

Existentialism and Identity in the 21st Century

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Why It Matters

In the United States, the discussion of gender has led to an acrimonious political climate, becoming one of the most hotly contested flashpoints of the so-called “culture wars.” Frequently, this pits a traditional Christian worldview against a secular post-structuralist/feminist perspective. Both, however, draw heavily from 20th Century existentialism in their respective accounts of human sexuality.

Methods and Purpose

- Review of existentialist, Christian personalist, and post-structuralist literature
- Tracing the influence of existentialism on contemporary accounts of gender and sexuality

Key Definition

Existentialism: Philosophical movement prominent in the 20th Century, especially in France. While there were deep divides among existentialist thinkers, fundamental concerns of the movement included human freedom, choice, and self-realization. Some, like Sartre and Beauvoir, were atheists, maintaining that one must define the meaning of one's existence amidst an inherently meaningless world. Others, such as Gabriel Marcel, were Catholic, emphasizing transcendence and the discovery of one's identity in God.



Clockwise from top left: Jean-Paul Sartre, Pope John Paul II, Gabriel Marcel, Judith Butler
(Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons)

Conclusions

- Through their emphasis on the role of freedom in human self-definition, and their corresponding exploration of existential oppression, secular existentialists laid the groundwork for a crucial element of contemporary theories of gender.
- Christian existentialists, through their consideration of transcendence and vocation, were critical in the development of a Christian personalist account of human sexuality.

Authors Reviewed

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| • Jean-Paul Sartre | • Jacques Maritain | • Abigail Favale |
| • Maurice Merleau-Ponty | • W. Norris Clarke | • Judith Butler |
| • Simone de Beauvoir | • Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II) | • R. W. Connell |
| • Gabriel Marcel | • Pope Francis | • Anne Fausto-Sterling |