



## From the Eternal form to the Authentic Self: A comparative study of Idealism and existentialism in educational thought

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### Abstract

This paper offers a comparative philosophical examination of Idealism and Existentialism, two influential philosophical traditions that have significantly impacted educational theory and practice. Idealism, which posits a reality rooted in a universal, absolute Mind or Spirit, conceives of education as the process of realizing this pre-existing ideal within the individual. Conversely, Existentialism prioritizes individual existence, consciousness, and subjective freedom, viewing education as a path toward authentic self-creation. This study investigates the contrasting metaphysical and epistemological underpinnings of each philosophy, analyzing their consequences for educational objectives, the teacher's role, the nature of the curriculum, and the student's position within the learning process.

This study posits that the interaction between idealism, which emphasizes objective truth, moral absolutes, and cultural legacy, and existentialism, which highlights personal choice, existential dread, and subjective meaning, represents a fundamental conflict within modern education.

The argument concludes that a considered synthesis of these seemingly opposing viewpoints can provide a more comprehensive educational model. This model would simultaneously value the quest for universal knowledge and vigorously uphold the autonomy and accountability of the individual student.

**Keywords:** Idealism, existentialism, educational philosophy, plato, jean-paul sartre, curriculum theory, student agency

### Introduction

The practice of education is never value-neutral. Beneath every curriculum, every pedagogical method, and every classroom policy lies a foundational philosophy that answers fundamental questions: What is real? What is truth? What does it mean to be human? For centuries, educational thought has been shaped by two powerful and often opposing traditions: Idealism and Existentialism. Idealism, with its roots in the ancient world, has traditionally championed the pursuit of objective, universal truths and the cultivation of the rational mind in accordance with an absolute standard. Existentialism, a distinctly modern movement born from the crises of the 20th century, has fiercely countered this view, arguing that reality is subjective, truth is personally created, and the primary purpose of education is to help individuals confront their freedom and forge their own meaning.

This paper undertakes a comparative philosophical study of these two traditions, moving beyond a simple definition of terms to explore their deep structural implications for education. The initial section will outline the fundamental principles of each philosophical framework, focusing on their respective metaphysical foundations, epistemological approaches, and understanding of the human experience. Following this, a comparative analysis will be undertaken, examining their implications for key areas of educational theory: the objectives of education, the functions of educators and learners, and the structure of the curriculum. The primary argument posits that the inherent conflict between Idealism's pursuit of universal structure and Existentialism's emphasis on individual freedom is not a problem to be resolved, but rather a productive tension that is essential to genuine education. The concluding section will suggest that a dialectical synthesis, which acknowledges both the established knowledge of the past and the individual's capacity for self-determination,

represents the most effective direction for educational practice.

### The Philosophical Foundations of Idealism

The philosophical tradition of Idealism is most famously associated with Plato, who proposed a dualistic view of reality. Plato believed that the world we perceive through our senses is a realm of mere appearances, marked by constant change and eventual decay. He argued that true reality exists in the eternal, unchanging realm of "Forms" or "Ideas"—idealized, abstract models of concepts like Justice, Beauty, and Truth.

The material world, in contrast, is merely a reflection or flawed imitation of this superior, comprehensible reality (Plato, trans. 2000) [5]. The human soul, having existed prior to its current state and once inhabiting this realm, has lost its original understanding.

Consequently, in the Platonic tradition, learning is not the assimilation of novel data; rather, it is anamnesis, the process of recalling what the soul inherently understands. This idealist perspective was subsequently developed by philosophers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who conceptualized reality as the evolution of a singular, absolute Spirit or Mind (Geist). According to this perspective, history and human consciousness represent the means by which the Absolute achieves self-awareness. The individual, therefore, is not a discrete entity but a finite expression of this universal consciousness (Hegel, 1977) [2]. For idealists, knowledge is not a matter of personal opinion; it is the understanding of a pre-existing, objective framework of reality.

The human intellect, through its interaction with profound concepts, mathematical principles, philosophical inquiries, and artistic expressions, harmonizes with this universal structure, thus realizing its utmost capabilities.

