

existentialism

a philosophy that states

that each person is **alone**

and freely **responsible** for their own actions

by which they **define** their own character

in a world **without meaning**

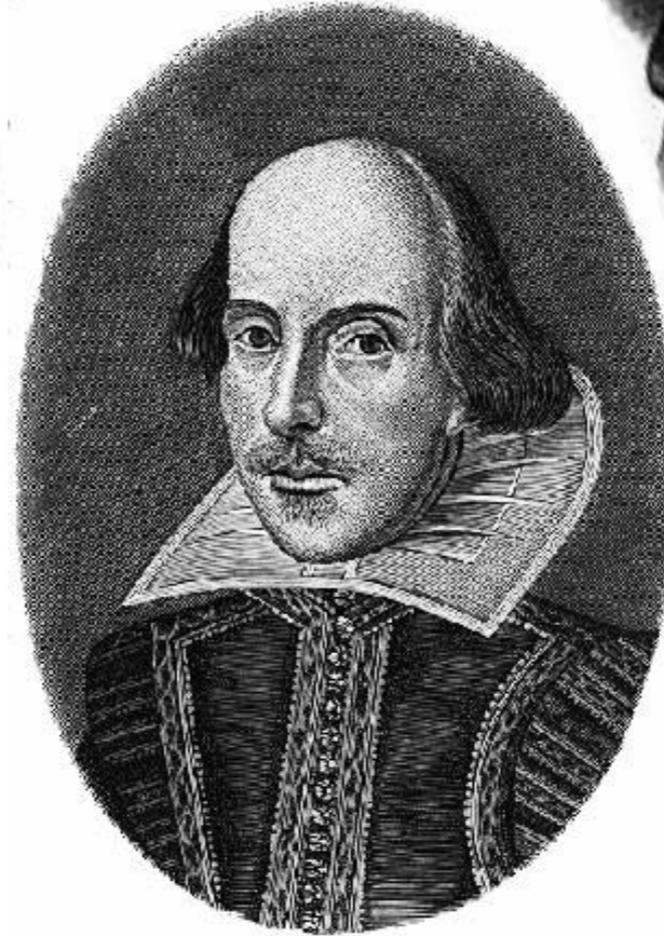
existentialism

- philosophical thinking begins with the **acting, feeling, living** human individual - *not thoughts*
- analyzes **individual existence** in an **unfathomable** universe

existentialism

- focuses on the plight of the individual who must **assume ultimate responsibility** for acts of free will **without any certain knowledge** of what is right or wrong or good or bad
- the individual's starting point is characterized by a **sense of disorientation** and confusion in the face of an **apparently meaningless or absurd** world

