Existentialism

Project Workbook

“MAN IS NOTHING ELSE BUT WHAT HE MAKES OF HIMSELF.”
- JEAN PAUL SARTRE

Name:
Form:
1. Introduction to Existentialism

**Aim:** What is existentialism?

Lesson Outcomes::

**MUST** be able to explain what the existential attitude is

**SHOULD** be able to identify the difference between a scientific, religious and existential method of enquiry into an ultimate question

**COULD** be able to analyse which method of enquiry that they believe to be more effective

**Key terms:** Existential attitude  Method of enquiry
Ultimate Question  Experience

**What is an ultimate question?**
How might you attempt to find an answer (what might be your method of enquiry) for the following questions:

- How should you live your life?
- What is love?
- Why do you exist, here and now?
- What is the point of your life?
3 different methods of enquiry to find answers to questions:

1. Scientific enquiry
   This way tries to find answers by demonstrating them through scientific experiments that can be observed in nature and agreed upon by all. This might be done by performing new experiments or appealing to scientific laws and theories already established. Answers can be proven as facts in the physical world and therefore are not usually disputed.

2. Religious enquiry
   This way tries to find answers by appealing to religious beliefs in God. This might be done by referring to religious texts, talking to religious leaders or considering your own or other people’s religious experiences. Answers ultimately come from God and are true independent of us.

3. Existential enquiry
   This way tries to find answers by appealing to our human experiences of the world. This might be done by analysing one’s moods, behaviour, feelings, thinking, worries or experiences. All of our answers come from ourselves and so have no independent source.

Stretch and Challenge Exercise
Which method of enquiry is more effective for ultimate questions?
Ultimate Question Investigation 1:

What is love?

Which do you think is the best method of enquiry into this question and why?

Ultimate Question Investigation 2:

Your Question: .................................................................

Scientific method of enquiry:

Religious method of enquiry:

Existential method of enquiry:
Written Task

Complete this sentence: using the terms underneath:

The existential attitude is .....
H/W Task 2: Explain the existential attitude using an ultimate question of your choice and contrasting it with the scientific and religious methods of enquiry.

How might having the existential attitude affect your life?
2. What is being?

Aim: What is it to be a human being?

Lesson Outcomes:

**MUST** be able to explain the existential attitude towards what it is to be a human being

**SHOULD** be able to interpret Heidegger’s term *Dasein*

**COULD** be able to analyse the impact of this on their own world view

Key terms: Being, Dasein, Experience, Average everydayness, Subjectivity, Human Condition

What does it mean to be a human being?

How might an existentialist try to answer this question?
Fact: We are all human beings already!
Therefore, existentialists say that in order to find out what it means to be a human being we have to study ourselves.

Philosopher Alert!
Heidegger
German philosopher
whose most famous book ‘Being and Time’ is a very important existentialist work.

Key Terms: Dasein
Heidegger spent a great amount of time trying to explain what it is for something to ‘be’. He was particularly interested in being in a human sense, and refers to this as dasein. Dasein is a difficult term to define, but Heidegger uses it as the name for the unique human being’s kind of being.

Group Task 1: Analysing ourselves
Ranking exercise – using the cards try to order them in terms of which of the things define/affect your experiences the most.
Common Features of the ‘Human Condition’

Your mood

Your fears

Your worries

Your possibilities

Your choices

Your future

Your feelings

Your death

Your being honest with yourself.
Key Term: Average Everydayness
This is Heidegger's term for the idea that our lives are just fairly ordinary most of the time. Heidegger argues that it is in these ordinary experiences that we can find out what it is to be human, nothing can tell us the answer but ourselves.

Calvin and Hobbes

Task 2: Think, pair, share.
Individually choose at least two from the list of features of the human condition and think of a time when it affected your actions/experience. Then explain to your partner before we share some responses with the group.

Stretch and Challenge Exercise
Are there any other things that you think affect your actions/ experiences that aren’t on the list? Explain what they are.
Key Terms: Subjectivity and The Human Condition

Subjective means based on or influenced by personal feelings, tastes or opinions. Since in existentialism we must begin with ourselves, this means that all thinking and answers it finds must be subjective and depend on the person. It is the opposite of objective.

