

existentialism from dostoevsky to sartre

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emerged in the late 19th and 20th centuries, focusing on individual freedom, choice, and the inherent meaninglessness of life. This philosophy examines the struggles of human existence, often highlighting themes of alienation, despair, and the quest for authenticity. Among the most significant figures in the development of existentialist thought are Fyodor Dostoevsky and Jean-Paul Sartre, whose works reflect the evolution of existentialism from its initial explorations of the human condition to its more structured philosophical formulations.

Dostoevsky: The Roots of Existential Thought

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) is often recognized as one of the forerunners of existentialism. His novels delve deeply into the psyche of his characters, exploring themes of morality, free will, and the search for meaning in a chaotic world.

The Struggle with Faith and Doubt

Dostoevsky's exploration of faith and doubt is most notably portrayed in his seminal works, such as "Crime and Punishment," "The Brothers Karamazov," and "Notes from Underground."

1. "Crime and Punishment":

- The protagonist, Raskolnikov, grapples with the moral implications of his actions after committing murder. His internal struggle raises questions about the justification of extraordinary individuals who believe they can transcend moral laws.
- Raskolnikov's journey illustrates the existential conflict between reason and faith, as he oscillates between nihilism and the search for redemption.

2. "The Brothers Karamazov":

- This novel presents a profound exploration of faith through the character of Ivan Karamazov, who famously questions the existence of a benevolent God in the face of suffering.
- The narrative culminates in the "Grand Inquisitor" parable, wherein Ivan critiques the church's authority and its implications for free will and personal responsibility.

3. "Notes from Underground":

- This work introduces the concept of the "underground man," a character who embodies existential angst and radical skepticism.

- The underground man's rejection of societal norms and his subsequent isolation reflect a deep existential crisis, highlighting the tension between individuality and societal expectations.

The Duality of Human Nature

Dostoevsky's characters often embody the duality of human nature, reflecting the existential belief that individuals are capable of both great good and profound evil. This duality is evident in:

- Conflict with Self: Characters like Raskolnikov and the underground man face intense internal conflicts, symbolizing the struggle between competing desires, moral imperatives, and societal pressures.
- Search for Meaning: Dostoevsky's protagonists frequently embark on journeys that are as much about self-discovery as they are about external actions, reflecting the existential idea that meaning must be created rather than found.

Sartre: The Philosophical Framework of Existentialism

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) is often considered the father of modern existentialism. His works provide a structured philosophical framework that builds upon the themes introduced by Dostoevsky and others, emphasizing radical freedom, choice, and the absurdity of existence.