forerunners of existence



forerunners



Buddha's teachings

500 BC

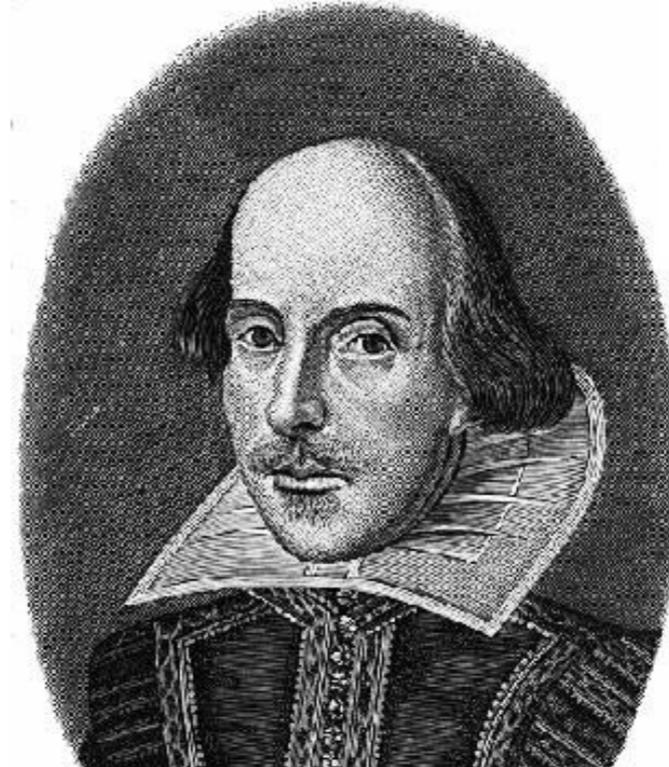
St. Augustine's Confessions

AD 400



Shakespeare's Hamlet

1600



forerunners

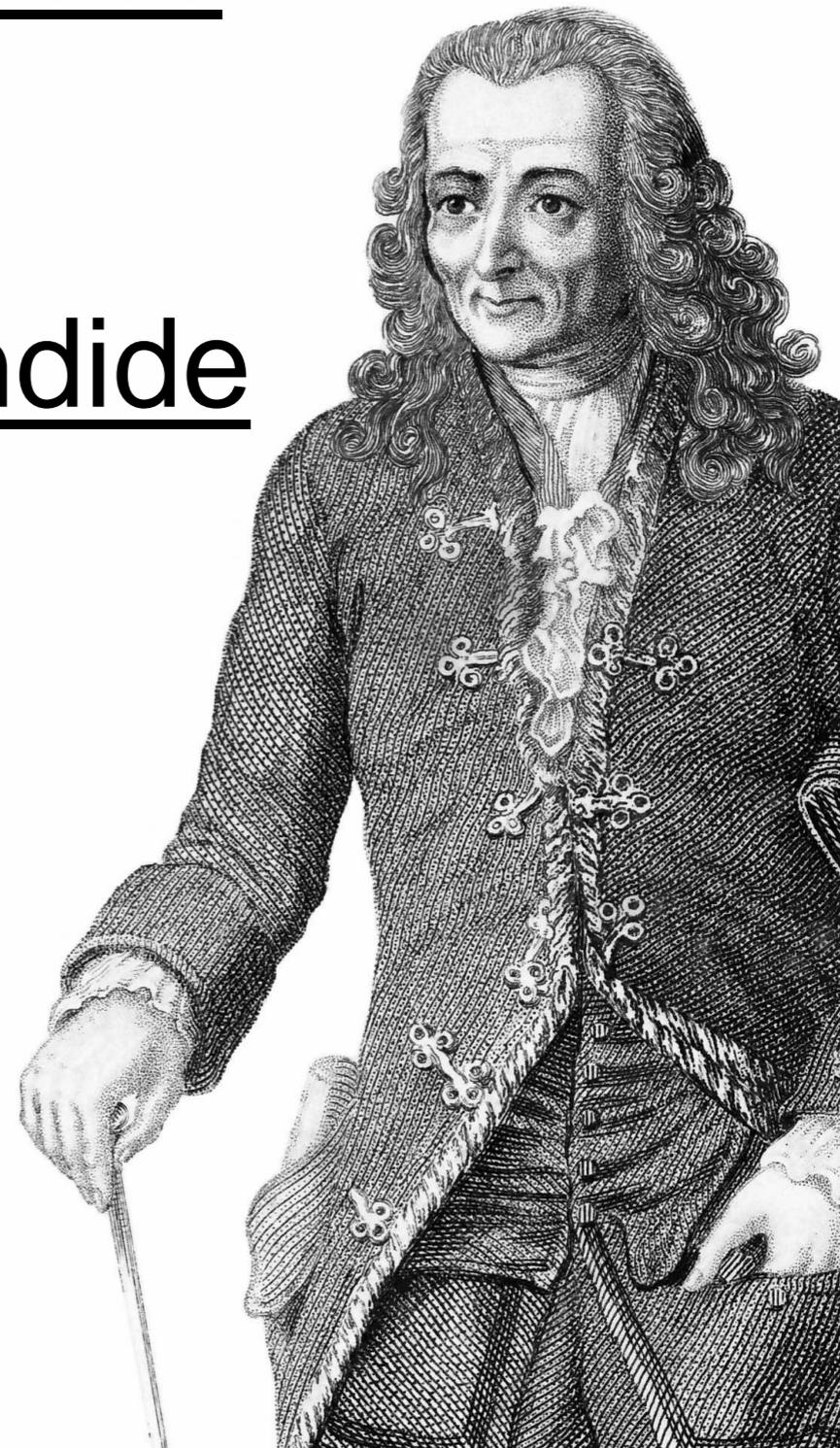


Pascal's Pensées

1650

Voltaire's Candide

1750

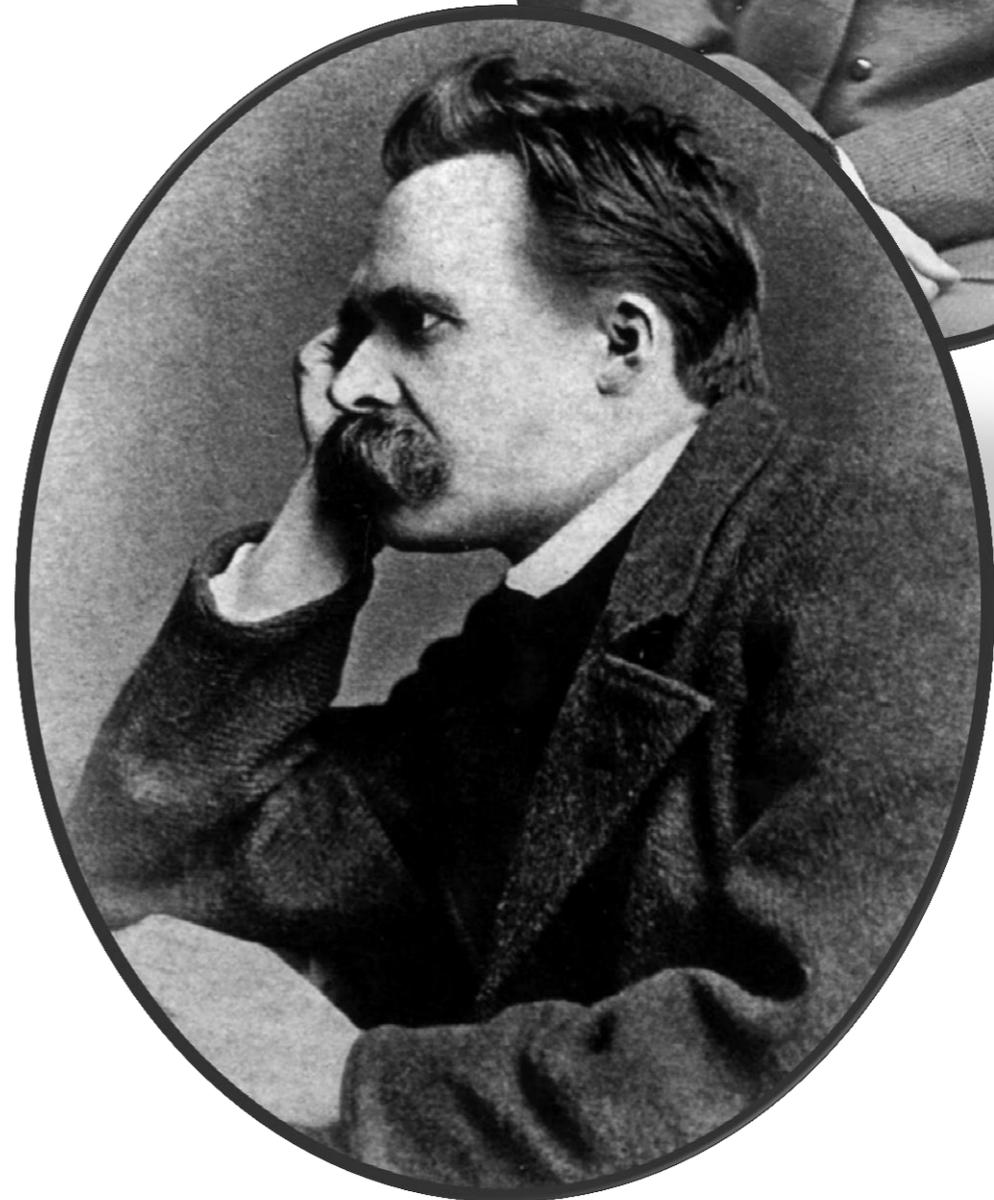
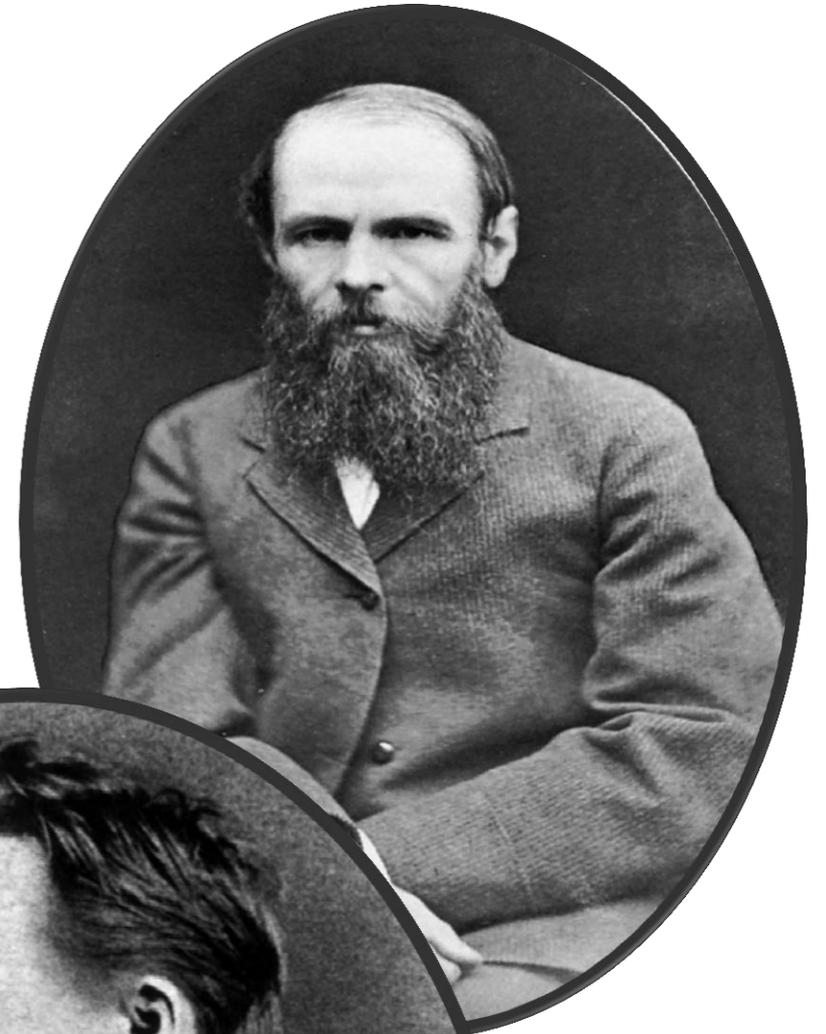


Thoreau's Walden

1850



fathers of existentialism



Søren Kierkegaard

(1813–1855) was a Danish Christian theologian who emphasized the **necessity of difficulty.**

He maintained that the individual is **solely responsible** for giving his or her own life meaning and for living that life **passionately** and **sincerely**, in spite of many existential obstacles and distractions including: despair, angst, absurdity, alienation, and boredom.