The Human Condition is the term used to state that there are several common things that all people share. E.g. Everyone has feelings, everyone has hopes and fears etc. (see the list).

Written Task

Explain, using the terms underneath, what an existentialist might say if they were asked what it is to be a human being:

An existentialist might say that…..

The Human Condition

Dasein

Experience

Average everydayness

Subjectivity

Ourselves
H/W Task: Give an example of how each of the key terms from the list of features of the human condition has affected your actions at one time or other.

Given that existentialists argue that these are all part of the human condition, create an argument for which one you think affects human beings actions the most.
Stretch and Challenge Exercise

Create a short story or piece of artwork that illustrates the human condition in some way.
3. Perspectivism

Aim: What is perspectivism and how does it affect our search for answers to ultimate questions?

Lesson Outcomes:

**MUST** be able to explain and illustrate perspectivism

**SHOULD** be able to suggest what effect perspectivism has on a belief that there is one right way to behave and live your life

**COULD** evaluate Nietzsche’s claim that all truth is a matter of perspective

Key terms: Perspective Moral dilemma Subjective Truth

A famous moral dilemma:

The Trolley Problem

What is the right thing to do and why?
**Key Term: Perspective**

A *perspective* is a particular attitude toward or way of looking at something. It is a point of view. Existentialists argue that if we are to attempt to understand our existence with our own *subjective* experience, then this affects what we can claim to *know*. *Perspectivism* is the view that no one has access to truth beyond their own perspective. All judgements of truth or value are simply a point of view and, as such, there is no one right way of seeing/interpreting the world which is definitively true.

**Task 1: Examine the following pictures. Discuss with your partner—what do you see?**

![Images of a cube and a vase with faces, and a woman with a headscarf]

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Task 2: Work in pairs, using an example from the picture, to write an explanation for what it means to say that what we experience is **subjective**.
Philosopher Alert!

**Nietzsche**

German philosopher who is considered one of the founders of existentialism and most influential thinkers.

*Nietzsche* claims that all of our claims about truth and right/wrong stem from our own subjective perspective – they are only one person’s point of view and so there are no right answers. So, looking back at the trolley problem—there is no right answer, he would say that there is only one point of view against another!
Written Task

Explain the idea of perspectivism using an example.

Suggest what it might mean for someone who claims they know that there is a god OR that there is one right way to behave and live your life.

Stretch and Challenge Exercise

Do you agree with Nietzsche that ALL truth is a matter of perspective? Try to give an example of something we can know that isn’t just a point of view.
H/W Task: Choose an event that has occurred recently in the news e.g. MH17 plane attack in Ukraine. Write two brief newspaper articles beneath, each from a different perspectives about the event.
Homework Task 2: Explain what, if any, impact Nietzsche’s ideas about truth could have on your views on what is right/wrong and religion/God.

Stretch and Challenge Exercise

Include a picture of your choice and explain what subjective aspects of the human condition may affect our experiences of it.
4. The absurd

Aim: What is the existentialist notion of the absurd and how is it a part of our lives?

Lesson Outcomes:

**MUST** be able to explain the notion of the absurd and the feelings that it arouses

**SHOULD** be able to illustrate the view that we invent rules in life in order to give ourselves a false sense of purpose

**COULD** be able to analyse the view that life has no inherent meaning or purpose

Key terms: The absurd, Anxiety, Perspective, Meaning, Purpose, Values, Rules, Invention

What ultimate questions might you ask having looked at your stimulus material (and why)?
Task 1: What is the meaning of life? Why are you here?
Individual task to write down how thinking about these question makes you feel.

Common existential feelings when faced with these questions:
Une....e    Anx....y    F.....r    Conf......on    C.......ern
Wo......y    Fr...........ion

MAKING LINKS: In pairs, you have two minutes to discuss what the existential attitude and idea of perspectivity might suggest to whether there is one right answer to what the meaning of our life is.
**Key Terms: The absurd**

The **absurd** is the name existentialists give to the idea that the thing that we seem to want most in life—an answer to why we are here and what the meaning of our lives is—is something that we *can never actually know*. This is what makes life absurd, that is bizarre, illogical, silly or ridiculous, because we can’t work out what the point of it is, but we really want to.

