won't marry her. Dot tells Gladys, who then blackmails Cross, demanding $800 to pay off her house and car.

Cross is bound by his past, too. His father died when he was young, and Cross inherited the emotional weight of his mother's grief and dread. His dread also springs from a sense of betrayal at being lucidly aware of his horrifying predicament and vision of how life could be better.

From a young age, Cross believed that "it's up to us to make ourselves something. … A man creates himself." But now, all he wants to do is roll up into a ball and fling himself as far as he can. Wright writes, "This dilemma was the meaning of his life." Cross is alienated. He finds no meaning in existence and feels himself powerless, without an anchor.

After getting the $800 loan, Cross boards a train to take the cash to Gladys. When it crashes in a tunnel, Cross is assumed dead. In reality, he's suffered only minor injuries. Cross faces a crossroads: either return to his dreadful life or seize his freedom and a new identity. He chooses the terrifying and exhilarating dream, asking, "Why the hell not?"

"Descent" and "Despair"

Cross moves to New York City following his supposed death and takes the name Lionel Lane. He sees this existential choice as the fight for self-realization. As Cross descends into his new life, his quest to create himself becomes "religious in its intensity." Almost immediately, he realizes that his forbidden choice, to let people believe he is dead, means that he also has to cut ties with the law and morality.

At a hotel, Cross bumps into an old friend who recognizes him. Out of fear of his new freedom being compromised, Cross pushes his friend out a window, covering up the murder as a possible suicide, and flees. It is the first of four murders he commits throughout the book as he learns to live by Dostoyevsky's famous quote that if God is dead, then anything goes.

For a time, Cross lives free from the external beasts of family, social pressures, and the law. But his desires become tyrannical, like a "restless, floating demon" within him. He plunges into a spiritual malady of despair and lives in a kind of "subjective prison."

He loses his sense of aliveness and feels more adrift and alienated than ever. He begins to idealize his past life. He has forgotten that his original life was also dry and intolerable, but at least he knew it was his world. Now, he says, "It was just a world." And he hates it.

Once Cross frees himself from the agonizing duties of his past life, he faces the agonizing emptiness of his new life.

"Decision"

We could cut ties and duties like Cross does and recreate ourselves. But that doesn't work out so well for Cross. So, what other decisions—or existential leaps—might bring meaning to our lives? Wright explores a few possibilities in the novel's final chapter.

Kierkegaard's religious leap to faith is one option that works for some. But Cross doesn't believe that religion is a good option. He thinks it settles for simple understandings of the world and dishes out glib answers. It's easier to believe that gods make good and terrible things happen than to think that there's no meaning in the chaos at all. Belief in life after death can make this absurd world more tolerable.

Political ideologies are another possible existential leap. Wright wrote *The Outsider* not long after World War II, amid McCarthyism and the Cold War. Some of Wright's own disappointments with the Communist Party seem to be communicated through Cross, who also loathes fascism and capitalism. Cross knows there's not much that can be done about these ideological monsters. All you can do is try to stop yourself getting entangled with them and maybe even help others not become anesthetized by them.

Wright does suggest that a commitment to connect with other people might provide an authentic way forward. At one point, Cross feels that trying to connect with others is like talking through a glass wall—you see one another, but you can't hear or understand.

Music might be a possible bridge. When Cross hears a neighbor playing blue-jazz in Harlem, he feels less alone. Music is an art form that can incite rebellion against suffocating traditions. Musicians, artists, and teachers are outsiders who look bravely at what Cross calls "horrible totalitarian reptile[s]." They tend to be targeted by those vying for power because creative thinkers question and are a threat to how far power can extend.

Another character in *The Outsider*, a brilliant and successful White artist named Eva Blount, aims to paint in ways that foster connection and understanding. Cross admires her work and goals and shares with her his view that abstract art is "pure creation" and a way of authentically expressing subjective dimensions of reality like dread and suffering.

Cross discovers that Eva recently married Gil, a Communist. During their honeymoon, she found out that the Communist Party had ordered Gil to marry her to boost the party's image. The Communists threatened that if she didn't keep quiet and stay married, they would destroy her. In an attempt to assert his own version of right in the world, Cross murders Gil and two others—a Fascist and another Communist.

Eva and Cross become lovers. He dreams of building a life with her beyond despair. She represents what's worth protecting and defending in the world. Wright also suggests that truth is a way of linking us together. Lies get in the way of building bridges. But when Eva finally learns the truth about Cross, she jumps out of a sixth-floor window and dies.

The closest that Cross comes to building an authentic bridge of connection is with District Attorney Ely Houston. After meeting on the train as Cross flees from Chicago to New York City, the two men's paths cross again when Ely is assigned to investigate Cross's murders.

On the train, they bond as outsiders. Ely, who is White, is an outsider by virtue of his disability—his back is hunched. They also bond as intellectual equals. And later, they bond as law and outlaw. Ely figures out Cross's real identity and that he has committed murder but doesn't have concrete proof that will hold up in court. Ely understands Cross's psychological and emotional reasons for doing what he did. It's ironic that the only person who understands Cross is the same person whose job it is to condemn him for his criminal actions.

Rejecting radical individualism, religion, and political ideologies as solutions, Wright points to a kind of existential thinking that recognizes the importance of authentic connections with others.

The truth won't always connect people. But Wright leaves open a real possibility that honest communication just might lead to authentic connection—or at least help us to feel less alone in the world.

After the Communists shoot Cross in the street, he is taken to the hospital. Moments before he dies, Ely visits him and asks why he chose to live this way. Cross answers, "I wanted to be free. … To feel what I was worth. … What living meant to me. … I loved life too … much." But he also admits that, at the end of his path, he found nothing.

Cross laments, "I wish I had some way to give the meaning of my life to others. …To make a bridge from man to man." Wright seems to affirm that, as social beings, to live in a society means making commitments. Those commitments—like a bold existential leap—include trying to connect to others, to listen, and to be honest. "The search [for meaning] can't be done alone. … Alone a man is nothing."

18

Simone de Beauvoir on Authentic Love

In this lecture, you'll dive into the lifelong relationship between Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. So much is known about them because they published their diaries, love letters, autobiographies, and novels based on their real lives. You could even say that Beauvoir invites people to analyze her philosophy through the lens of her lived experiences, just as she did herself. Looking at how they lived and loved reveals some of the dynamics, tensions, problems, and benefits of Beauvoir's philosophical concept of authentic love.

Beauvoir and Sartre

Simone de Beauvoir met Jean-Paul Sartre at university in 1929, when Beauvoir was 21 and Sartre was 23. Though he had just failed his final philosophy exam, Sartre had a reputation for being brilliant. When he invited Beauvoir to his study groups with friends, she was thrilled. She knew she was intelligent, but when she talked with Sartre, she said, "It was the first time in my life that I had felt intellectually inferior to anyone else."

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A year after he failed, Sartre retook the exam and won first prize. Beauvoir won second prize. Sartre brought Beauvoir the news and told her, "From now on, I'm going to take you under my wing." They wandered the streets of Paris, talking for hours about themselves, their relationship, the books they wanted to write, and their future. Beauvoir said that Sartre was exactly the partner she had always dreamed of.

When Sartre met Beauvoir, he suggested a "free" relationship. On a date near the Louvre, they agreed to a "two-year lease." They would be "essential" or "primary" to one another, and other lovers would be "secondary" or "contingent" loves.

They never lived together. They didn't marry. They didn't have children. And they were not monogamous. But in many ways, their bond was traditional. They had a lifelong committed relationship. They dreamed of the romantic ideal of happiness, harmony, and understanding that makes us feel as though we're made for each other. Open relationships

are not a necessary consequence of their philosophy. What's important is to strive to create authentic relationships, no matter what form the arrangement between lovers takes.

Beauvoir's Definition of Authentic Love

Beauvoir and Sartre's relationship wasn't always authentic, according to Beauvoir's definition. In her most famous book, *The Second Sex*, published in 1949, Beauvoir writes,

> Authentic love must be founded on reciprocal recognition of two freedoms; each lover would then experience himself as himself and as the other: Neither would abdicate his transcendence, they would not mutilate themselves; together they would both reveal values and ends in the world. For each of them, love would be the revelation of self through the gift of self and the enrichment of the universe.