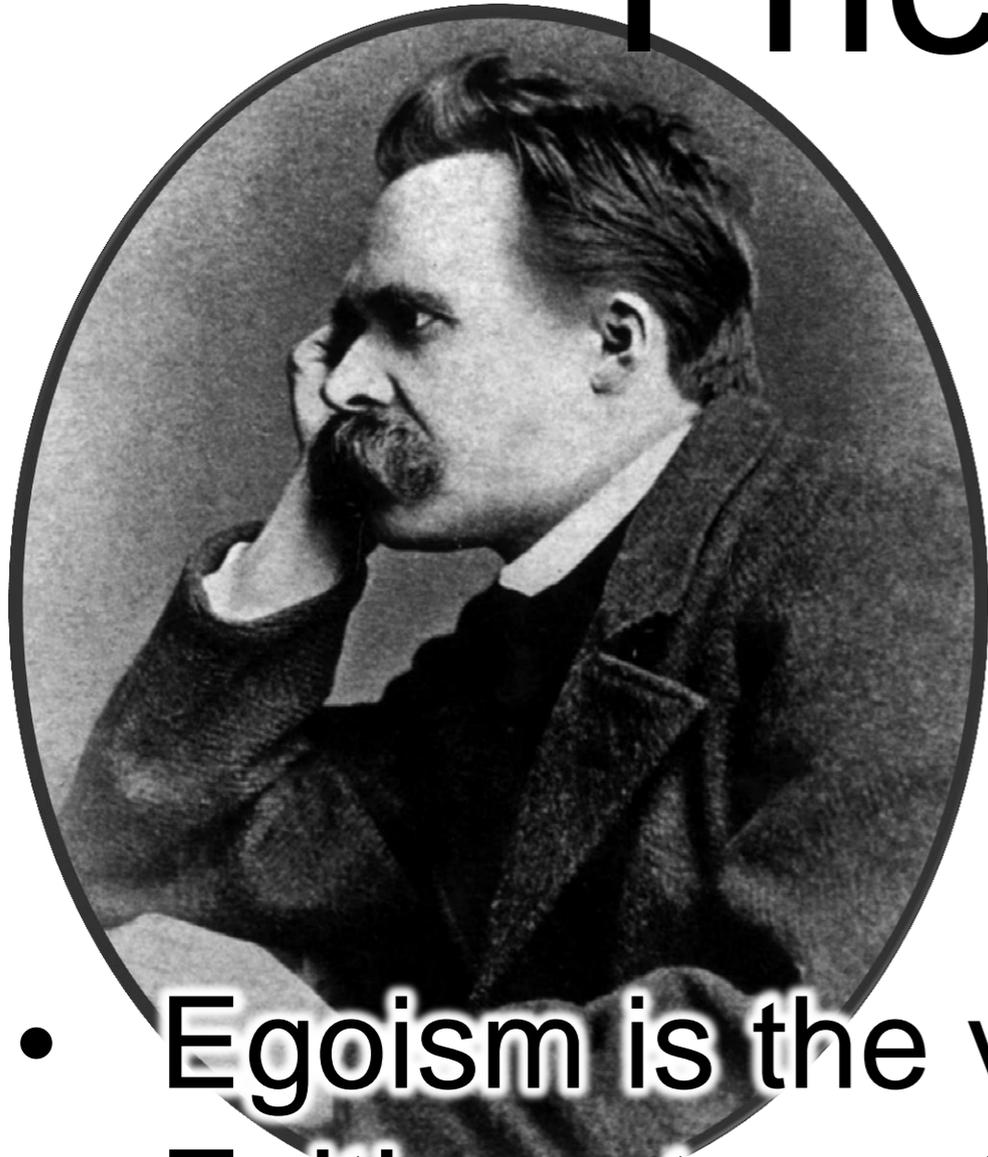
Søren Kierkegaard

- Our life always expresses the result of our dominant thoughts.
- Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays.
- Take away paradox from the thinker and you have a professor.
- Trouble is the common denominator of living; it is the great equalizer.

Søren Kierkegaard

- Boredom is the root of all evil: the despairing refusal to be oneself.
- Face the facts of being what you are, for that is what changes what you are.
- Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced.
- Once you label me you negate me.
- Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.
- Be that self which one truly is.

