

# A Backdrop To Existentialist Thought

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PROF. DAN FLORES

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

HOUSTON COMMUNITY COLLEGE

[DANIEL.FLORES1@HCCS.EDU](mailto:DANIEL.FLORES1@HCCS.EDU)

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“Existentialism . . . arose as a backlash against philosophical and scientific systems that treat all particulars, including humans, as members of a genus or instances of universal laws. It claims that our own existence as unique individuals in concrete situations cannot be grasped adequately in such theories, and that systems of this sort conceal from us the highly personal task of trying to achieve self-fulfillment in our lives.”

- Guignon (REP, 1998)

# Three generalizations of Existentialism

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1. “existence precedes essence.” A backlash against the systematicity of individuals to a system of laws.

By the end of 1609 Galileo (1564-1642) had turned his telescope on the night sky and began to make remarkable discoveries.

Humans have no essential purpose or essence. We determine and choose *who we are*. What an odd thing to say.

## 2. We have full and sole responsibility for how our lives turn out.

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And this is not just a way of speaking. We are the creators and arbiters of meaning.

- Shadows on the moon and the meaninglessness of human life
- The world is objectified and the universe becomes a vast space of observable objects.
- Nietzsche's claim that "God is Dead."

In a cold, dark, cruel world, it is up to you to see to it that your life turns out a certain way or other.

### 3. One must become “authentic” and “take over their own existence with clarity and intensity.”

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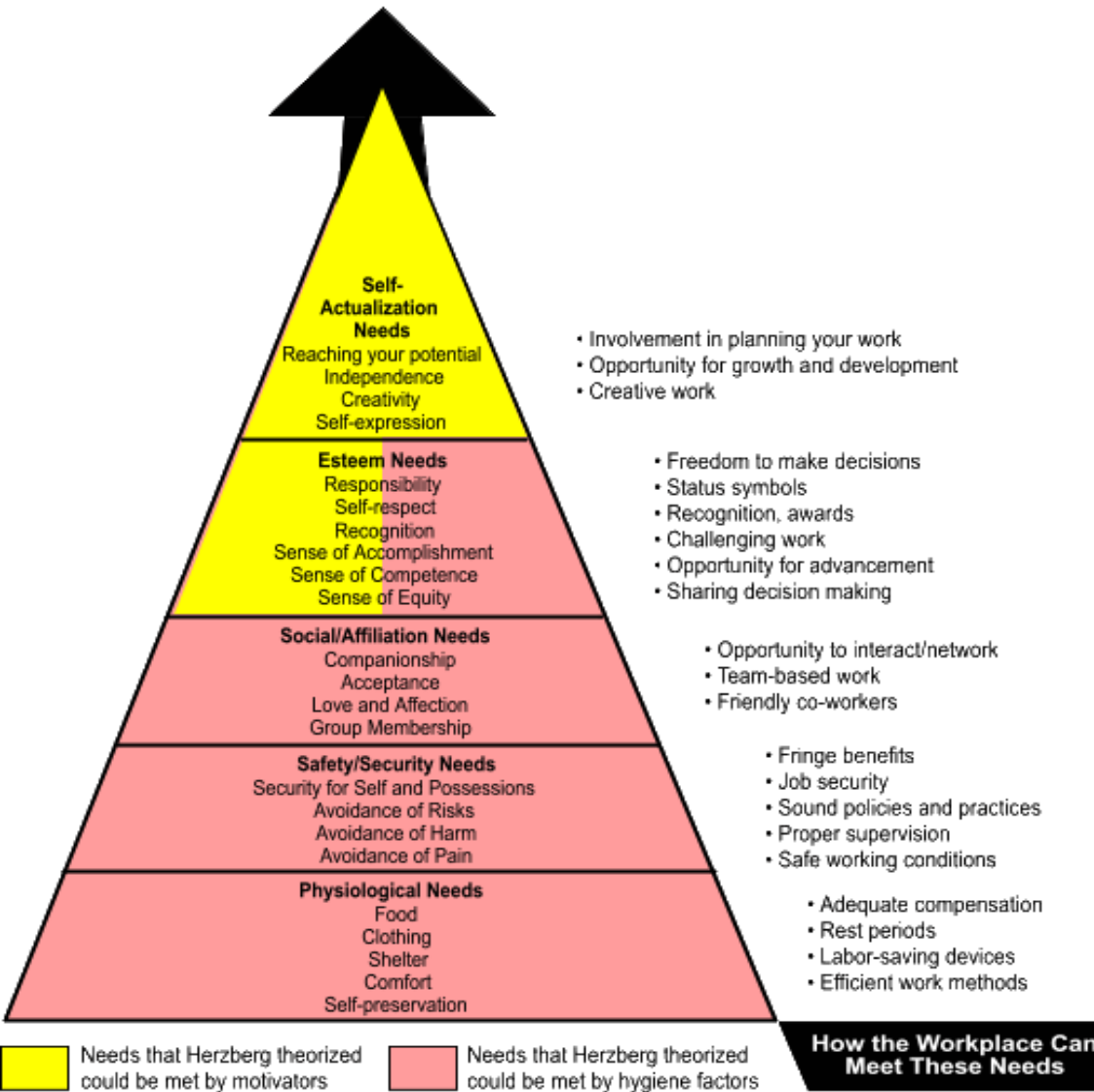
We obviously all have desires that must be met.