Importantly, this doesn't apply only to romantic relationships, but this lecture will focus on how this relates to romance.

Let's break it down. To reciprocally recognize two freedoms means that lovers appreciate one another as free and equal. They recognize their own freedom and equality, too. It's essentially respect for both people. Beauvoir and Sartre recognized each other's freedom to pursue their own careers and relationships outside the couple. They were supportive of one another and together agreed on the type of relationship they would have.

To experience themselves as themselves and as the other means that people must recognize that the other has their own experiences and feelings. Beauvoir called this dynamic intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity is about realizing that while you are a subject and the other person is an object to you, from their perspective, they are a subject and you are an object to them.

To transcend is to pursue personally meaningful objectives into an uncertain future. Authentic lovers recognize that they each have their own ambitions, goals, and projects. They respect one another's desires. Neither sacrifices themselves, their aliveness, or their reasons for being for the other person. But they also share goals and work together toward them.

Another element of Beauvoir's definition of authentic love is that for each person, love would be the revelation of self through the gift of self and the enrichment of the universe. Authentic love is about being generous and cooperative and supporting one another's flourishing. Beauvoir says that the best kind of love is where you give your all but it feels like it costs you nothing because you get so much joy in return.

An important theme is that authentic love is not only about individual joy. Some couples turn inward, selfishly forgetting everyone outside the relationship. Authentic lovers look inward as well as outward and work toward enriching the universe for people outside the relationship, too.

Mutual recognition of each other's subjectivity is crucial to authentic relationships. This means not treating others as objects to be used for your own pleasure or other ends.

Bad Faith Traps

Beauvoir points out a number of philosophical issues—bad faith traps—that plague loving relationships. Bad faith is the moral fault of not facing up to the reality of our situation and hiding from our freedom.

Both men and women are at risk of loving inauthentically. But Beauvoir argues that women face greater challenges because they have traditionally been "the second sex." Conventionally, men have been the first, or primary, sex, meaning they're free and self-defining subjects. And women have been defined in relation to men, as their other.

According to Beauvoir, women's situation as the second sex has limited their possibilities to choose their lives and relationships freely. For social and financial survival, they were nudged—or shoved, really—toward dependency on men. And that's a problem for authentic loving because it means that men and women have not reciprocally recognized one another as free subjects. It also means women have been more likely to abandon their transcendence. And it means love for women has mostly been about giving, while for men, love has been about taking.

Beauvoir extends Hegel's master-slave dialectic to love to show how we create inauthentic relationships. And while she acknowledges that slaves have no choice in the matter, women have often been complicit in their submission to men.

One big problem in love is idolizing your lover. Idolizing someone means you're elevating them to a higher status while submitting yourself to them and voluntarily becoming the subordinate in Hegel's master-slave relation. For Beauvoir, if you willingly give up your freedom in being submissive to your lover, that's a moral fault.

For Beauvoir, to piggyback on someone else's transcendence might feel like an easy path, but it's bad faith because it's an attempt to shortcut to a meaningful life. Instead of putting in the effort to create your own life, you cruise on the back of someone else.

A second bad faith trap is devotion. Why? For one, the person expected to do the devoting and what they're expected to give up vary drastically, and this creates vast inequalities. Especially when Beauvoir was writing in the mid-20th century, but often still today, men's careers take priority over women's, and women still take the lead on unpaid domestic work, even when they do more paid work. Beauvoir proposes that women have been willing to fulfil the submissive role because there's pressure to be an ideal woman and high prices to pay for not conforming, such as relationship strife.

Devotion is also tricky because it can easily slide into tyranny. When devoting yourself to another person creates expectations and obligations on them, it violates their freedom.

Possessiveness is another trap. Humans are not objects that can be possessed. To possess another, or to behave as if you possessed them, is to rob them of their freedom—whether you're doing so from a dominant or a subservient position, it's a moral crime.

One of the reasons lovers get caught up in power dynamics is that they're trying to become one. Expressions such as "other half" or "soulmates" imply that we're half-beings and that each lover fills the other's gaps so that the two complete one another. But Beauvoir, though she felt this way with Sartre, argued that the idea of merging is another trap. What's important in authentic relationships is that lovers experience themselves as subjects and realize that others are subjects, too. What's wonderful about being in love is to be able to understand new aspects of yourself, the world, and new possibilities from the beloved's compassionately different perspective.

Another bad faith trap is making another person your raison d'être, your reason for existing. This leaves you empty-handed when the relationship ends, or it will frustrate you when the other person doesn't agree on how they should justify your life.

Beauvoir argues that "being loved isn't an end in itself, a raison d'être; it changes nothing, it leads nowhere." Harsh, yes, but her point is that it's prudent to have multiple projects in your life and not to become too dependent on anyone; otherwise, you risk emotional, financial, and existential distress. But some people are in situations where dependence is their only real option.

While many people do find a sense of self-worth and fulfilment in love, to make the relationship our only source is a dangerous strategy. Another person can't fulfill us, and we can't fulfill any other person, either. Life's too rich, and that's too much pressure.

For Beauvoir, idolizing, devoting, possessing, dominating, submitting, merging, and using another person to justify our lives are all examples of inauthentic loving.

Questions to Consider

Beauvoir thought that authentic relationships are the greatest because they support each person's flourishing, and happiness can be a side effect of that. If you're interested in taking some of Beauvoir's wisdom to heart, here are some questions you might want to consider:

- Is your relationship reciprocal? It doesn't necessarily need to be exactly equal. But are you putting in equal effort? And are you getting what you want out of it? Authentic relationships begin with reciprocity.
- Can you both pursue your goals and activities independently? And do you have activities that you do together because you want to be together? If you are only doing things together because you feel it's your duty, then that's a red flag.
- Do you feel that you have to mutilate yourself to be with that person? If yes, that's a sign of inauthenticity.
- Are you creating values and goals together? Authentic lovers do. If they're all one-sided, that's another red flag.
- Do you both feel yourselves becoming enriched and uplifted in the relationship? Are you able to be generous and feel that it costs you nothing because the other person is generous in ways that are meaningful to you?
- Is the world a better place by you being in the relationship together? If so, that's authentic love, too.

19

Beauvoir on Authentic Friendships

In this lecture, you'll look at Beauvoir's novella *Inseparable*, written in 1954 but not published until 2020, 34 years after Beauvoir's death. It tells the story of two friends—Sylvie, a character based on Beauvoir herself, and Andrée, who is based on Beauvoir's best childhood friend, Zaza Lacoin. This heartbreaking story of friendship can help you understand the nuances of intersubjectivity and other key elements of authentic friendship, including challenges and benefits.

Beauvoir's *Inseparable*

While cooking potatoes on a campfire, 9-year-old Andrée's dress caught on fire and her leg burned "to a crisp." After missing a year of school due to the accident, she wants to borrow her new classmate Sylvie's notebooks to catch up. Sylvie is immediately enchanted and reflects, "Never had anything as interesting happened to me. I suddenly had the impression that nothing had ever happened to me at all."

This is the beginning of Simone de Beauvoir's novella *Inseparable*. On Andrée's first day at school, a teacher asks her if she's intimidated. Andrée responds, "I'm not shy. … Besides, you're not intimidating." Sylvie is awed by Andrée's confidence, defiance, and irreverence. She's exciting and makes Sylvie laugh. Instantly, they become best friends.

Andrée is allowed to walk home on her own after school. Initially, Sylvie is envious of Andrée's independence. But she soon realizes that it's a veneer and comes at a dreadful cost. Andrée is being groomed for marriage in an intensely devout household. Andrée's situation affords her small freedoms, but she lacks big freedoms to choose what to do with her life.