Friedrich Nietzsche

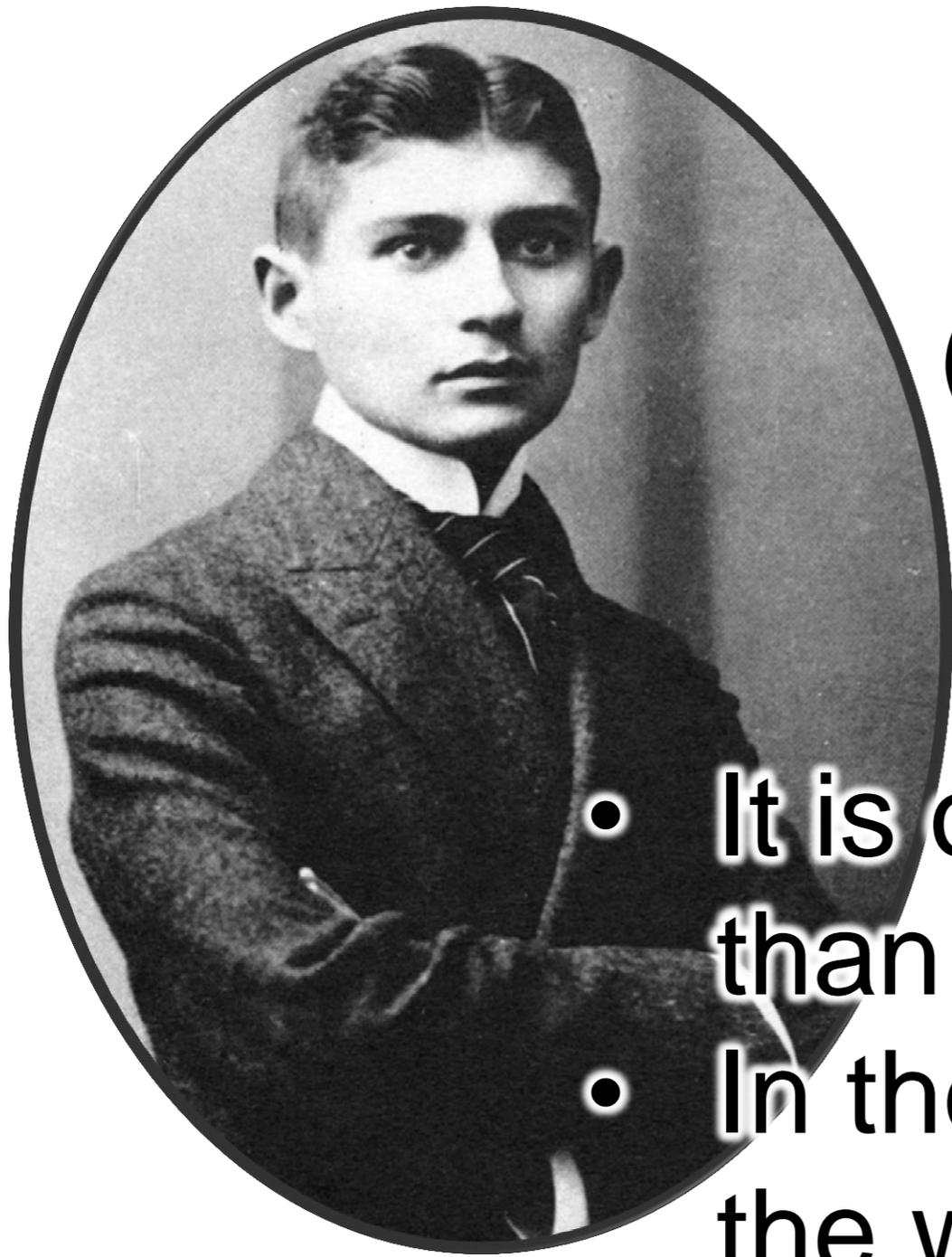


(1844–1900) a German anti-establishment academic who famously declared that “God is dead”

- Egoism is the very essence of a noble soul.
- Faith: not wanting to know what is true.
- Love is blind; friendship closes its eyes.
- Fear is the mother of morality.

Friedrich Nietzsche

- All evidence of truth come only from the senses.
- He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.
- I would believe only in a God that knows how to Dance.
- Is life not a thousand times too short for us to bore ourselves?
- And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.
- Convictions are more dangerous foes of truth than lies.



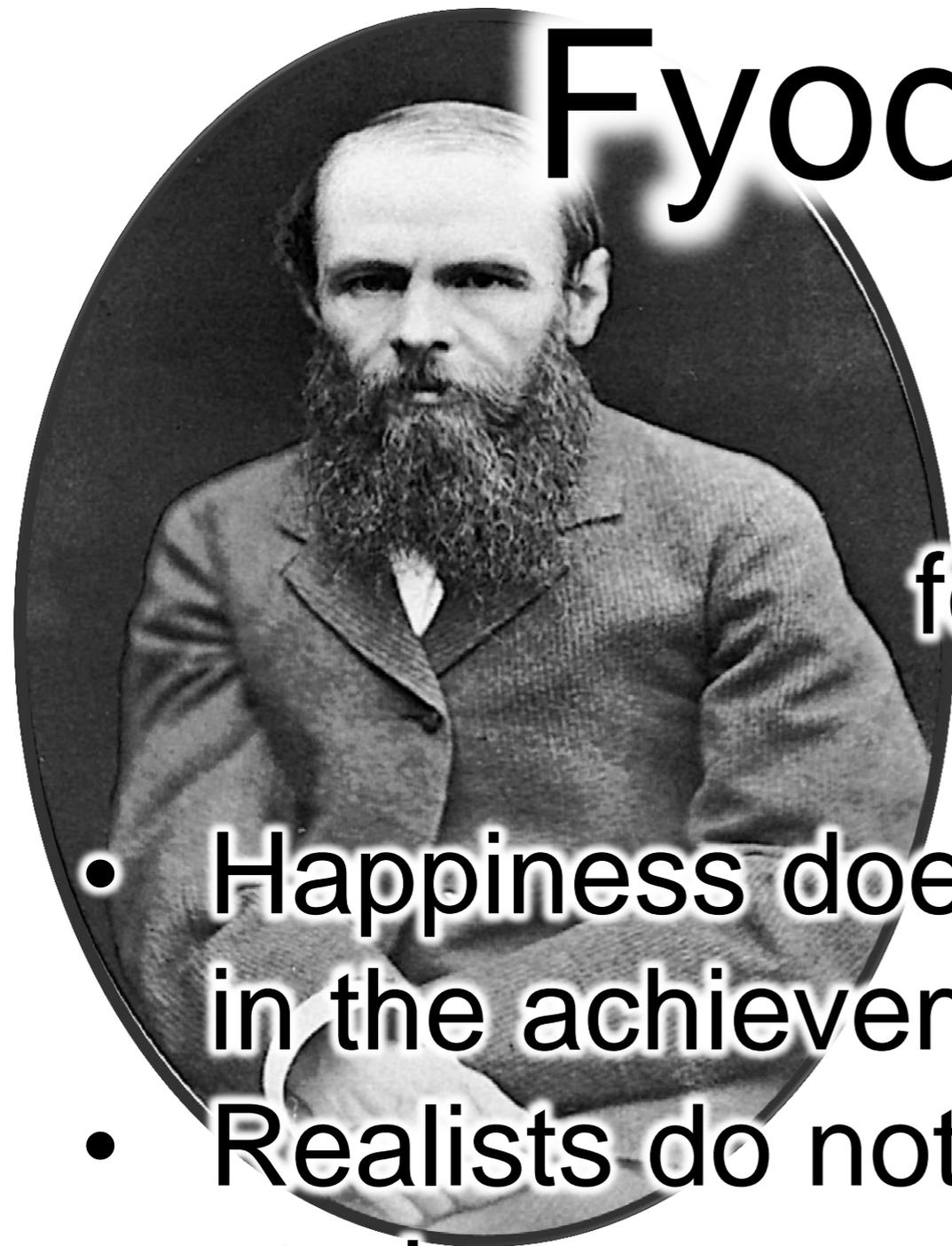
Franz Kafka

(1883–1924) a Czech short story writer and factory manager

- It is often safer to be in chains than to be free.
- In the fight between you and the world, back the world.
- If I shall exist eternally, how shall I exist tomorrow?
- Evil is whatever distracts.

Franz Kafka

- A first sign of the beginning of understanding is the wish to die.
- The spirit becomes free only when it ceases to be a support.
- Suffering is ... the only link between this world and the positive.
- My "fear" is my substance, and probably the best part of me.
- God gives the nuts, but he does not crack them.
- Association with human beings lures one into self-observation.



Fyodor Dostoevsky

(1821–1881) an Imperialist

Russian novelist who
focused on the **inadequacy
of logic**

- Happiness does not lie in happiness, but in the achievement of it.
- Realists do not fear the results of their study.
- To live without hope is to cease to live.
- The formula 'Two and two make five' is not without its attractions.

Fyodor Dostoevsky

- If there is no God, everything is permitted.
- The cleverest of all ... is the man who calls himself a fool at least once a month.
- To love someone means to see him as God intended him.
- The greatest happiness is to know the source of unhappiness.
- Man is fond of counting his troubles, but he does not count his joys.
- Deprived of meaningful work, men and women ... go stark, raving mad.

