

# Making of the Modern World 15

Lecture #13: Existentialism and the  
Absurd

# “Waiting for Godot”

- Estragon’s Lament
- <https://youtu.be/AEEJD6zZPfc>

# What do you do?

- You are a young man in Nazi-occupied France. You are the only son and provider for your elderly mother. She needs you to care for her, but you feel called to join the French resistance. Your mother begs you not to put yourself in danger, you are all she has in the world, but you know that you will be ashamed not to make a sacrifice against the Nazis.
  - What do you do?
  - Is there a clear answer?
  - Idealism vs. pragmatism
    - “Elegy of Fortinbras”

# Existentialism and the Absurd

- For the existentialists, the world was clearly absurd.
  - This creates a state of radical and total freedom.
- In this world, you confront confusion and absurdity. You cannot rely on external authority but must determine for yourself. The responsibility is yours.
  - The world as absurdity
    - Like listening to a conversation through a wall
  - There is no meaning in the world beyond that which we give it.
- Existential angst – there is nothing holding us back
  - When we stand on a cliff we fear falling but perhaps also fear throwing ourselves off.
    - We feel our freedom – there is nothing holding us back.

# Existentialism and Reason

- It may be that an attempt to live “rationally” is to attempt to live in bad faith.
  - We attempt to impose structure to a world that is fundamentally irrational or random
  - Do not say “it was meant to be” or “this is what I am supposed to do”
- We are subjects not merely objects in the world.
  - Must create our own subjectivity
  - Must accept our freedom

# Meaningless, Freedom, Authenticity

- Many existentialists claimed that God's absence left humankind w/o purpose.
  - Sartre defined existentialism as “the attempt to draw all the consequences from a position of consistent atheism.”
  - Each individual must create his or her own meaning and live authentically.
  - We are condemned to be free
- “existence precedes essence”
  - Most important fact about us is that we are individuals free to chart our own destiny
  - There is no innate nature to which we can free ourselves of responsibility

# Conformity in Mass Society

- Existentialism as individualism
  - Is existentialism the answer to the problems of modern life? The problems of conformity in the modern world
    - Consumerism
      - Meaning through brands
    - Do we have free will?
      - Why do you like what you like? Why do you do what you do?
        - » Facebook and the “presentation of the self”
    - We must live “authentically”, but what does that mean?
- What is the existential attitude?
  - Disorientation in the face of absurdity or a meaningless world
  - Existentialism “jars you out of your habits”
    - Must constantly evaluate our choices
    - Must be “counter-culture”

# Existentialism and Connection

- Universal need to overcome separation and aloneness
  - Sources of transitory connection through conformity
    - Not rooted in authenticity
    - Fusion without integrity
- Standing in love vs. falling in love
  - Masochistic love
  - Sadistic love
  - Mature love – recognizing and respecting others for who they are

# Existentialism as privilege

- Is an existentialist perspective realistic?
  - What about questions of race, gender, class?
- Can existentialism have the same meaning for the oppressed as for the privileged?

# The counter-culture challenge

- Confronting injustice and refusing to “go along”
  - Students for a Democratic Society
    - The constraints of the university
      - What is the purpose of the university?
    - “total emasculation of the creative spirit”
  - Civil rights movement
    - Resistance
    - Refusal to “go along”

# “Eyes on the Prize”

- Transition to next time
- “March on Selma”

<https://youtu.be/h7HnkIVyGD0>