Andrée's mother constantly thwarts her daughter's relationships. She tolerates Sylvie on occasion but only because she sees Sylvie as a decoy from boyfriends she doesn't want Andrée to have. When Sylvie and Andrée go to college at Sorbonne University, Andrée meets a student named Pascale Blondel, a character based on the real-life philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Andrée and Pascale fall in love. Andrée's parents tell her that either she and Pascale must marry or she must cut off all contact with him and go to England for 2 years. But Pascale won't propose. Sylvie appeals to Pascale to reconsider, but he says he's afraid of upsetting his family by marrying too young and doesn't think a 2-year separation is so bad.

But, for Andrée, the thought of separation is horrifying. Soon thereafter, she falls ill and dies quite suddenly. It was probably encephalitis, meningitis, or aneurism. Sylvie believes the real cause of Andrée's death to be a broken heart.

Authentic Friendships

Inseparable seems to be Beauvoir's attempt to surpass her grief about her best childhood friend Zaza's sudden and untimely death and a way for her to process her outrage over seeing Zaza suffocated by convention and propriety. And what Beauvoir shares with us through the novella is an ode to friendship. It teaches us about what it means to be an authentic friend and shows us how authentic friends can be catalysts for one another's growth.

Challenging each other in constructive ways pushes friends to become more than they are and reach beyond their assumed understandings of the world. Sylvie and Andrée each challenge what the other had been taught. They share insights and opinions and support each other in questioning themselves and the world. This challenging dynamic starts early on in their friendship. They're both very intelligent and compete for top place in their classes.

There are lots of different forms of friendship. Some friendships are about mutual pleasure: You enjoy doing certain activities together. Or there are friendships for mutual advantage: You might have a business acquaintance who you catch up with occasionally for lunch because the relationship is professionally beneficial. These types of friendships are not necessarily bad or wrong. They're just not the ideal of friendship.

Like Nietzsche, Beauvoir suggests that great friends encourage one another and concurrently flourish. They open each other up to new possibilities for overcoming themselves. Sylvie finds a great friend in Andrée, just as Beauvoir found a great friend in Zaza.

Sylvie and Andrée have deep conversations about important matters like justice and equality and how, for women, selling their body in marriage is in some ways similar to selling their bodies on the street. Andrée's cynicism provokes Sylvie to question herself and her opinions. Andrée says out loud what Sylvie only wonders about quietly.

Intersubjectivity

Beauvoir agreed with Sartre that because we are individuals with our own goals, there will always be tensions in relationships. But she was more optimistic about the possibility of moving beyond conflict. She writes in *The Second Sex*, "Alterity is the fundamental category of human thought."

Alterity is the recognition of differences between us. It's the acknowledgement that you are a subject and the other person is other to you, and vice versa. This process of othering becomes a problem if it leaves out recognizing others as subjects.

Recall from a previous lecture that intersubjectivity, or the mutual recognition of one another's subjective perspective, is the key to authentic relationships. It's the realization that other people's experiences are as real and vibrant as your own. It's the acknowledgement that their pains, concerns, freedom, and facticity are as important as your own. In Beauvoir's words, intersubjectivity is "the free recognition of each individual in the other, each one positing both itself and the other as object and as subject in a reciprocal movement." Renouncing individual self-importance is crucial here. If we don't, "friendship is impossible."

Interpersonal bonds are precarious, but Beauvoir writes that "friendship is as precarious as life." And authentic friendship is worth it, even if your friend dies or you drift separately or rip apart. Beauvoir thought that an authentic friend would be "both an object wrenching her to the limits of her self and a witness who restores that self to her."

Andrée challenged Sylvie's assumptions about the world. Sylvie campaigned for Andrée's happiness by appealing to Pascale to marry Andrée. Sylvie and Andrée challenged each other's views on religion. But they weren't trying to dominate each other. They were companions who helped one another flourish.

The authentic friend is a safe other, someone who holds up a mirror to your being and helps you stretch in new ways but is still constructive and supportive.

Unequal Friendships

Inseparable also teaches us about unequal friendships, since Andrée isn't nearly as excited about Sylvie as Sylvie is about Andrée. Can friendship be authentic if the friends feel differently about one another?

For a philosopher such as Aristotle, who wrote a lot about friendship, the answer is probably not. Aristotle claimed that the highest kind of friendship is between virtuous equals. If a relationship is asymmetrical, an equalization of goodwill or pleasantness in proportion to merit must take place for the friendship to survive. In Aristotle's view, if people are vastly unequal—in terms of virtue, vice, or wealth, for example—they can't be friends.

But one concern with Aristotle's approach is that merit is a slippery concept: Social structures don't always recognize and rank those most deserving of merit. Expecting to be loved for one's virtues is arrogant, subjective, and open to manipulation and risks further entrenching inequality.

Demanding time, attention, or declarations of feeling pushes relationships into tyranny or torment. Associating only with people you consider your equal, or expect equalization from, might thwart possibilities to form solidarities to overcome social and other inequalities.

Beauvoir is proposing a different view of friendship to Aristotle's. She's suggesting that friends don't necessarily have to reciprocate in the same ways or to the same extent to be authentic. Sylvie and Andrée's friendship is unequal. Andrée's affection for Sylvie can never compete with Andrée's affection for her mother and God. Sylvie realizes that the friendship is not as important to Andrée, but she says, "I admired her too much to suffer from it."

***Inseparable* teaches us that to be an authentic friend is to be happy that the other exists and to want them to be happy, too. Friends admire each other. They find joy in each other.**

Friendship versus Sexual Love

Some people read sexual love into Sylvie's feelings for Andrée, but there's little evidence for this. No doubt there are important lessons with respect to same-sex relationships, but that is not explicit here—and perhaps not even implicit.

But the ambiguity of Sylvie's feelings challenges us to question our own understanding of friendship: Where do we draw the line between friendship and sexual love? At what point do we start to assume that a person has sexual feelings for another, even though there is no evidence for it and even when they deny it? Can you admire someone—even recognize them as attractive—without wanting to have sex with them? Surely the answer has to be yes. We limit our possibilities for relationships, and impoverish ourselves, if we put such stifling rules around what friendship can be.

The risk with assuming that an intimate friendship must be sexual is that we're stigmatizing relationships. To assume a friendship is sexual is a way of policing people: "Don't get too close to a friend or people will assume you're homosexual, and that's bad!" This risk is perhaps one of the reasons that Beauvoir didn't publish the novel. Advertising for *Inseparable* in 2020 declared that the novella was "too intimate" to publish during Beauvoir's lifetime. It seems to be hard for people to accept the idea that same-sex friendships, without sex, can be as intimate as love relationships.

Developing authentic friendships calls for intersubjectivity—a conversion that involves letting go of self-centeredness, overcoming the desire to control others, and recognizing that others have their own experiences that we aren't always privy to and may not always understand.

20

Beauvoir on Raising Children Authentically

Some people criticized Simone de Beauvoir for writing about parenthood when she wasn't a parent herself. But Beauvoir responded that plenty of men write about parenthood without being fathers and no one criticizes them. Of course, everyone has been through the experience of having parents or caregivers and has a sense of what makes for good parenting and caregiving. So, too, did Beauvoir. And she respected other people's capacity to make their own decisions. Her central problem, as you'll see in this lecture, was with the gender roles that stifle authentic living.

Metaphysical Privilege

Being thrown into the world is an original fact of existence. Beauvoir argues that children are thrown into a world of seriousness. There are already languages, customs, facts, and beliefs that children have to contend with and submit to. Adults present themselves to children as fixed, omnipotent beings that children are supposed to respect and obey.

When adults say, "You're a good girl" or a "bad boy," children feel themselves as good or bad in concrete ways that can shape how they take on this persona that adults impose on them. All of us are a mix of angelic and demonic dimensions. Importantly, we collect these "ineffaceable imprints" as we grow, cementing our past. But that doesn't mean we can't shift in the future.

The child's condition, Beauvoir writes, is "meta-physically privileged" when they feel themselves free without responsibility. Children don't have a choice in being born. But normally, children aren't supposed to worry about the world. They're supposed to just go out and play. When they can play without their actions impacting the order of the world, they don't need to face the anxiety of freedom. A child's insignificance is a type of security against the world's seriousness.