A black and white portrait of Simone de Beauvoir, showing her from the chest up, looking slightly to the right. Her hair is dark and styled in a short, wavy bob. The background is a plain, light color.

Simone de Beauvoir

(1908 –1986)

existentialist philosopher; major
influence on **feminist
existentialism & feminist theory**

- She was ready to deny the existence of space and time rather than admit that love might not be eternal.
- I am too intelligent, too demanding, and too resourceful for anyone to be able to take charge of me entirely. No one knows me or loves me completely. I have only myself.
- One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.

Simone de Beauvoir

- I am incapable of conceiving infinity, and yet I do not accept finity. I want this adventure that is the context of my life to go on without end.
- That's what I consider true generosity: You give your all, and yet you always feel as if it costs you nothing.
- I wish that every human life might be pure transparent freedom.

(a few) commonalities



(a few) commonalities

- Existentialism is not a comprehensive philosophy, or way of life, but *an endeavor to grasp reality*.
- Because of the individualism inherent in its purpose, existentialism is not reducible to a list of beliefs.

(a few) commonalities

- With that said, all existentialists retain the **emphasis on the individual** and **reject traditional academic philosophies** as too abstract, superficial and remote from concrete human experience.

diversity of thought



diversity of thought

- **how one achieves, and what constitutes, a fulfilling life**
- **what obstacles must be overcome in life**
- **what external and internal factors are involved in existence**
- **and the potential existential consequences of the existence or non-existence of God**

modernism

“the horror” becomes real





beyond modernism

- Remember that, in existentialism, the individual's **starting point** is characterized by a **sense of disorientation** and **confusion** in the face of an apparently **meaningless or absurd world**.
- The **atrocities** of two World Wars **destroyed** many of the **basic assumptions** people has previously held about life.

beyond modernism



Popularized by **Jean Paul Sartre** (and others) in the 1940s, existentialism became increasingly appealing to the Western world after WWII as a way to reassert the **importance of human individuality and freedom.**

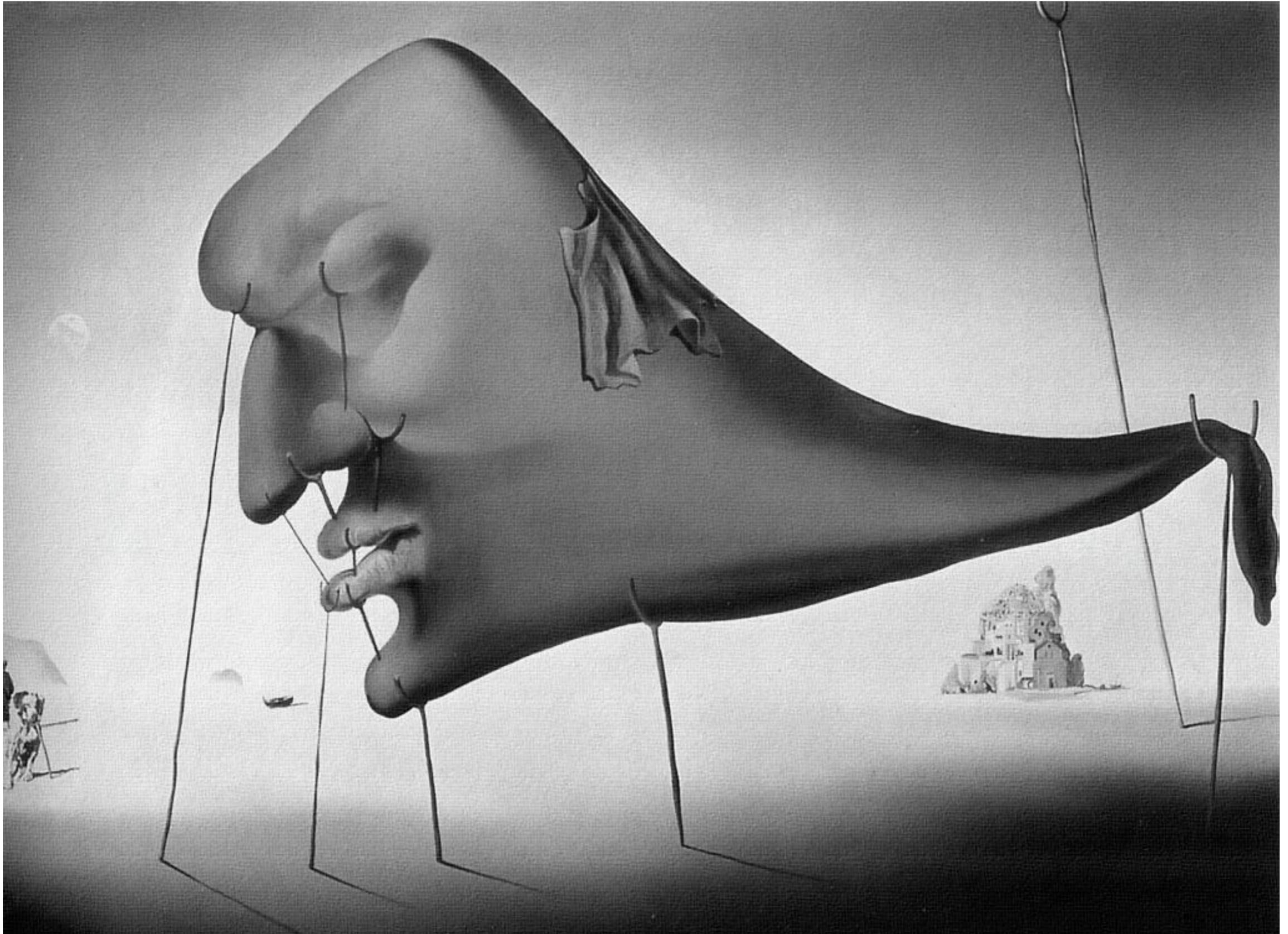
beyond modernism

- **Post-modern existentialism** is immersed in and arises directly out of Western man's anxiety, disillusionment, and conflicts.
- A distinct literary movement, "*anti-theater*" (called **theater of the absurd** by its critics), arose directly out of existentialism in an effort to attack traditional art forms as being no longer valid in this pointless existence.

absurdism (1930-1970)



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characteristics of absurdism