The common place denial of our ability to choose and accept responsibility results in inauthenticity.

Being authentic requires profound emotional experiences such as anxiety, existential dread and guilt, nausea . . .

# At base level we are undoubtedly animals with basic needs and desires.

Self-actualization is not an endpoint,  
but a self-renewing need/drive



## PART II

# HISTORICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ANTECEDENTS TO EXISTENTIALISM

### What is the Copernican Revolution?

“[The sphere of the fixed stars] is followed by the first of the planets, Saturn, which completes its circuit in 30 years. After Saturn, Jupiter accomplishes its revolution in 12 years. The Mars revolves in 2 years. The annual revolution takes the series' fourth place, which contains the earth...together with the lunar sphere as an epicycle. In the fifth place Venus returns in 9 months. Lastly, the sixth place is held by Mercury, which revolves in a period of 80 days” (*Revolutions*, 21-22).



- Nicolaus Copernicus
- Tycho Brahe
- Johannes Kepler
- Galileo Galilei
- Isaac Newton

What does this now tell us about humans' relationship to nature?

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- What is Kant's problem?
  - How do we have *a priori* synthetic judgments?
  - What we know about the world comes from "mental categories" and sense datum.
- Kant against Newton and Leibniz
  - There are at least three possibilities regarding space and time:
    - 1) *real* [Newton's view, most physicists],
    - 2) *relations of real things*, "relations of appearances, relations abstracted from experience and represented confusedly in abstraction" (Paton, p. 133) [Leibniz's view]
    - 3) *forms of our sensibility*. [Kant's view]



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“...it should be possible to have knowledge of objects *a priori*, determining something in regard to them prior to their being given. We should then be proceeding precisely on the lines of Copernicus' primary hypothesis. Failing of satisfactory progress in explaining the movements of the heavenly bodies on the supposition that they all revolved round the spectator, he tried whether he might not have better success if he made the spectator to revolve and the stars to remain at rest. A similar experiment can be tried in metaphysics, as regards the *intuition* of objects. If intuition must conform to the constitution of the objects, I do not see how we could know anything of the latter *a priori*; but if the object (as object of the senses) must conform to the constitution of our faculty of intuition, I have no difficulty in conceiving such a possibility.” (Kant, 2, p.22)

There is one infinite unitary space, but this like all other objects is unknowable as *itself* (noumena)

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- objects of our experiences are representations of the object in itself . . . Including space/time
- Consider the following:
  - “if space and time were real things, our knowledge of space and time would be *a priori* knowledge of objects in space and time.” (Paton, 176)  
in other words, . . . .
  - “if time (and space?) were something existing by and for itself, it would then be something which without a real object would none the less be real.”