Crisis of Adolescence

In a healthy context, children will begin to push back against the rigid world that they're brought up in. This is the process of a child realizing their subjectivity—and that of others. A healthy adolescence is one where the world that they thought was serious collapses around them. They notice flaws and contradictions in the adult world, and they realize that their choices have consequences.

Beauvoir contends that this realization—that we must make decisions that "weigh upon the earth"—is at the core of the "crisis of adolescence." This realization can be liberating but also deeply confusing and scary. Beauvoir says adolescence is the "moment of moral choice. Freedom is then revealed and [they] must decide upon [their] attitude in the face of it."

The transition from childhood to adulthood is another pivotal moment in the process of shaping our authenticity. Our authentic self isn't hidden inside our childhood bodies but rather created in collaboration with the world around us. We're the sum of our past actions, but that doesn't define who we're becoming.

There is no mistake so great that you can't recover your humanity for yourself, even if others hold it against you. Your past actions alone don't determine who you can be in the future.

Beauvoir's *Les Belles Images*

It's true that we draw our moral attitudes and motivations from the countless choices we've made about who we want to be. As we grow, we're making most of those choices without really reflecting on them or intentionally developing our being in specific ways. Sartre's explanation for why we choose what we do is the original choice. Beauvoir was hesitant to jump to that sort of conclusion. This is the drama of subjectivity: We create ourselves moment by moment throughout our lives.

This is a drama that plays out in Beauvoir's 1966 novel *Les Belles Images*. The title is French for "pretty pictures." From the outside, the protagonist, Laurence, seems to have it all. She's a successful advertising executive and is married to a famous architect. She has two beautiful daughters. But Laurence's marriage has zero passion. Her career is unfulfilling. She worries about her children. And as a working mother who does most of the childcare, she feels the weight of expectation to be successful by other people's standards.

During the Second World War, Laurence was 11 years old. The horrors of the world were thrust upon her. She wants to protect her daughters from the harsh reality of the world as long as possible. But one day, her oldest daughter, Catherine, who is 10 years old, asks Laurence why people live.

In a panic, Laurence tells her people exist to make one another happy. Catherine asks, "What about unhappy people?" Panicking again, Laurence explains that there are always things you can do to make people happy. You can give poor people money. You can take sick people to doctors. Laurence persists in trying to build a safe, secure, sheltered, happy bubble around Catherine. In Beauvoir's philosophical terms, Laurence wants to protect Catherine's "metaphysical privilege."

But Catherine was asking about unhappy people because she had seen a poster of a hungry child. The tagline said that two-thirds of the world is hungry. As Catherine struggles with understanding human suffering, Laurence struggles with watching her daughter become aware of the world and develop into an adolescent. She wonders, Why open Catherine's eyes to the world when the world is so bleak?

One of the many things Beauvoir does in this novel is show us the challenges of parenting and the process of Laurence discovering what it takes to be an authentic parent. Two key elements of authentic parenting are educating children and being role models for them. First, let's talk about education.

Authentic Parenting through Education

In Beauvoir's view, authentic parenting educates children in kind and supportive ways. Metaphysical privilege, being free without responsibility, is important for a child, but it's also a kind of naivety. To keep a person in an infantilized state for too long is to oppress them.

Keeping kids in the dark is dangerous, too. In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Beauvoir writes that when she was 16, her aunt took her and her sister to see a film. It was standing room only. She recalls feeling hands touching her through her coat in the dark. She didn't know what to say or do. When the lights came on, a man and his friend laughed at her, and she couldn't understand why.

In another incident, this time at a religious bookstore, the shop assistant beckoned Beauvoir toward the back of the shop and exposed himself to her. She ran away. At age 16, Beauvoir sensed that there was something wrong with these incidents. But she had no education to understand what had happened or how to judge or criticize it. Incidents like these are not uncommon, and they teach girls that their bodies are for male pleasure.

These situations still happen. And these attitudes are a function of our social structure that teaches children that women's existence is for men. Authentic parents teach children that women and girls aren't objects. It's no wonder that women are enticed into a life away from authenticity and toward sacrifice, toward being a vassal since, in Beauvoir's words, the "thrust of her transcendence comes up against harsher and harsher resistance."

A key takeaway from *Les Belles Images* about authentic parenting is that, in Laurence's words, "Bringing up a child doesn't mean turning it into a pretty picture." But so many caregivers try to groom children into being obedient humans—and especially girls into the role of being-for-others.

Gender Roles

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir talks about how a girl is socially indoctrinated not to do things that a boy does. It becomes very confusing to know what she wants to do and not do. Girls are taught not to get their dresses dirty; boys are taught not to wear dresses at all. Beauvoir saw these expectations as part of the system of discrimination against women and girls that teaches girls and boys that women's work is to please men, to be there for others, to be passive and objectified when required of them at the expense of themselves. These roles culminate in children being pushed into specific roles. Unpaid housework, emotional labor, and childcare aren't "natural" jobs for women—they're roles that women are taught to take on.

Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Rapunzel perpetuate harmful assumptions about women. The female protagonists wait quietly for adventurous boys to rescue them. While this is a problem for all children, Beauvoir argues that a boy, more so than a girl, is encouraged to "posit himself for himself. He carries out the apprenticeship of his existence as free movement toward the world. … He undertakes, he invents, he dares." Beauvoir teaches us that authentic parenting aims to support a child in transcending their infantile being by projecting themselves into the world freely and adventurously.

Some limits are important, of course, but authentic parenting supports children in establishing themselves as sovereign subjects who face their situations with lucidity and others with an intersubjective attitude. This means teaching children to take their future confidently into their own hands and to pursue projects of their own choice. It means finding sensitive ways to teach children about the situations of other children and helping to reveal possibilities for doing something about suffering.

Authentic parents create the conditions for children to exercise their freedom in responsible and self-affirming ways.

Authentic Parenting through Role Models

Authentic parenting also requires us to be role models ourselves. Catherine can tell that Laurence is miserable. Kids are smart. She tells her mother, "It's sad to be a grown-up." Laurence wants to believe that a good world is possible, but how can she inspire her daughters to believe in the future if she herself is disillusioned?

She realizes that her protectiveness of her children is a function of her own anxieties. Sheltering Catherine isn't going to make those anxieties go away or make the world a better place. A better strategy is for adults to be brave in facing up to their anxieties and helping children to do the same.

These big challenges of parenting help explain why Beauvoir insisted that parenthood must be freely chosen. Recognizing that people who are forced into parenthood are among the worst kind of tyrants, she advocated for contraception and access to abortion. She argues that it's immoral to force people to take responsibility for something they did not choose. Consenting to sex doesn't mean consenting to childbirth.

Authentic parenting calls for us to challenge the structure of our world by pushing back against gendered stereotypes and roles so that kids can transcend in bold ways, affirming themselves while throwing themselves joyfully into the world. This calls for teaching children to be creative in seeking and seizing possibilities for their lives, not to be limited by superficial coding about feminine and masculine behavior.

Laurence's leap to authentic parenting occurs when she vows to stop sheltering Catherine so tyrannically and support her in her quest for being-for-herself. Although the world is filled with unhappiness and suffering, the authentic attitude is to teach children to understand and, with them, look for ways to improve the context of their own lives and the world around them. To be indifferent is to live a cold and impoverished existence.

Another specific step that parents can take toward authentic parenting is to show children a variety of heroes.

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Beauvoir on Authentic Aging

The search for immortality—the philosopher's stone, the holy grail, the fountain of youth—is ancient. Simone de Beauvoir understood the obsession. When she was 30, she promised herself that when she turned 40, she would give up sex and "dutifully retire to the shelf." She later changed her mind, but her fear of aging eventually returned with a vengeance. In her sixties, she decided to research and write a 650-page book called *The Coming of Age*, sometimes translated as *Old Age*, published in 1970. As you'll see in this lecture, she wanted to find out the truth of elderhood and to break what she called "the conspiracy of silence," to expose the myths and misconceptions about getting older. She wanted to know why she was afraid of aging and how people should think about it.