**Whackbat!**

Watch the clip explaining the rules of Whackbat and then discuss the following questions in groups:

1. **Why are there rules in whackbat?**
2. **When playing whackbat does following the rules give you a purpose and goals?**
3. **Are the rules completely made up?**

Then consider these questions:

1. **Why are there rules e.g. social, moral, legal, in life?**
2. **When playing the game of life does following the rules give you purposes and goals?**
3. **Are the rules completely made up?**
Existentialism proposes the idea that all the rules people follow in life aren’t really true, but made up to try and give us a false sense of purpose or meaning because we so desperately want one. People try to cope with their feelings of fear, confusion and anxiety by following invented rules that give their lives a false sense of place, purpose and meaning. E.g. Following religious rules such as the 10 Commandments.

**Stretch and Challenge Exercise**

What might a religious believer say that the meaning of their life is?

How might they respond to an existentialist?

**Stretch and Challenge Exercise**

Are there moments in life when the absurd nature of existence is thought about more? Try to give an example and explain it.
Written Task

Explain what the notion of the absurd is and what feelings it evokes in people.

Why do existentialists think that we invent rules in life?

Extra question – How might the idea that human’s invent our rules contradict what a religious person, such as a Christian, might think?
H/W Task: Write a diary entry of someone who has just realised that their life is absurd and all the rules that they have been following are made up.

Why do you think that human beings want to know the meaning and purpose of their lives?
5. Essence and Bad Faith

Aim: Do human beings have an essence and what does it mean to say that people act out of bad faith?

Lesson Outcomes:

**MUST** be able to explain and illustrate the difference between existence preceding essence and essence preceding existence.

**SHOULD** be able to draw connections between the notion of absurdity and our lack of essence

**COULD** be able to analyse and interpret an example of bad faith

Key terms: Essence Existence Being-in-itself
Being-for-itself Bad Faith

Look at your object and answer the following questions:

What is it?
What is it for?
Is it free to do anything it wants?
Did someone make it this way intentionally?
**Beings-in-themselves**
These are things that are determined and shaped by their given nature and purpose. They fulfill a certain function, which they didn’t choose. These kinds of beings are not free, in that they make no decisions and have no potential for change. They do not make any progress. E.g. a table, a pen, a plant

**Philosopher Alert!**

**Sartre**
French philosopher
Famous French thinker who first Used the phrase ‘existentialism’

**Beings-for-themselves**
These are beings that have no given nature or purpose. They have no fixed characteristics and are not given any particular future or goal by another. They are free to create themselves and have no specific purpose. They are not purely material and make choices that allow them to progress. E.g. Human beings

**Essence precedes existence**

**Existence precedes Essence**
Individual task: For each object, below explain in the box what its essence is. State whether or not its essence precedes its existence, or its existence precedes its essence.
Key Term: Bad Faith

‘Bad faith’ is the position someone finds themselves in if they pretend that they don’t have a choice about how to live their life. This can be done in several different ways. Some people appeal to fate or divine intervention (God) as determining their life. Some appeal to supernatural forces or to nature, believing that they do actually have a fixed essence and purpose. E.g. I didn’t do it because it wasn’t meant to be., or it was part of God’s plan.

Making Links: In pairs, you have 2 minutes to make a connection between humans’ lack of essence and our feeling of absurdity.

Stretch and Challenge Exercise

Can you think of your own example of someone who has bad faith?
Written Task

Explain how a existentialist would argue the difference between a human and an object of your choice, using the key terms below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essence</th>
<th>Existence</th>
<th>Precedes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being-for-itself</td>
<td>Being-in-itself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extra question – explain how believing in God might be considered to be ‘bad faith’ by some existentialists.
H/W Task: ‘We are each the authors of our own lives’ Explain what you think this quote from Sartre means in relation to essence and existence. Do you agree? Say why.

