

## A Form of Photographic Existentialism?

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### Introduction

The French philosopher and writer Albert Camus once remarked that, "you will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of and you will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life."

So, at face value, philosophical inquiry probably doesn't lead to any great sense of happiness, However, I am a great believer that the act of photography does.

Yet, when it comes to thinking about why we photograph, we often enter into areas already loosely covered within the philosophic realm.

I want to explore the notion of photographic existentialism and the parallels between this school of philosophic thought and the art of creative nature photography.

### An Existentialist Outline

Philosophy is used in many ways. It can be traced to various world outlooks, the human being's notion of the external world, of himself, and of his position in it.

Existentialism itself has perhaps been most influential in the last century. Its modern attraction owes much to the aftermath and hopelessness of the Second World War. And while it may have lost some of its former glory, it still holds quite an influence over many in the creative arts today.

It has a set of underlying themes and characteristics - anxiety, dread, freedom, awareness of death, and the consciousness of existing. It emphasizes action, freedom, and decision as fundamental to human existence.

It argues against definitions of human beings either as rational, knowing beings who relate to reality primarily as an object of knowledge or whose action can, or ought to be, regulated by rational principles.

Rather, it tends to view human beings as subjects in an indifferent, objective, often ambiguous, and absurd universe in which meaning isn't provided by the natural order, but rather can be created by human beings' actions and interpretations.

Inspired by the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and the German philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger it became popular in the mid-20th century through the works of the French writers Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

### Existentialism in Photography

In the art world, various schools of existentialist thought have viewed the role of art not as reflection of objective and external reality to man but as the free projection of the human being.

Similarly, the purpose of our photography is often not simply to capture reflective objectivity but rather to transcend reality by creating something out of what lies before us.



We must freely project our own influences and emotions into the photograph. If we do not, the act of photography can become merely a worthless documentation of the objective reality around us.

## **Freedom of Choice**

Getting back to existentialism and the fundamental theme of ontology or the study of being, the human being's existence is set out as the first and basic fact; he has no essence that comes before his existence. As a being he is nothing. The human being has liberty through the decisions that he makes himself in order to solve his problems and live in the world. This liberty of choice is a central tenet of existentialist thought.

Consider the parallels with the photographer – free to choose to photograph any aspect of the world. As photographers we all set our own photographic schedule and we choose to photograph what we alone determine (unless of course you are shooting for commercial assignment but then that is merely a job, not the process of making art).

I would argue that these choices are what define us as human beings, perhaps also as photographers. Our photographs can define our existence and shape our view of the world.

## **Responsibility**

For existentialists the human being is thrown into the world and is therefore free. The human being must take this freedom of being and accept the responsibility of his actions. Therefore with freedom of choice comes responsibility.

Consider also the photographer, faced with decisions concerning what to photograph or how to depict any given subject. Questions such as what mood the final picture should adopt or what the photograph should ultimately say often govern the decision making processes when making an image. In this sense the photographer also has responsibility of his actions.

Indeed, the great surrealist Henri Cartier-Bresson once said that “the condensed form of thought that is the language of photography has a great power, which is that of making a judgement on what we see and that implies great responsibility.”

So by accepting that we have responsibilities we become accountable without excuse. And perhaps this is what leads us to what you might call ‘existential angst.’

## **Anxiety**

In existentialism, anxiety ascends from the human being's realization that his destiny is not fixed, but is open to an undetermined future of infinite possibilities and limitless scope. Likewise, consider the photographer's photographic choices and endless scope.

‘Anxiety’ is present at every moment of the human being's existence and existentialists argue that an acceptance of this is part and parcel of authentic existence. This will lead the human being to take decisions and be committed.

The free human being, in his authenticity, must be involved; for his own actions are only his, his responsibility is to himself, and his being is his own. The human being must be committed. To be committed means not to support this in place of that, but to attach a human being's totality to a cause; it is the human being's existential freedom that leads to total commitment. Many of us have found a path to commitment to the natural world through photography.

What I find is that existence is always particular, unique and individual.

So it is with the best photographs and long may that continue.

I'd like to finish up by again quoting from Albert Camus, the great existentialist thinker of his day. You may find you agree with what he has to say;

*“Beauty is unbearable, drives us to despair, offering us for a minute the glimpse of an eternity that we should like to stretch out over the whole of time.”*

and...

*"But what is happiness except the simple harmony between a man and the life he leads?"*

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**Dylan McBurney** lives just outside Belfast with his wife Caroline near to the Glens of Antrim and in close proximity to his family. From this base, Dylan tries to spend at least six months a year on the road, exploring and photographing new landscapes within Ireland.

Dylan's stock photography is represented online by the Alamy agency and his imagery has been published and exhibited internationally.

Dylan regularly leads small workshops across Ireland. His latest photographic adventure is an ongoing exploration of the Northern and Western coastline of Ireland, a landscape of incredible beauty, sparse population and changing light. You can view more of his work on his website [www.standinginireland.com](http://www.standinginireland.com).

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