Biological and Social Atrophy

Beauvoir began her search for truth by trying to figure out which elements of aging were part of our facticity and which might be transcended. An obvious place to start is with the question, Can we escape the biological fact of aging? Medical and biotechnologies are helping people live longer and in better health. Will we advance to the point that we will be able to stop the aging process indefinitely or even completely?

The global longevity market is worth many billions of dollars. Research is being done into DNA editing, virtual eternity, cryopreservation, and so much more. There are many optimists, and with good reason: We are living a lot longer than we used to. But for now, we can't escape the biological fact of aging.

Even if biological atrophy is inevitable, what about social atrophy? Beauvoir saw that in her era, as in ours, elderhood is treated as a "normal abnormality." On the one hand, aging is normal in that it is a natural process. Unless one dies young, aging is humanity's universal destiny. On the other hand, elderhood is abnormal because older people are often assumed to be no longer properly functioning and capable humans. Ageism classifies older people as stagnant and powerless as time drags them toward their graves.

Beauvoir describes the social stigma of aging in terms of *exis* and *praxis*—a "being" versus a "doing." Children are *exis*, which means they just exist as they are. They're not productive in society—or at least they shouldn't be. Adults are *praxis*, which means that they do productive and practical things.

Especially in societies where people are valued by their profitability, older people's capabilities are undervalued and underappreciated, which oppresses and dehumanizes them.

Once a person is perceived as old, they're treated as *exis* again, that is, as no longer productive. The difference between children and older people is that people see children as future *praxis*, whereas older people are perceived as past *praxis*. But Beauvoir thought that treating older people as *exis* is deeply problematic.

In an age when technology is evolving rapidly, older people's wisdom is discounted in favor of the innovations of youth. It's assumed that older people are a burden to society. But that's not true. Older people are involved in myriad activities, such as childcare and volunteer work, and some people never retire.

Because of this phenomenon of ageism, Beauvoir writes, "The aged person is no more than a corpse under a suspended sentence." And it's worse when other dimensions of oppression, such as sexism and racism, enter the equation. And these factors combined can crush older people. But to what extent can we control the perception of aging as an abnormality?

While men tend to be considered "distinguished" in their later years, it's hard for women to avoid ageism when they also face sexism that defines them as being-for-others. Women who lose their perceived femininity in old age are deemed less "useful" in satisfying the male gaze or are perceived as less useful to society when they can no longer bear children. And it's incredibly difficult for less privileged people to cushion themselves against the hardships of aging. The social decline is inescapable for all but the most privileged in society. Yet even they are susceptible to the identity crisis of aging.

Identity Crisis of Aging

The problem, as Beauvoir saw it, is that aging exists outside of every one of us—and this has the potential to provoke an identity crisis. As Beauvoir aged, she asked herself, Who is that person that seems to be me but who I don't recognize? Her body grew old. She looked old in the mirror. But she didn't *feel* old. It came as a shock to her when, at age 50, people began to classify her as "old." Beauvoir couldn't fully grasp how others perceived her. She felt that her experience of aging existed outside of her. The experience of her age escaped her.

Is the identity crisis of aging inescapable? The philosophical problem is that we can't control how others perceive our aging. It's not healthy to be entirely defined by others, but completely ignoring how others see you is to deny a core aspect of knowledge about your being. Beauvoir thought aging operates in the same way.

For each of us, aging is "unrealizable." An "unrealizable" is a category of being that represents the inverse of our circumstances. It's how we're viewed from the outside or, in other words, a reality that's imposed on us externally. It's a disconnect between our grasp of ourselves inwardly as an enduring entity and our outward transformation. Beauvoir writes, "All we can do is to waver from the one to the other, never managing to hold them both firmly together."

We can't know what we are for others. We try to piece together an image from snippets, but it remains ambiguous. Beauvoir writes, "Age is not experienced in the for-itself mode." A similar thing happens to children when they go through adolescence.

The difference with adolescents is that they experience their transition of puberty directly, whereas in Beauvoir's view,

> The aged person comes to feel that he is old by means of others, and without having experienced important changes; his inner being does not accept the label that has been stuck to him—he no longer knows who he is.

Of course, menopause is an important change, but Beauvoir argues that menopause occurs "well before old age" and that it's unique in being the only relatively abrupt phenomenon in the process of getting older.

The way we feel doesn't always match with how we appear to others. Other people, our situation, and our context also define us from the outside. And we can't control what other people think. This is one of the reasons that Jean-Paul Sartre said that "hell is … other people." Other people judge and categorize us in ways that we can't see ourselves. This happens in many contexts, but aging is a major situation that's often overlooked. And we can't escape it.

Still another factor that makes aging hard to come to terms with is that as we grow older, our relationship to time shifts. When we're young, newness is exciting. Everything is novel, and time seems expansive. Our future stretches far ahead of us.

But as we grow older, we fall into habits and routines. We discover fewer new things. As we tread further along the path of life, memories become hazy and distant, and the future becomes shorter and shorter. Regardless of what you think happens after death, this can be scary because we probably have only one life to live.

The process of aging and how our facticity changes over time are often clearer to others than to ourselves.

Authenticity in Older Age

Society is changing. Actresses such as Meryl Streep, Diane Keaton, Judy Dench, Susan Sarandon, Helen Mirren, and Sally Fields have set great examples. Through their films, they've rejected stereotypes and destigmatized aging by showing that it is not all false teeth, incontinence, and daytime television in rocking chairs. They flirt, fall in love, have sex, travel, and pose for nude calendars. It is impossible to reject the negative assumption of aging on one's own, but collectively, women are beginning to change how aging is perceived, for the better.

Of course, aging does have many downsides, not least ailing health, pain, and loneliness. But it also has benefits that Beauvoir thought we as a society are slow to appreciate, such as wisdom, experience, and self-understanding. Beauvoir thought that one of the biggest benefits is that older people don't need to worry about pleasing others so much. This means that elderhood can provide opportunities to become more authentic because we are more immune to the harsh judgmental gazes of other people and more aware of how our experiences and capabilities go beyond physical appearances.

While it's true that experiences of growing older vary drastically, many people do dread it. We'd do a lot better if we discussed aging more and didn't view it as something shameful. Beauvoir writes, "In order to resolve the 'identification crisis' we must unreservedly accept a new image of ourselves." Elderhood is normal. We need to stop judging it as something to be ashamed of. To grow old is a gift. We should embrace the fact of our aging bodies and be grateful that our meatsuit has served us so well for so long. Without it, we wouldn't exist. So far, our consciousness can't exist without a body.

We must refuse to die before we're dead. We must refuse to hang on as merely a warm corpse. Beauvoir advised,

> There is only one solution if old age is not to be an absurd parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning—devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual or creative work.

Beauvoir did live her philosophy. Before her death at age 78, her writing slowed, but she became more engaged in activism. She campaigned for women's rights and donated to women's homeless shelters and publishers. She supported women authors and responded to letters from her readers. On her deathbed, she tried to persuade her caregivers not to vote for far-right nationalist leaders.

The older we grow, the more authenticity comes within our grasp. In Beauvoir's view, being authentic means becoming creators of our vibrant selves that we shape through our choices.

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Beauvoir on Loving Your Mortality

Simone de Beauvoir struggled to love her mortality. Her despair over the human condition and the meaning of death haunted her throughout her life. Perhaps it's no wonder, given that the horrors of World War II were still fresh in her mind. If humanity is capable of such atrocities, then, like Camus, Beauvoir wondered where people might find the will to live. In this lecture, you'll explore the idea of death as a choice. You'll look at three of Beauvoir's key insights into how death transcends human mortality, whether or not humans choose it, and why mortality is a condition of life that people ought to learn to love.

Beauvoir's Insights on Death

One of Beauvoir's most important insights is that our own death can be incredibly difficult to comprehend. Like old age, death is unrealizable. We can only imagine our death. We can't actually know what it'll be like for us specifically until it's too late. We see others die. We can envisage our own funeral and what the world will be like without us. But it's always going to be a fantasy.