Explain why the Calvin and Hobbes strip is an example of ‘bad faith’.
6. Authenticity

**Aim:** What does it mean to be authentic and is it something we should value?

**Lesson Outcomes:**

**MUST** be able to explain what it means to be authentic

**SHOULD** be able to argue for why existentialists suggest being authentic is something that we should value

**COULD** be able to assess whether or not they are authentic

**Key terms:** Authenticity  Value  Honesty  Subjectivity  Essence  The absurd

**Discuss the following questions:**

*Is it possible to be dishonest with yourself?*

*Have you ever done something that you thought wasn’t really you?*

*Have you ever said you thought something that you didn’t really think?*
**Key Term: Authenticity**

Being **authentic** means being honest with yourself and trying to understand your own existence. It is something that existentialists promote. Authenticity involves consciously choosing your own actions and not becoming a victim of ‘bad faith’. Being authentic means understanding yourself and being honest to yourself about the possibilities of your own life, what you are capable of achieving. The popular trend of ‘being yourself’ or ‘staying true to yourself’ has its roots in this notion of authenticity.

**Task 1: Let it go!**

Discuss in pairs and then explain how the character from the film is now choosing to be *authentic* having previously lived an *inauthentic* life.

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**Stretch and Challenge Exercise**

Why do you think that people are inauthentic? Try to give an example to illustrate your point.
Why is being authentic valuable for an existentialist?

**MAKING LINKS:** Connect **authenticity** with **subjectivity**

**MAKING LINKS:** Connect **authenticity** with **absurdity**

**MAKING LINKS:** Connect **authenticity** with **essence**

**MAKING LINKS:** Connect **authenticity** with **bad faith**
Written Task

What does it mean for someone to be authentic? Give an example of an inauthentic action in your answer.

Why is being authentic something we might value?

Extra question – Are you authentic? Explain your answer.
H/W Task: Write a short story about someone who makes an inauthentic decision and regrets it.

How do you think being truly authentic might change your life? Explain your answer.
7. Development of Meaning

**Aim:** Does existentialism offer any solutions to the search for meaning in our lives?

Lesson Outcomes:

**MUST** be able to explain how an existentialist can find meaning in their life

**SHOULD** be able to illustrate Nietzsche’s notion of ‘sublimation’

**COULD** be able to evaluate this proposed solution to the problem of meaning

**Key terms:** Meaning, Sublimation, Creation, Values, Truth

If everything is subjective, we have no essence and life is absurd then how can we get any meaning from our lives?

Is our quick experience here pointless? Does anything we say or do in here really matter? Have we done anything important? Have we been happy? Have we made the most of these precious few footsteps?
Task 1: Bruce Wayne/Batman

Discuss in pairs how anything in this clip might relate to creating meaning in your life

Can you link this clip to idea that we have no essence?

Existentialists claim that because your life has no inbuilt meaning you have to create a meaning for yourself. You don’t have a specific goal or purpose in life, so you need to invent one for yourself if you wish to have meaning.

Key Term: Sublimation

Nietzsche suggests that meaning created through a process of sublimation. This means that we should channel our creative energies into projects that will stretch us and develop us. We become our own projects and in doing so sculpt something out of ourselves that can give us meaning and passion. We craft our own mould and write the pages for the novel of our lives. When you sublimate yourself, you turn yourself into something better by putting your energy and focus into something creative. E.g. Music. Meaning can be found in this way in our ability to create something out of our lives.

Stretch and Challenge Exercise

Is Bruce Wayne being authentic in the clip?
What could you do to sublimate your life and give it meaning?

Work in pairs to come up with some examples.

**MAKING LINKS:** In pairs, make a connection between essence and sublimation.
Written Task

How can an existentialist find meaning in their life? Give an example to help explain your answer and refer to sublimation if you can.

Extra question – do you think that this is a good answer to the ultimate question of what is the meaning of life? Explain.
H/W Task—Create a brief beginner’s guide to existentialism and explain how it offers meaning in our lives

Beginner’s Guide to Existentialism
‘Existentialism addresses questions about values, meaning and truth’ Do you agree? Explain your answer