

# *Key Existentialist Themes*

## **Existentialism**

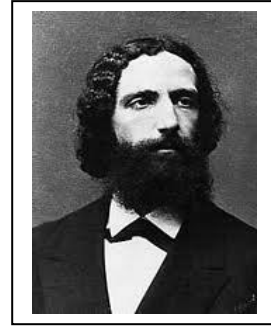
- The difficulties in defining existentialism.
- A style of philosophy.
- Begins from man's position in the world. Philosophy of the subject, of the individual, rather than of the object.
- It is a way of philosophising by which we come to think about human existence as it is known directly. Moreover, this style of philosophising begins from *man as an existent*, rather than *man as a thinking subject*. It is thereby distinct from rationalist approach to philosophy.
- Some key themes – the individual; intentionality; being and absurdity; choice and free will; and the role of experience; authenticity; the emotions.

## **Phenomenology**

- The study of the world as it appears to the human observer (the study of phenomena).
- Attempts to describe our experience directly, as it is, independently of, for example, the causal explanations that historians, sociologists and psychologists might give.

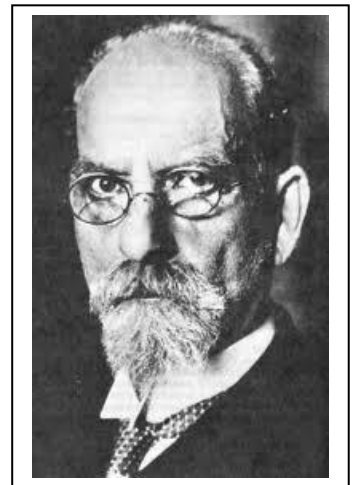
## Brentano (1838-1917)

- Consciousness as INTENTIONAL—every act of consciousness is directed at some object or other.
- Intentionality as ‘aboutness’ or ‘directedness’.
- For Brentano, intentionality is main characteristic of mental phenomena and can be directed towards non-existent objects and existent ones.



## Husserl (1859-1938)

- Intentionality means that consciousness ‘brings it about’ that there are objects. Consciousness ‘constitutes’ objects—objects acquire meaning through consciousness. Consciousness structures our experiences.
- Interested in the *essence* of our conscious experiences. Phenomenology is the descriptive analysis of essences. The phenomenologist is not concerned with particular acts of sense-perception, but with the essential features common to all such acts. In order to ‘access’ these essences, the acts must be ‘reduced’.



- *Reduction*: instead of focusing on the normal objects of our acts (physical objects, persons, or general features that many objects have in common) we focus our gaze purely on the structure of the act of consciousness. Ordinary objects are ‘bracketed’ off (*epoche*: Gr. A suspension of judgment). We study the features of the act that make it seem to have an object and do not ask whether or not it actually has one.
- This phenomenological method aims to eliminate presuppositions which might prevent the direct and immediate experience of essences.
- Heidegger questioned the possibility of knowledge free from presuppositions—human understanding requires pre-knowledge. For Heidegger, understanding is interpretive.

## Reading

### Essential

- Mary Warnock, *Existentialism* (Oxford and NY: Oxford Uni. Press, 1970), ch. 2 (on Husserl). Digitalised. Uploaded to Moodle page.

### Recommended

- Webber, Jonathan, *Rethinking Existentialism* (Oxford, 2018; online edn., Oxford Academic, 23 Aug. 2018), chapter 1.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198735908.001.0001>,
- accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

### Further

- Gallagher and Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind* (London & NY: Routledge, 2008), pp.5-10. Online access via library.

The **primary texts** by Husserl (below) are not easy reads, but the introductions to the books below provide an explanation of Husserl's ideas. You may wish to consult them if you are interested in further reading on Husserl:

- Husserl, *The Paris Lectures*, translation and introduction by Peter Koestenbaum (Lancaster, Boston and Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985). [From documents written in 1929.]
- Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology* [1907], trans. William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian, introduction by George Nakhnikian (The Hague: Martin Nijhoff, 1964).