A second important insight is that the authentic attitude to death is being-for-life. Cicero wrote, "For the whole life of a philosopher is … a meditation on death." Michel de Montaigne, referencing Cicero, suggested that "all the wisdom and reasoning in the world boils down finally to this point: to teach us not to be afraid to die."

Martin Heidegger says that our authentic project is being-toward-death. The relentless ticking of life's clock brings us closer to the end and infuses our existence with urgency. Beauvoir seemed to find Heidegger's ideas about being-toward-death somewhat terrifying and reframed the authentic project as being-toward-life.

What does being-for-life mean? Like Sartre, Beauvoir considered existence to be a knotty mess of being and nothingness. We exist, but we're also a lack, a not-yet. Why start something if you're only going to stop? And if you do start something, why and where should you stop? Beauvoir writes,

> All human projects therefore seem absurd because they exist only by setting limits for themselves, and one can always overstep these limits, asking oneself derisively, "Why as far as this? Why not further? What's the use?" … In spite of everything, my heart beats, my hand reaches out, new projects are born and push me forward.

Beauvoir points to Voltaire's satirical novel *Candide*, whose titular character says we must cultivate our own garden. We take up residence in our small corner of the universe and create meaning within it. To do nothing is to give up enjoyment of our life.

Authentic living is a process of constantly overcoming ourselves—and it's joyful. As we overcome our being, stretching into the future, our transcendence continues to regrasp itself. As we reach into an open future of possibilities, we seize new ways of being.

Beauvoir writes, "He [meaning us humans in general] must transcend himself since he is not, but his transcendence must also grasp itself anew as a plenitude since he wants to be." Our projects are not "diversions or flights" from death "but a movement toward being. ... Every moment he is seeking to make himself be, and that is the project."

A third important insight is that it's difficult to generalize about death because our relationships to it are all highly individual. Some people aren't afraid of death, possibly because they see it as so far into the future that it doesn't seem relevant. Later in life, Beauvoir speculated that the reason people don't pay much attention to death when they're young is that life seems vast.

Yet some people long for death. When Beauvoir was a child, she fantasized about it. She was brought up Catholic and dreamed of becoming a nun. Her life felt like a "happy adventure." She imagined that when it was time for her to die, snowy angels would carry her gently up to heaven. Dying would be, she thought, just like a larva turning into an insect with wings and soaring among flowers. Religion takes away the terror for some, but not all. While death became terrifying for Beauvoir once she lost her faith, it was also terrifying for her mother, who never lost her faith.

Regardless of how we approach it, Beauvoir believed it's incumbent on us to reflect on our death so that we can face life lucidly and bravely.

Others long for an escape from earthly suffering. In Beauvoir's novel *The Mandarins*, the character Paula contemplates drinking poison to end her life after her long-term lover leaves her. When her friend Robert advises her not to, she wonders, "But then how shall I live?"

The notion of eternal life has its problems as well. In her 1946 novel *All Men Are Mortal*, Beauvoir explores some of the philosophical complexities of immortality. Her conclusion seems to be that immortality would become boring and that death makes life meaningful.

Death as a Choice

Beauvoir was incessantly torn between being afraid of death and lusting for it. The thought of existence continuing without her in it was terrifying and overwhelming. But to live takes courage. To wake up every day and say yes to life over and over is a heavy burden. Like Camus, Beauvoir wonders, Why not kill ourselves now? Why put ourselves through the absurdity of life?

There are lots of religious arguments against suicide. Consider the Christian commandment of "Thou shalt not kill." Suicide is self-murder. During the Middle Ages, the Church would punish the corpses of suicides. Often, the state would punish the deceased's families, such as by seizing their property. Dante's *Inferno* scandalizes suicide, as well. Violence against self and other forms of violence are punished in the seventh circle of hell.

And Christianity isn't the only religion to discourage suicide. The Qur'an instructs you not to kill yourself or others. Buddhists generally frown upon suicide because they're against destruction of life in general, which includes your own life. Hinduism also sees suicide as generally unacceptable because it involves violence and breaks the code of ahimsa, the principle of nonviolence. Nevertheless, Hinduism considers nonviolent death to be acceptable in some circumstances.

But there are arguments for suicide, as well. Philosophers such as David Hume defended suicide. Hume wrote,

> Tho' death alone can put a full period to his misery, he dares not fly to this refuge, but still prolongs a miserable existence from a vain fear, lest he offend his maker, by using the power, with which that beneficent being has endowed him.

Hume is implying that if you're miserable, it's absurd to go on living just because you're afraid of offending a God who gave you the power to kill yourself.

In some cases, it's understandable. In her autobiography *All Said and Done*, Beauvoir recounts how she received a letter from an old woman who was distraught that doctors insisted on keeping her alive. This woman had no control over her quality of life because she was so sick. And she had no control over her death because she was paralyzed. "Surely those who wish to die should be allowed to do so," the woman said. Beauvoir wondered, "And indeed, why? Why?"

In other cases, what to do is much less clear. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir gives an example of a brokenhearted young woman who intentionally overdoses on barbiturates. Her friends save her. If she lives a happy life, then her friends did the right thing.

But if this young woman were to continue to be miserable and want to die, then preventing her from doing so would only prolong her suffering. This choice must be up to the young woman alone. The complication, of course, is that one person's freedom necessarily involves others, which is why Beauvoir emphasizes that there are no easy answers.

At the end of Beauvoir's novel *The Mandarins*, the protagonist Anne is depressed and on the verge of killing herself. Just as she's about to swallow poison, she hears her daughter outside, who is irritated that Anne had left her granddaughter unattended. Anne imagines how her family would grieve over her passing and decides, "My death does not belong to me."

Of course, Anne's death is within her power, but others will bear the burden. She reflects, "It's strange; I would die alone; yet it's the others who would live my death." Death remains a real option for her, but her feelings of responsibility to those she loves and who love her become more present to her. Anne leaps back into her life, albeit reluctantly. She slides back into work and her relationships. They infuse her existence with meaning—at least for the time being.

Beauvoir's view is that we each need to find our own reasons to live, but we also must assume death as the natural limit of our lives. And we must face it lucidly. She writes,

> Existence must not deny this death which it carries in its heart; it must assert itself as an absolute in its very finiteness; man fulfills himself within the transitory or not at all. He must regard his undertakings as finite and will them absolutely.

Every action is infused with the possibility of death. But death is precious precisely because it injects meaning into our actions. Mortality isn't something we should simply endure; life is better when we can love it.

Beauvoir has become one of the most important philosophers in the canon, particularly in the existential realm. American playwright Lorraine Hansberry suggested that *The Second Sex* was a "great book" that "may very well be the most important work of [the 20th] century." Since Beauvoir's book, Hansberry says, "the world will never be the same again." In *At the Existentialist Café*, Sarah Bakewell called *The Second Sex* "the most transformative existentialist work of all."

23

Toni Morrison and the Sources of Self-Regard

In 1993, Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for being a writer "who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality." Although she wasn't a card-carrying existentialist, there is a lot of existential energy in her work—especially in her novel *The Bluest Eye*. In this lecture, you'll explore this novel, which philosopher Lewis Gordon considers a masterpiece of Black existential analysis.

Authentic Self-Regard

The Bluest Eye—Morrison's first novel, published in 1970—is about an 11-year-old Black girl named Pecola Breedlove growing up in a poor and abusive family in the small town of Lorain, Ohio, in 1941. Pecola is oppressed on many dimensions: race, class, sex, and—central to the novel—beauty standards. She has learned how people with blue eyes are loved, accepted, and classified as pretty. She prays for blue eyes every night. With blue eyes, she'd be beautiful, and she thinks people would treat her differently. Morrison wanted to explore where this kind of self-loathing comes from.