- assumes that there is no guiding principle or belief system
- humanity struggles vainly against a fate it has no control over
- the futility of existence, and again the absurdity of trying to control existence
- the relativity of truth
- provides an unquestionably unreal experience
- shows the inadequacy of communication
- theme of estrangement from one's own self

stylistic methods of absurdism

- unconventional dialogue - dislocated, cliché, repetitious, use of puns
- characters are metaphorical or archetypal
- minimal plot, no logical plot structure
- use of illogical plot situations
- refers to itself (*metadrama*)
- vaguely-defined setting
- no discernable climax (catharsis)
- lack of a clear narrative or psychological motivations for characters

impact of absurdism

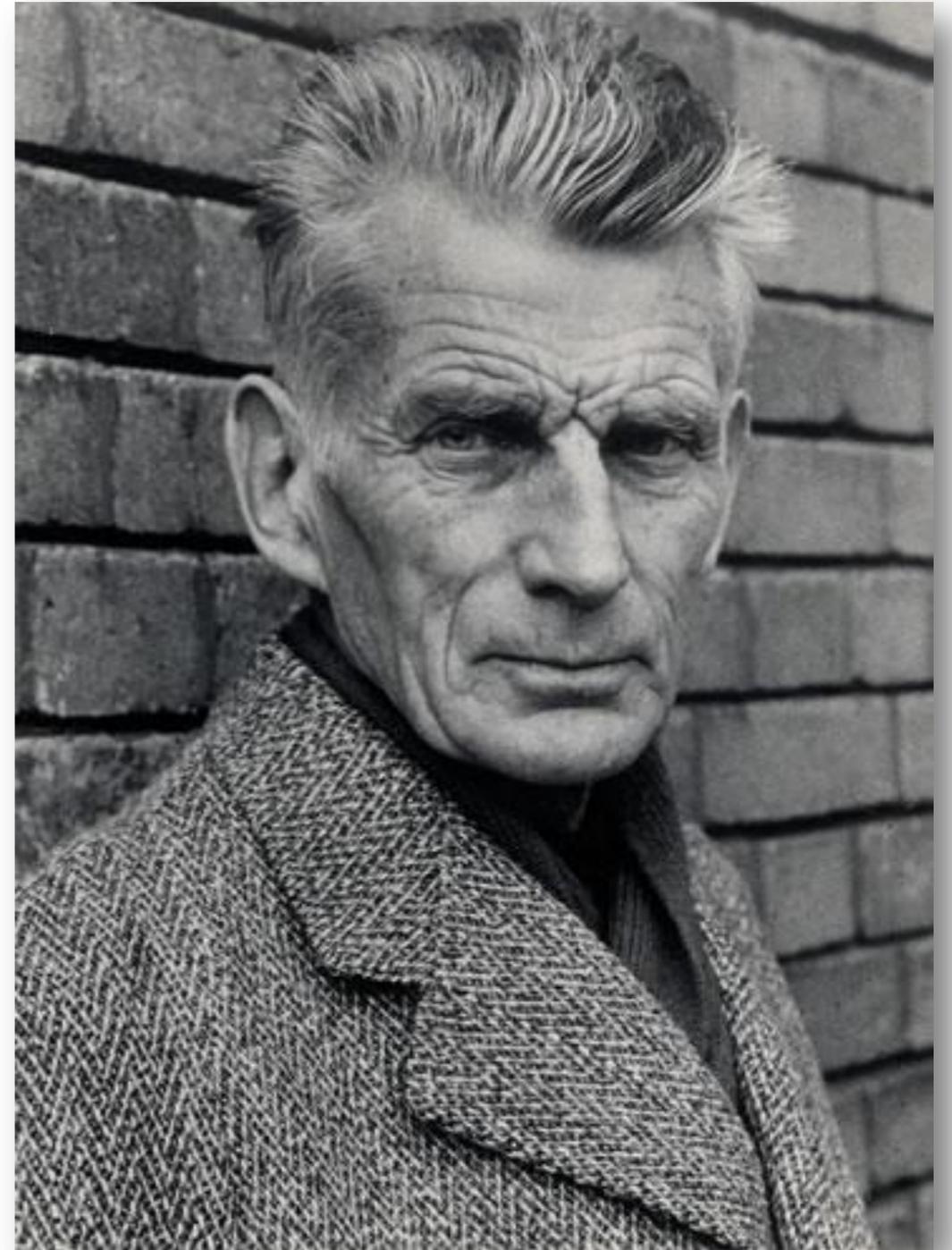
- Just as *initial* audiences of the **theatre of the absurd** faced problems with understanding it due to its radical ideas, an audience today may face similar problems.
- Without the backdrop of a horrific world war, you may not *initially* be able appreciate the themes of desperation and hopelessness illustrated in postmodern existentialism.

impact of absurdism

- This literary period can be seen as a statement of hopelessness, but the fact that this entire movement was born out of something as universally depressing as a world war perhaps casts some hope:
- Theatre of the absurd **forces us to face the awful situations we have brought upon ourselves**, and so society can choose to *actually do something* about it.

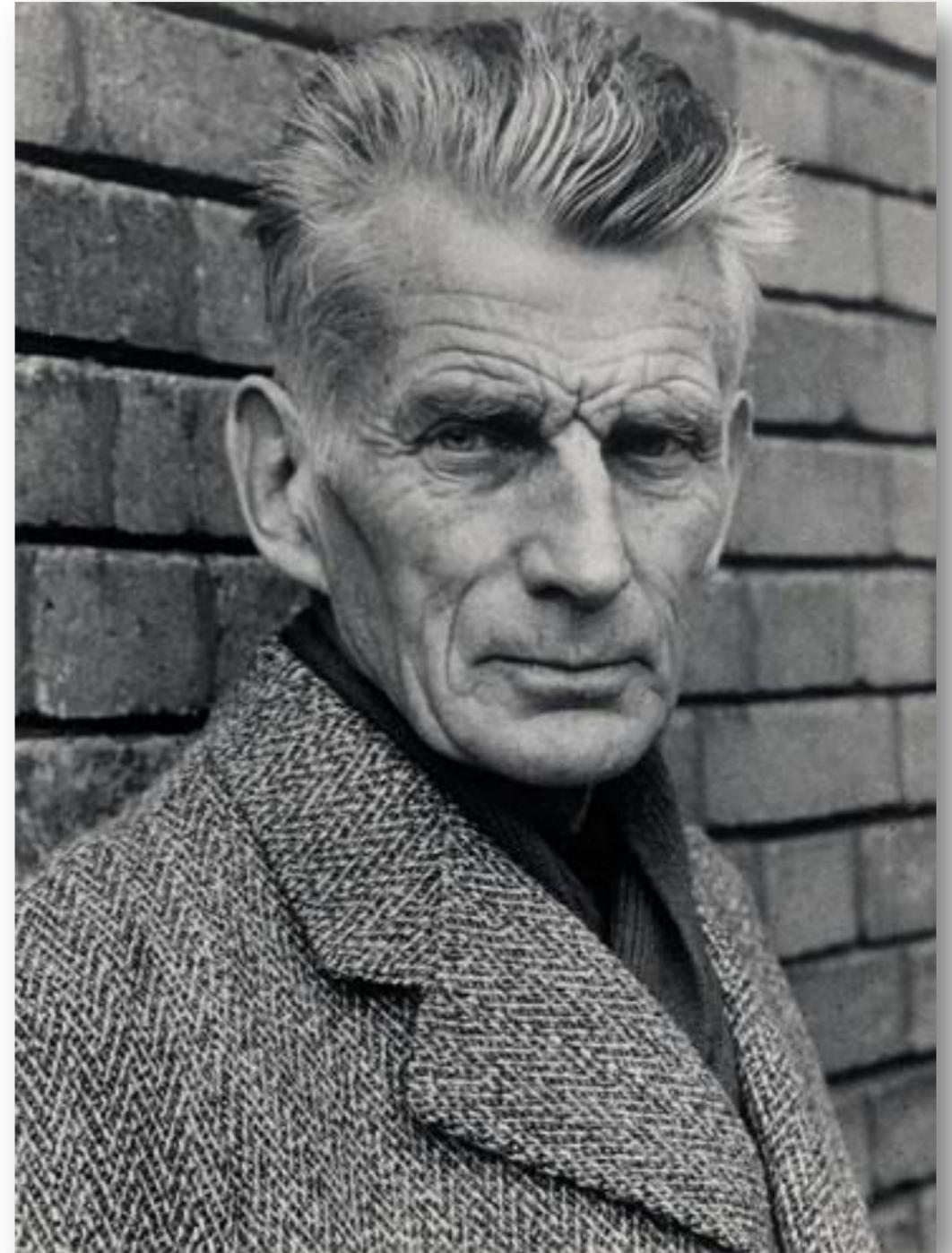
Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)

- Irish-French writer Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot (1953) is one of the most celebrated works in the theater of the absurd.