## The Philosophical Foundations of Existentialism

Conversely, Existentialism, a philosophical school of thought, draws its origins from the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre, and centers on the individual. The movement's core tenet is Sartre's claim that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 2007) [6]. In contrast to an object like a paperknife, which has a predetermined purpose (essence) before it is made (existence), a human being is born without a pre-established nature or objective. Humanity doesn't have a pre-existing, perfect form that defines us. Instead, we enter the world at a specific time and place, and our essence, or what gives us meaning, is formed by the choices we make and the actions we take. This complete freedom is the main characteristic of being human, and it brings with it a significant responsibility. As Sartre argued, when we make choices for ourselves, we also choose for all people, creating an idea of what a human being should be. This responsibility leads to angst, a deep, existential worry that isn't a mental illness, but a clear understanding of our complete freedom and the responsibilities that come with it (Sartre, 2007) [6]. Existentialists reject the idealist notion of a universal, objective truth. Instead, they argue that subjectivity is the only valid starting point for a truly authentic life. Truth isn't something "out there" waiting to be discovered; it's created through personal, conscious choices made in a universe that is indifferent and lacks inherent meaning. Education, from this perspective, must not indoctrinate but must confront the learner with their freedom.

## A Comparative Analysis of Educational Thought

The differing foundations of Idealism and Existentialism lead to very different ideas about education. This section will compare these ideas across four important areas.

### Educational Goals

For the Idealist, the main goal of education is to develop the rational soul, helping it understand truth, goodness, and beauty.

Education functions as a process of actualization, wherein the inherent potential of the individual is cultivated to correspond with universal ideals. In Plato's Allegory of the Cave, the educator's role is to guide the soul from the darkness of ignorance to the light of true understanding. This process involves both intellectual and ethical aspects (Plato, trans. 2000) [5].

Consequently, the ultimate objective is the formation of a well-ordered individual, which, in turn, contributes to the establishment of a just society.

The measure of success is the degree to which a student has internalized the timeless truths of their cultural heritage and can live in accordance with rational and moral law. Conversely, the objective of Existentialist education diverges from actualization, focusing instead on creation. Given the absence of a predetermined essence to be realized, the aim is to assist the student in becoming a self-creating, authentic person. Authenticity, in this context, entails living with conscious acknowledgment of one's freedom and assuming complete accountability for one's decisions, without resorting to external labels, societal norms, or the self-deception of claiming one "had no choice." Education should not endeavor to shape students into a pre-established ideal—whether a responsible citizen,

a diligent worker, or a devout believer—but rather to stimulate their awareness of their own agency. The aim is to cultivate the courage to choose one's own values and give one's own life meaning in a world that offers none a priori (Greene, 1973) [1].

## The Teacher and the Student

From an idealist perspective the teacher is seen as a figure of considerable authority. The teacher's function transcends the mere transmission of information; they are both a specialist in their field and a living representation of the principles being imparted. Acting as a guide and mentor, the teacher's responsibility is to assist the student in overcoming ignorance, employing dialectical methods, inquiry, and direct instruction to facilitate the student's understanding of the rational structure of reality. The student's role involves both disciplined receptivity and active engagement in this intellectual process. This relationship is characterized by asymmetry, stemming from the teacher's closer relationship to Truth and the student's requirement for direction in realizing their own rational potential.

Existentialism, conversely, fundamentally challenges this established hierarchy. Although a teacher may possess superior knowledge of a particular subject, such as mathematics or history, they lack authority over the student's existence, values, or the construction of meaning. The teacher's main role is to help students find their own truth. This is done not by giving answers, but by asking questions that challenge assumptions and force students to make their own choices. Maxine Greene, a key figure in existentialist education, believes the teacher should be a "stranger" who questions the usual ways of thinking. This encourages students to see the world differently and realize they can change it (Greene, 1973) [2]. The student isn't just a passive learner; they are an independent person whose individual perspective must be respected. As a result, the teacher-student relationship becomes a conversation of mutual understanding. The teacher's authority is limited to a specific area and doesn't include the student's freedom to choose.

## The Curriculum

The idealist curriculum is very structured, organized in a hierarchy, and based on the "great works" of human history. It is a curriculum of ideas, not skills. The humanities—philosophy, literature, history, and the classics—form the core because they are the primary vessels through which universal truths are transmitted. Mathematics is valued for its ability to show absolute, rational truths, while the arts are studied for their ability to represent ideal beauty. This curriculum is meant to be a "civilizing" force, connecting each student to the accumulated knowledge of the past. Its main goal is to preserve, ensuring that the most important achievements of human culture are passed down through generations (Hutchins, 1936) [3].