MORRISON

The novel is about how Pecola and others, though not all, face anguish, seize freedom, and take responsibility for themselves and others in devouring environments. The existential questions Pecola grapples with are ubiquitous: To what extent can a person be a responsible agent of their own life, especially in an oppressive environment such as Pecola's? To what extent is a community responsible for its members? And how can a person develop authentic self-regard?

Authentic self-regard, Morrison suggests, is living in a way that's self-affirming. It's a matter of recognizing yourself as worthy of humanity, accepting your existence as valuable. You take responsibility for making the effort to create yourself actively and persistently toward personal and communal fulfilment. And Morrison shows possibilities for authentic self-regard even in the face of oppression.

Morrison said *The Bluest Eye* focuses

> on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female.

She was disconcerted about the systematic erasure of Black women and girls from literature. Of the books that did mention Black females, she said they were missing "some intimacy, some direction, some voice."

Just as the soil in which a seed grows matters for a flower, so, too, does the environment in which children grow up matter.

Asserting Ourselves and Questioning Assumptions

One of Morrison's key messages seems to be that assertiveness is critical for authentic self-regard. Throughout *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola rarely uses her voice. She lets others tell her story. Morrison suggests that an authentic response to being put down is to take a confident and upright stance in the world and push back against the objectifying and oppressive gaze of others.

Standing strong also means questioning assumptions about the world. Pecola's friend and temporary foster sister, Claudia, is a role model for taking steps toward authentic self-regard through questioning. For Christmas, Claudia is given what everyone else thought was a treasure: "a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll" that bleated "Mama."

Claudia knows she's supposed to love the doll, but she is revolted and frightened by it. To find out why everyone is obsessed with the doll, Claudia deconstructs it, breaking it apart and emptying its insides. The adults are furious. But Claudia's destruction is a form of defiance. She seizes her freedom and takes responsibility for the inevitable punishment. But her act of destruction is also creative. Claudia looks behind the doll's façade and myths to expose what's underneath. Nothing meaningful. Just a chunk of metal. Claudia wants to be asked what she wants for Christmas. And her rebellions are successful. No more dolls.

Claudia challenges her doll's status as the ideal girl and, in the process, rejects the white beauty standards that the doll represents. She is fully aware that the problem is bigger than a doll. The message here seems to be that questioning is vital. It's essential not to just accept what others are telling us we should want and love and hate.

Awareness of Worth

Morrison doesn't advocate for violence in response to oppressive conditions, but she makes space for anger. In one of the few scenes where Pecola narrates her own story, she is on her way to buy candy. The blue-eyed gaze of the shop owner, Mr. Yacobowski, barely registers her existence. Pecola feels powerless and invisible before him.

For a brief moment, Pecola almost stands up for herself. Knowing that the situation calls for her to challenge Mr. Yacobowski to recognize her humanity, Pecola thinks, "Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging."

But then, a crushing sense of shame overwhelms her and smothers her surge of anger. Pecola submits to the worthlessness that Mr. Yacobowski's deflating gaze imposes on her. She doesn't seem to regard herself as worthy of basic recognition.

The candies Pecola buys from Mr. Yacobowski are called Mary Janes. On the pale-yellow wrapper is a picture of a pretty, little, smiling White girl. Ingesting the candy represents Pecola's choice to internalize and conform to what society says is beautiful.

The world weighs so heavily on many people that it's understandable that some people dream of escaping it. Pecola practices self-annihilation. She lies in her bed under her blanket and wills away her body, part by part. But she can never get rid of her brown eyes. She finds herself lumped with the facts of her body.

Authentic self-regard comes from standing up to people who threaten to objectify you. It comes from seizing your freedom while recognizing that you live in a community where everyone is responsible for one another. It's not that the individual alone is responsible, nor that the community is wholly responsible for its members; it's both.

The Importance of Community

Being stuck with the facts of our lives is a recurring theme in *The Bluest Eye*. For example, there's a scene in which Pecola's parents buy a new couch. By the time it gets delivered to their home, there's a huge rip in it. Yet no one takes responsibility for the damage. The couch can be seen as a metaphor for life. Life is not in perfect shape. We arrive in a world that's already spoiled in so many ways. Everyone and no one in particular is responsible. Yet we're lumped with existence as it is, ripped and broken.

It doesn't make sense to trash the couch. (Pecola's family can't afford new furniture.) And it doesn't make sense to trash our lives. We probably only get one chance at existence. So, it makes sense to try to make the most of life, even if we think it's tainted.

Morrison was clear about the importance of community supporting individuals as well as individuals understanding themselves as part of a community. Even though Pecola's family doesn't provide her a foundation of self-regard, there are other people in her life who might. For example, when Pecola gets her first period, Claudia and her family help her by explaining to her what's happening and helping her clean up. Claudia's family provides some of the care and wisdom that Pecola's missing from her own.

Another group of people who teach Pecola that her existence matters are her neighbors, three middle-aged sex workers named China, Poland, and Miss Marie, who live in the apartment above Pecola's family. These women are always cooking, laughing, singing, and storytelling. Their apartment is a kind of haven for Pecola. She is allowed to come and go as she pleases.

China, Poland, and Miss Marie are tender, caring, and accepting. They're not necessarily happy, but Morrison does suggest that they've developed a sense of authentic self-regard. They've seized their freedom. They're autonomous, self-sufficient, and self-confident, and they don't subscribe to social norms of beauty or behavior. These women are vibrant and vivacious creators of their own lives.

Morrison also suggests that the whole community is responsible for the well-being of its members. Yet, apart from the occasional support of her neighbors and Claudia's family, Pecola's community fails her time and time again. When Pecola is raped by her father, her mother blames her for it. After the child conceived in these horrifying acts of incest is stillborn, the community ostracizes Pecola. She lets herself become alienated from society as well as herself.

Morrison suggests that the community let Pecola down so dramatically because comparing themselves to her made people feel better about their own challenges. Claudia knows she let Pecola down, too. Claudia knows that this isn't a healthy community and that everyone is to blame. Morrison wanted to reveal what she called "the void that is Pecola's 'unbeing.' It should have had a shape—like the emptiness left by a boom or a cry." Morrison wanted to expose the existential void that's left in a community after a person is destroyed.

The Bluest Eye has implications beyond Pecola. It's a meditation on the importance of community for all of us. Morrison's work teaches us that it's inauthentic to let ourselves fall prey to gazes of other people. Passivity is self-sabotaging. Self-loathing smothers possibilities for authentic self-regard. Pushing back against damaging conventions is an authentic action.

Morrison didn't want us to pity Pecola as a victim. She wanted to challenge each of us to reflect on our own complicity by asking, How do you confront others? Do you approach people with curiosity? Or do you condemn them in superficial ways, such as by the color of their skin or the shape of their face or their language? How do you desecrate yourself and others? Morrison wanted to move us to interrogate ourselves.

24

Everyday Existentialism

In this final lecture, you'll look at some ways that existential thinking is relevant in the 21st century, such as in films like *Everything Everywhere All at Once* and in psychotherapy. You'll also examine newer areas of research where existential thinking is being applied, such as technology and ecology.

Existentialism in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

In the 2022 Oscar-winning film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, the middle-aged protagonist, Evelyn, is having an existential crisis. She is disappointed with her life. Worried she's run out of time to do anything meaningful, she takes out her frustrations on her husband, Waymond, and daughter, Joy. A yawning emotional abyss leaves them all feeling lonely and disconnected. Plus, the tax department is auditing the family's launderette, and they're at risk of losing the business.

Though not explicitly existential, the film provides a lot of fodder for existential analysis. In an alternate universe, Joy has become a powerful "agent of chaos" named Jobu Tupaki. Jobu experiences the universe as full of suffering, and her despair is palpitating. She believes that existence is absurd and nothing matters. She's become a nihilist.

Like Richard Wright's Cross Damon, Jobu cuts herself off from moral codes and laws, becomes her own god, and is searingly lonely. She has also created a giant everything bagel that has collapsed on itself like a black hole and sucks everything into its vortex. "The bagel is where we finally find peace." She believes that death is the only way to escape despair and pain. And if life is suffering, Jobu figures she might as well take down the universe with her.