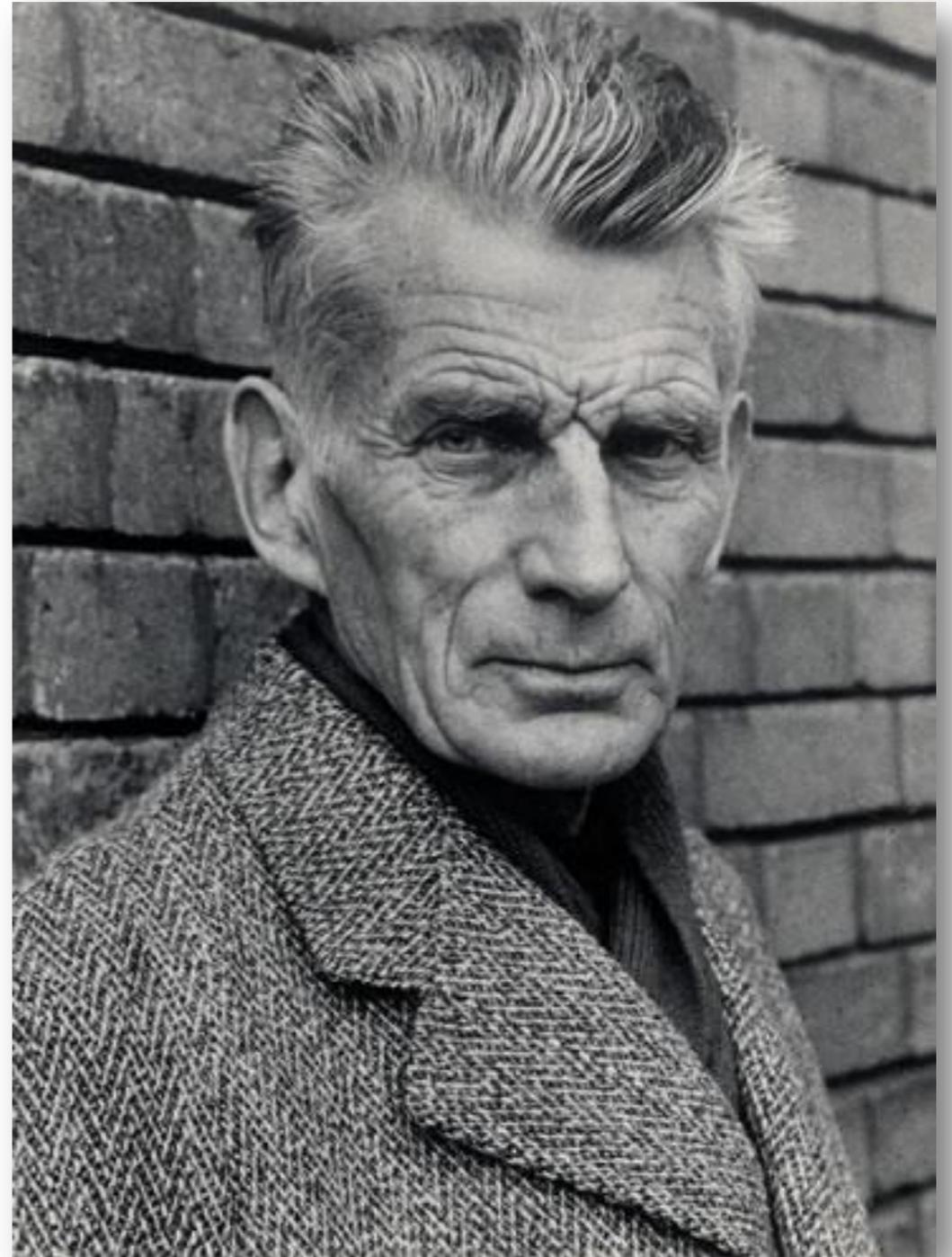
Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)

- Along with the other post-war absurdist, Beckett aims not to illustrate a narrative of any kind, but simply a **situation** – an existential human experience.



Samuel Beckett

- It is difficult for an audience to find a single meaning to many of Beckett's plays, reflecting his (and his post-war generation's) despair at being unable to find a meaning to existence itself.



Waiting for Godot



Waiting for Godot

- Originally written in French, the play which was once described as “terrible” due to the fact that “nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes” is now hailed as “one of the greatest successes of the post-war theatre,” and has been translated into over twenty languages.
- Beckett won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969.

other absurdist works

- We'll also be reading the (very short) play The Sandbox (1959) by American playwright Edward Albee.