In contrast, the existentialist curriculum rejects the idea of a fixed, standard set of works. To impose a single set of "great books" as the embodiment of universal truth is, from this view, an act of intellectual tyranny that forecloses the student's freedom to find their own meaning. Instead, the curriculum is often conceived of as thematic or problem-centered. The emphasis lies on disciplines that directly address the human experience: literature that examines the interplay of decision and outcome (such as the works of

Dostoevsky and Camus), historical narratives that illuminate the impact of individual actions on the course of events, and the arts as avenues for personal expression, rather than simple reflections of established norms. Consequently, the emphasis shifts from the passive reception of a cultural legacy to the active engagement with fundamental human challenges. Furthermore, science is presented not as a collection of definitive facts, but as a human endeavor characterized by investigation, decision-making, and interpretation.

The overarching goal is to provide experiences, not prescriptions, from which students can construct their own understanding and values.

### **Metaphysics, Epistemology, and Pedagogy**

The differences in education are fundamentally rooted in different views about the nature of reality and how we gain knowledge. Idealism's emphasis on a universal, objective reality gives rise to a pedagogical approach centered on both transmission and discovery. Consequently, the educator's role is to facilitate the effective communication of established knowledge, while the student's role is to uncover the pre-existing truth. Methods like lecture, Socratic dialogue, and rigorous analysis are privileged. The classroom is a place for the pursuit of Truth with a capital "T."

The existentialist, often aligning with a phenomenological or post-structuralist epistemology, sees reality as multiple, subjective, and co-constituted by human consciousness. Therefore, the primary pedagogical method cannot be transmission; it must be engagement. Methods such as dialogue, journaling, personal narrative, and project-based learning, which necessitate authentic decision-making by students, are prioritized. The classroom transforms into a space of intellectual liberty, a setting that fosters students' capacity to challenge established norms, navigate uncertainty, and assume accountability for their educational journeys. Assessment transcends the mere evaluation of factual retention; it encompasses an appraisal of the profundity of personal investment, the lucidity of one's reasoning processes, and the genuineness of one's commitments.

### **Synthesis and Conclusion: A Dialectical Tension**

To conceptualize Idealism and Existentialism as entirely antithetical philosophies represents a misapprehension of educational dynamics. A classroom devoid of structure, established practices, and the pursuit of shared knowledge risks devolving into a realm of relativism, wherein students are deprived of the intellectual instruments essential for making informed choices. Conversely, an educational approach that exclusively emphasizes the transmission of a predetermined body of knowledge, without accounting for the learner's individual autonomy, becomes a form of indoctrination that suppresses the very creativity and responsibility it purports to cultivate.

The enduring significance of juxtaposing these two philosophical perspectives resides in the acknowledgment that education is inherently situated within a dialectical dynamic. Idealism posits that individuals are initially immersed in a pre-existing world, encompassing established structures such as language, historical context, cultural norms, and a repository of scientific and ethical understanding.

Denying this access would be to deprive the student of the intellectual legacy that underpins informed liberty. As the philosopher Karl Jaspers, who navigated the intersection of these traditions, posited, our existence is invariably situated within a historical framework that influences our potential (Jaspers, 1954) <sup>[4]</sup>. Education, therefore, should be the process of introducing students to this "world of spirit," equipping them with the capacity to think with precision, intellectual rigor, and an understanding of the most significant intellectual achievements.

Furthermore, from Existentialism, we gain the crucial insight that these inherited structures are not ultimate ends in themselves. Rather, they serve as the initial stages for the individual's personal quest for meaning.

Education's fundamental purpose extends beyond the simple reproduction of the past; it is the creation of a future, a future that can only be realized through individuals possessing the courage to question, to decide, and to act. Therefore, education must cultivate not only intellectual abilities but also authentic selfhood—individuals who understand their position as the creators of their own lives, and that this creation necessitates considerable responsibility.

To summarize, the philosophical progression from Idealism to Existentialism signifies a transition in focus, shifting from the universal to the specific, from the objective to the subjective, and from the pursuit of truth to the generation of meaning.

Conversely, a comprehensive educational philosophy cannot privilege one perspective at the expense of the other. A truly holistic education will incorporate the idealist emphasis on elevated standards, demanding subject matter, and the quest for objective understanding, while also upholding the existentialist principles of individual autonomy, genuine selection, and the individual's capacity for creativity. This inherent tension is not a deficiency; rather, it constitutes the driving force behind a dynamic, emancipatory, and significant education—an education that equips students not merely to comprehend the world but to engage with it courageously and authentically.

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