This is not the existential view, but it's what the existential philosophers rebelled against. Initially, Evelyn's drowning in her everyday life, or what Heidegger called the inauthentic realm. She's an immigrant from China trying to survive the best she can, working intensely, caught in the Sisyphean cycle of "laundry and taxes and laundry and taxes." She's coagulating in what Sartre referred to as the realm of seriousness. Evelyn uses work as a distraction from what Ortega called "the fearsome pulsation" of anxiety of seizing the reins of her life.

In Kierkegaardian terms, Evelyn is stuck in the ethical dimension—trying to fulfill her roles as wife and businessperson and mother. But she forgets that an authentically meaningful life includes aesthetic elements like beauty and fun and love. Waymond tries to remind her by sticking playful googly eyes everywhere, but Evelyn dismisses them as silly.

At the tax offices, a Waymond from an alternate universe asks Evelyn to help stop Jobu's destructive path. We could say that Evelyn is called to become a kind of Nietzschean Übermensch who strives to access the possibilities and skills she has in every other universe. Evelyn faces what Jaspers called a limit situation that tests the boundaries of her understanding. Initially, she's lost and disoriented, but she accepts the challenge.

The existential view is that yes, we find ourselves in an absurd world, but our world is already infused with other people making meaning in it, and we can create meaning, too. Although Evelyn is briefly seduced by Jobu's nihilism, Waymond embodies an alternative.

Waymond dances, laughs, and sings. He creates aesthetic joy in the everyday. His attitude is much more than positive thinking. His googly eye stickers are silly, but they're also the antidote to the black hole of nihilism and seriousness. The eyes represent lucidity, delight, and enlightenment. He rebels against absurdity for life and love. His strategy is kindness.

"When I choose to see the good side of things, I'm not being naive. It is strategic and necessary. It's how I've learned to survive."

—Waymond

Inspired by Waymond's attitude, Evelyn adopts something like what Fanon called an "ethical orientation" of love. Evelyn validates the humanity of Jobu and others, even when they're behaving monstrously. She fights to transcend Hegel's vicious master-slave dialectic.

As Jobu gives up on the universe and lurches into the bagel's abyss, Evelyn reaches her hand out. Jobu reaches back. Their connection is the key to overcoming absurdity. Similar to Beauvoir's idea that authentic parenting is a platform to help children understand how to exercise their freedom in responsible and self-affirming ways, Evelyn helps her daughter to see possibilities for meaning amid the suffering. Love is the antidote to nihilism.

The community rallies around Jobu to stop her destruction and save her from herself. And then, they rally around Evelyn to help sort out her tax troubles. Evelyn learns to build a sense of authentic self-regard based on kindness. She becomes an agent of her own life, she fights with love for what she thinks is right, she builds intersubjective relationships with her daughter and husband, and she creates solidarities to fight for a world worth living in. Even though nothing is perfect, Evelyn says, "There is always something to love. Even in a stupid, stupid universe."

Existential Psychotherapy

During and in the decades after World War II, existential psychotherapy became popular as a humanistic-based alternative to Freudian and behavioral therapies that focused on unconscious drives. Paul Tillich, Rollo May, R. D. Laing, and many others were involved in developing the field. Ludwig Binswanger was one of the first to apply existential ideas to psychology in his 1942 book *Basic Forms and Knowledge of Human Existence.* Mutual recognition was central to his thinking.

Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl developed a method of existential psychotherapy called logotherapy. After 3 years in Nazi concentration camps—where his father, mother, and brother died—Frankl wrote a

book titled *A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp*, published in German in 1946. It was later released in English under the title *Man's Search for Meaning* and became a bestseller.

Logotherapy is based on the idea that, Frankl wrote,

> A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the "why" for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any "how."

Irvin Yalom at Stanford University has been particularly influential in the realm of existential psychotherapy. In his 1980 book *Existential Psychotherapy*, he defines the method as "a dynamic approach to therapy which focuses on concerns that are rooted in the individual's existence." Yalom attends to how people cope with what he calls four "ultimate concerns" of existence: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness.

His style of existential therapy aims to unpack the diversions—the inauthentic behaviors—that distract us from facing these concerns and to support people in confronting their anxieties, seizing their agency, and making more purposeful choices about their lives so that they can actualize a more fulfilling and authentically meaningful existence.

Another leader in existential psychotherapy is the UK-based Dutch psychologist Emmy van Deurzen, who defines existential therapy as being

> concerned with the understanding of people's position in the world and with the clarification of what it means to them to be alive. … The aim is to search for truth with an open mind and an attitude of wonder.

Van Deurzen's existential viewpoint holds that people are naturally adaptable and versatile. We don't have a fixed essence. We're creative and evolving beings who define ourselves through our actions. Awareness

of our mortality, impermanence, and the inherent meaninglessness of life can provoke angst and leave us scrambling to make sense of our situations.

She proposes that there are a few key ingredients in existential therapy, including "cultivating a naive attitude," "facing limitations," "exploring personal world view," and "enquiring into meaning."

Van Deurzen's approach builds on the assumption that when people face life clearly, they can find a meaningful path forward, and by tuning in to inevitable changes, they can become more resilient. Being lucid about our lives can provide a strong platform from which we can affirm our freedom, master our lives, communicate better, and make sense of our existence.

Technology through the Lens of Existentialism

Another area in which existential thinking can be applied in the modern world is technology. Social media, for example, is designed to distract us and get us hooked on the dopamine hits fueled by alerts such as likes, always craving and clicking more.

As Beauvoir, Heidegger, Ortega, and other existential philosophers pointed out, we sometimes get swept away with novelty and develop a compulsive need for newness. It's easy to be lured into letting others' approval chip away at our self-regard. Kierkegaard wrote that "a crowd … in its very concept is the untruth."

Heidegger was so concerned with the role of technology in our lives that he published an essay in 1954 titled *The Question Concerning Technology*. He worried that technology can be destructive when it distorts or obscures our awareness of how things really are. Just think of all the misinformation and idle chatter online. Algorithms hide and decide so much, block and open access to certain opportunities, and nudge us into clicks and purchases that we might not have made if we could see our situations more clearly.

As Heidegger writes, "For man becomes truly free only insofar as he … becomes one who listens and hears, and not one who is simply constrained to obey." The antidote is to pay attention to the risks and keep questioning what technology reveals, to mitigate its dangers—such as becoming like robots ourselves.

Heidegger suggests that it's dangerous to make technology so central to our lives that we let it rob us of freedom and lead us onto certain paths without our fully understanding what's going on.

Ecological Existentialism

Finally, existential thinking is also being applied in the ecological domain. One consequence of the scientific approach to life is that nature, animals, and all the other nonhuman things in the world tend to appear as separate from us. It's impossible to live authentically if you're disconnected from your environment.

In her 2011 book *Wild Dog Dreaming*, ethnographer Deborah Bird Rose coined the term "ecological existentialism," also called "coexistentialism," which refers to the exploration of our interdependence with the earth amidst climate change, environmental disasters, the collapse of biodiversity, and dwindling natural resources. The existential crisis is that we are entangled with our environment, the future is uncertain and unstable, and, although we might know theoretically that we're interconnected, it's hard to comprehend what's happening beyond our own horizons and grasp the world as a totality.

Rose proposes a mode of thinking that she calls kinship. The earth is our home, and kinship is a way of feeling at home in our home. The kinship approach offers that we are intertwined with the earth, with past generations, with future generations—with people and the living systems around us.

An authentically meaningful life calls us to adapt to our ever-changing conditions and to love and care for the planet we call home. Coexistentialism explores ethical questions such as, How should we build the world given that there are other species involved? How can we improve the world in a way that benefits everyone? And how do we manage when progress in one dimension is destructive in another?

These are tough questions, and there are no simple answers. But existential thinking gives us a language and intellectual framework to approach such challenges with lucidity, to explore potential solutions, and to encourage us to get constructive and creative—for our own sake as well as humanity's. As Simone de Beauvoir once wrote, "Don't gamble on the future, act now, without delay."

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