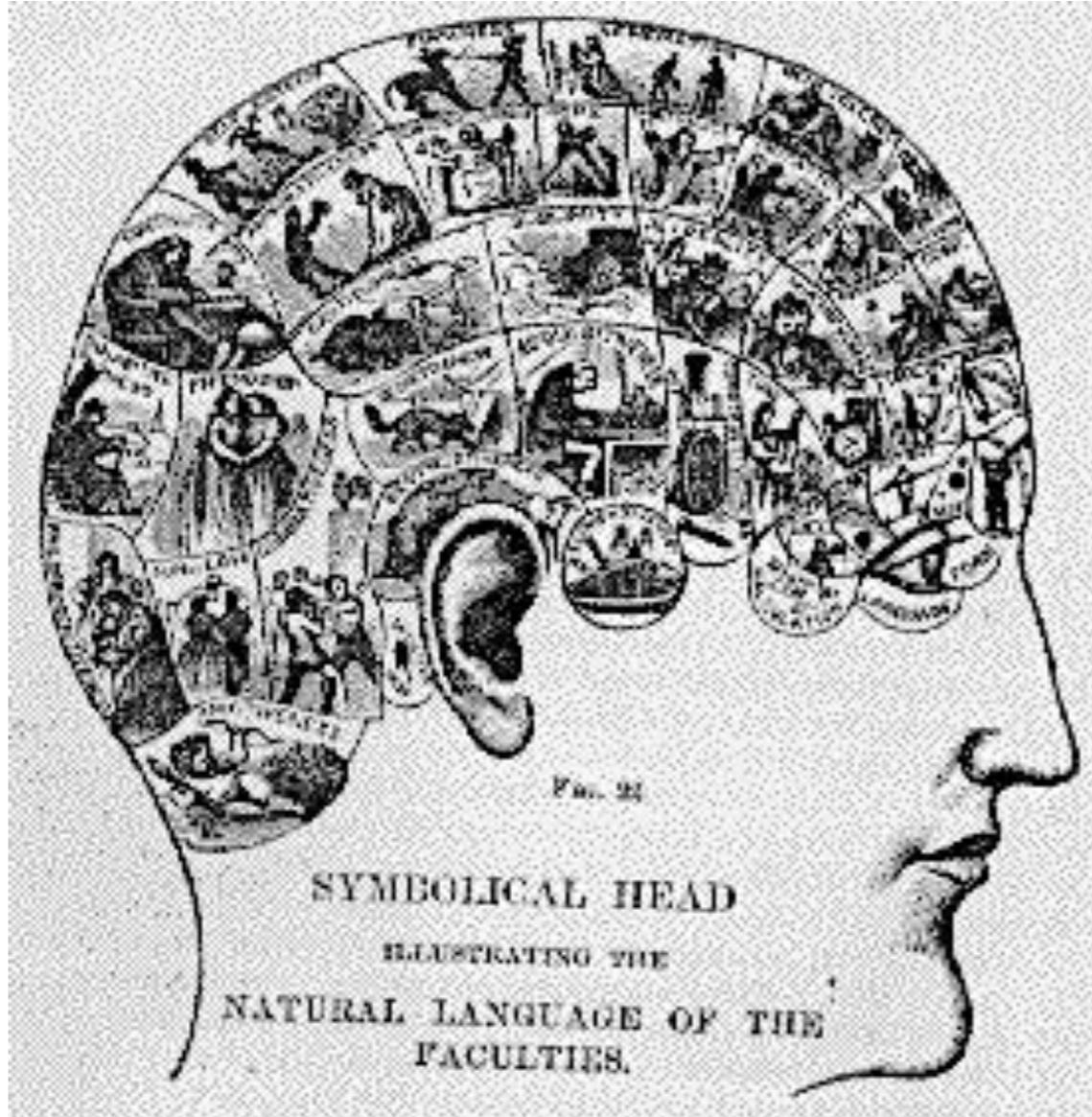


other absurdist works



French author Albert Camus' novel The Stranger (1942) is another prime example of postmodern existentialism.

themes of existentialism



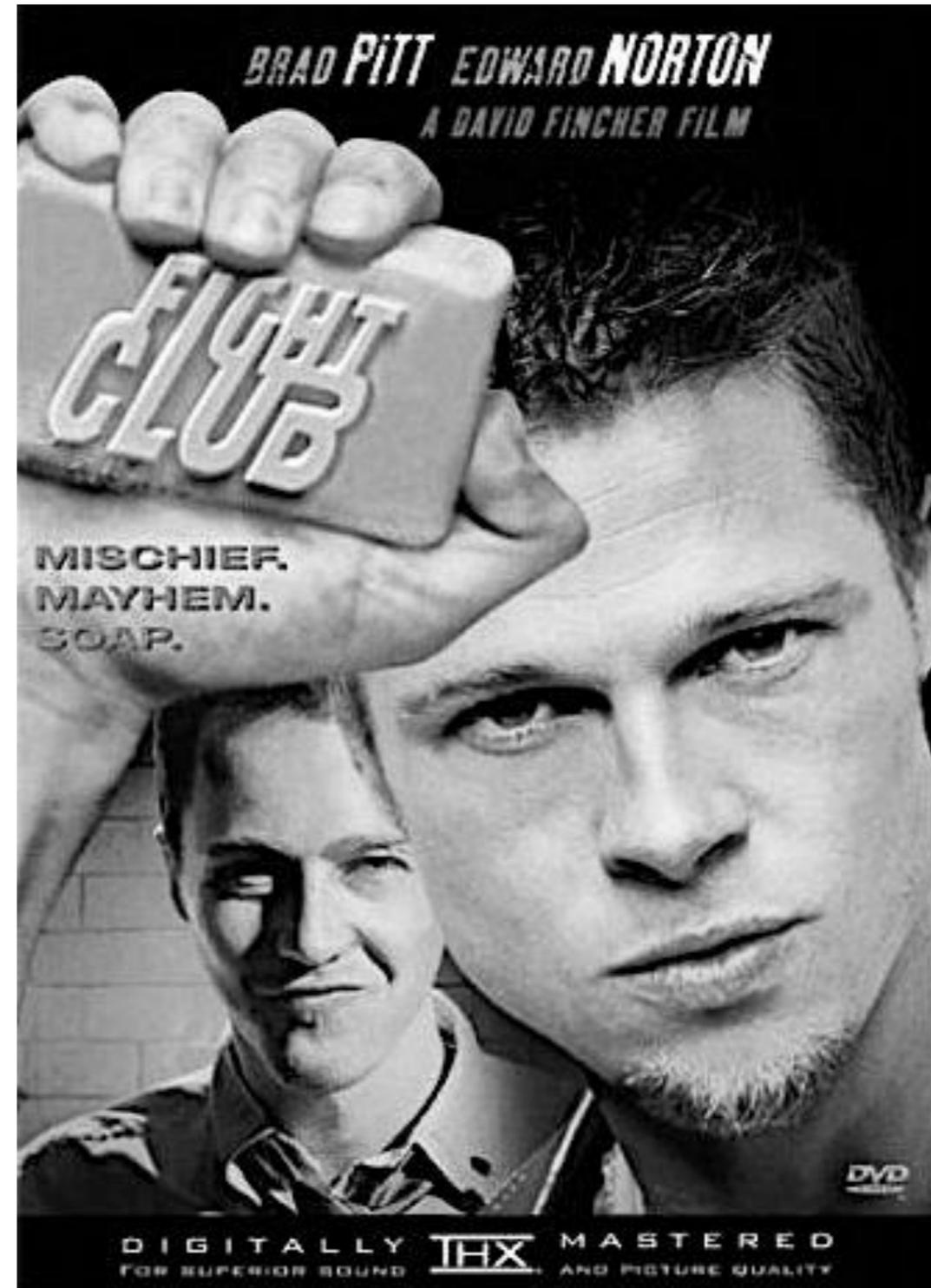
themes of existentialism

A note of warning: the themes which follow are not all taken up by every existentialist thinker and they are not entirely consistent with one another.

themes of existentialism

1. importance of the individual's existence
2. the importance of one's own free will
3. anxiety regarding life, death, and other uncertain or and extreme situations
4. finding meaning amidst absurdity
5. authenticity (courage, not self-deception)
6. importance of interpersonal relations

existentialism on film



existentialism on film

- Fight Club*
- One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*
- The Truman Show
- Donnie Darko
- Apocalypse Now*
- The Big Lebowski*
- Monty Python's The Meaning of Life

existentialism on film

- American Beauty
- Adaptation*
- The Shawshank Redemption*
- Barton Fink*
- Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*
- Garden State
- As Good As It Gets*

existentialism on film

- Being John Malkovich*
- Memento*
- I Heart Huckabees
- American History X
- Groundhog Day*
- Midnight in Paris
- Blade Runner

existentialism on film

- Moon*
- The Matrix
- Requiem for a Dream*
- A Clockwork Orange
- 2001: A Space Odyssey



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EXISTENTIAL GPS