# So, what's the point of all of this?

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- Consider where this places you in relation to *nature* or the “real world” in terms of, say, mentality, morality, or even your epistemic state.
- On the one hand, Copernicus and Galileo fundamentally revolutionized the way that we see the world and our interaction with it.
- On the other, and commensurate with C & G, Kant wants to revolutionize the way we understand metaphysics and reality itself.

# Even “I” am not safe . . .

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In René Descartes’ famous statement *Cogito ergo Sum* (*I think; therefore, I exist*) the “I” is posited as an object – and, in fact, an object that thinks. Hence it is one of three substances (*res cogitans*, *res extensa*, god)

- What happens when Kant’s criticism is applied to the *cogito*?

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There must be an external object which is presented to our sensible faculties in order that we may have an idea, conception, understanding, and, finally, a judgment of that object.

- “an object must be capable of being presented and intuited, in a possible experience.”
- If the “I” were an object that could be presented, then . . . However, the “I” like the forms of intuition (space and time) is not an object to be perceived. Rather, it is an internal experience. What is represented is the subject of thought.
- i.e., in a real sense . . . there is no “I”.

# Putting it all together . . .

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We are now faced with the very simple, but drastically radical idea that the subjective “I” – i.e., the “I” of self-consciousness, the subject “I” that dreams and hopes and wishes – is not inherently a meaningful *thing*.

- The “I” is, rather, a relation – and an accidental one at that – of your *facticity* to other parts of the world. In other words, a thing of self-contained experience.
  - how very strange, indeed.

## Part III:

# Nihilism, Facticity, & Meaning

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- The new world view has done away with any transcendent meaning and value.
- With no ultimate source for valuation, Nietzsche, especially, is concerned about a ubiquitous denial of all values.
- This is the concept of nihilism.
- Thrown into a world of ultimate meaninglessness, we realize that we are alone in an unfeeling world that is indifferent to our lives, concerns, beliefs and desires.

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- There is, however, something that separates us from the other animals and organisms
    - Self-awareness and reflection on our desires.
  - But this introduces a “rift,” a break in the natural order of the universe
  - No longer are humans existing beings in a physical realm of *thingness*.
    - We transcend our physical natures through consciousness and continually attempt to close up the rift by aspiring to idealizations.



# “Existence” As Distinct From “Being”

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regarding a “split” or “rift” in nature . . . This can be taken in two different ways:

- this split is simply between basic needs and desires and consciousness, or the ability to reflect on our basic wants and evaluate them, hence, a divide.
- in being able to evaluate our basic wants, we are able to choose *not* to placate to our base desires. We, therefore, introduce *negation* in to existence, i.e., nothingness.

# There is a basic struggle going on here . . .

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“Humans are not content with simply satisfying their basic desires, for they care about what kinds of beings they are, and they therefore reflect on the worth of the things they desire. Because they are capable of having aspirations and striving for something beyond the immediacy of their basic needs and drives, they are capable of forming second-order desires about their basic desires and can regulate their immediate responses in the light of higher goals and purposes.” (Guignon, 2001; p. xviii)

Simply put, Humans can face their facticity and, thus, their existence and *take a stand*.

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- We affirm or deny our being here, right now or whenever. . . We can say “no” to what has been, what is, and what may be
  - But always with some higher-order desire to fulfill . . .
  - There is a constant struggle  
“Human existence is constantly agitated by aspirations and strivings that go beyond its immediate needs and impressions, and so, Hegel says, ‘it can find no peace.’”

# The Two-Faced Human Existence



- “a relation that relates itself to itself.”
- Creatures and Creators
- Facticity and Transcendence
- Being Embodied and, yet, Free

But in all of this there is one final dichotomy

- we are always present, caught up in a “now”
- there is also a “directedness” toward the future.

# Glints Collide ...

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- We, thus, find ourselves, at every present moment, at a point where our past (and all that went into making the past) intersects our “future-directedness”
- There can be no present, no future without the past . . .

# ... Between the Past and the Future

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- Who have you been?
- Who are you now?
- Who are you going to choose to be tomorrow?



[http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1369\\_between\\_past\\_future/exhibition.php](http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1369_between_past_future/exhibition.php)