

Existentialism Test Study Guide



Introduction to Existentialism

- Existentialists reject the idea that the good life is about money, power, or honor; that society trumps the individual; that science can explain us.
- Existentialists do not believe that we have a pre-defined essence; we are what we make of ourselves in every moment.
- We have the freedom to choose the lives we lead. Our task as humans is to live with **authenticity**.
- Existentialism is the philosophy of no excuses: we are responsible for everything we are and become.
- “Existentialism’s first move is to make every man aware of what he is, and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him.”
- We experience **angst**—a feeling of fear or discomfort arising from the realization of our freedom.
- Life is **absurd**. The universe is random, uncaring, and imposes no external purpose on us.

Jean-Paul Sartre

- Existence precedes essence: what we are is more important than how we define ourselves.
- We must actively create our lives, not let our lives define us.
- There is no God, no good, no external morality. We define goodness/badness of our actions—we just need to be aware of the act of choosing.
- We are always free, no matter our circumstances. We are free to respond to the universe in any way we choose. This freedom, though, makes us anxious, because we realize that we are responsible for our failures and successes.
- We must avoid living in **mauvais foi** (bad faith), which is when we let the universe, our preconceptions, or society define us.
- Instead, we need to live with **authenticity**. Sartre explained this with the idea of the difference between holding hands and having your hand held.



Albert Camus

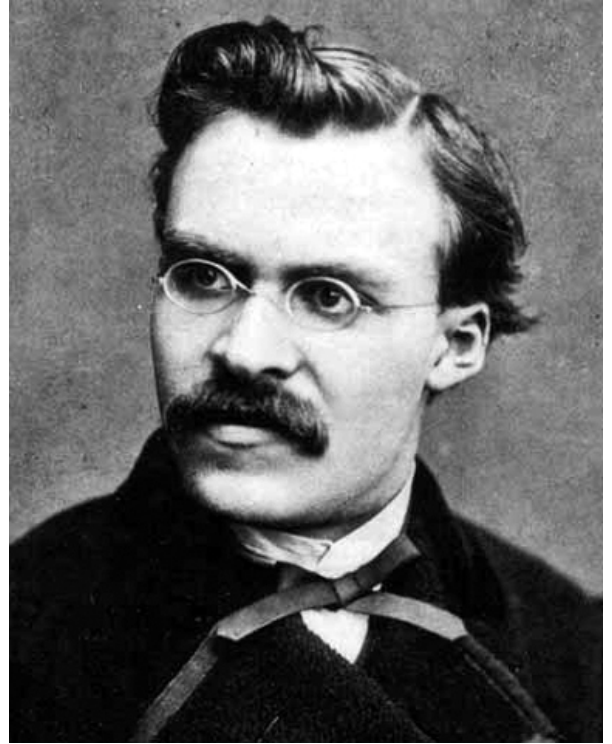
- Life is **absurd**: we hope for a better future, but each day brings us closer to death; we romanticize our lives, despite their pain; we rely on science to explain the things we cannot.
- **The Myth of Sisyphus**: Camus claims that when Sisyphus acknowledges the futility of his task and the certainty of his fate, he is freed to realize the absurdity of his situation and to reach a state of contented acceptance.
- Only personal experience matters. We can revolt in one of four paths Camus identifies:
 - Don Juan
 - The Actor
 - The Artist
 - The Conqueror

Existentialism Test Study Guide



Friederich Nietzsche

- **Nihilism:** Nietzsche rejects the idea of morals, values and beliefs, arguing that those ideas were flawed and foolish. He rejects the idea of Heaven as a reward and utopian ideals.
- **Eternal Recurrence:** We should live each day as if we would have to live it over and over forever, without change.
- **Master and Slave Morality:** Nietzsche rejected the idea of what he called slave morality—philosophy like Christianity, which argued for the subordination of individual will and desire for the sake of the common/collective good. Instead, he suggested embracing the morality of a master, individuals who transcend “the herd” and rejoice in their own excellence. Nietzsche calls for exceptional people to no longer be ashamed of their uniqueness in the face of a supposed morality-for-all, which he deems to be harmful to the flourishing of exceptional people.
- **The Ubermensch** is a future person who is not held back by conventional moral codes, but goes beyond them to create new values. We should, according to Nietzsche, become the authors of our own lives.



Soren Kierkegaard

- **Christian Existentialism:** SK believed that the core of understanding faith and sin was understanding choice: just as Adam had the choice to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, we have the choice to avoid/embrace sin and faith.
- Three Stages of Life:
 - Aesthetic Individuals: concerned with only experiences or abstract data. The aesthetics of experience include Hedonism, Materialism, and other life approaches dedicated to pleasure or personal gratification.
 - Ethical individuals recognize the despair of aesthetics, and are compelled to find greater meaning in life. Ethical individuals develop a system by which they will make choices and build relationships.
 - Religious individuals experience both suffering and faith. Only at this level does one truly understand the self.
- **The Leap of Faith:** "to be religious is to make a passionate, individual choice, a “leap of faith” against all evidence, even against reason itself. Faith is something personal, not a matter of doctrine, churches, social groups, or ceremonies.
- As Kierkegaard writes, “doubt is conquered by faith, just as it is faith which has brought doubt into the world.”
- **Objective Madness:** SK argued that, just as some suffered from subjective madness (insanity as is traditionally understood) other suffer from **objective madness**, people who rely so heavily on rationality and empiricism that they lose their humanity.

Existentialism Test Study Guide



Simone de Beauvoir

- The Other
 - Society defines women as distinct from normal, a position occupied by men. Women are defined as mysterious, different, and irrational—all of which combine to oppress women.
 - Men are seen as the master/original; women as inferior copies.
 - Women are punished for following the rules established by men (through diminished expectations) and for deviating from them.
- She criticized the idea of a **feminine nature**, which argues that there are central, essential characteristics of women. For example, she argues against the idea that women should all be seen as nurturers/caretakers.
- Women can **liberate** themselves by changing the **patriarchal** structure that limit their achievements and by rejecting/challenging/not following the patriarchal assumptions about them as individuals.



Andre Malraux

- The answer to an uncaring universe is the creation of art: Malraux stated that all art is a revolt against man's fate, and art is a means of transcendence. "Art," he once said, "is an anti-destiny."
- Art= the chance to express our humanity and to find personal sense of truth.
- What is art?
 - Self-expression of an idea, concept, emotion
 - Deliberate expression
 - Communication of the self
 - Ambiguous, with multiple possible interpretations—not propaganda
- Henry Peyre: "Malraux's criterion for a great work, to which he has himself frantically tried to live up, is Nietzschean: a work is great through its ability incessantly to question the validity of the world."

