

## **Existentialism and East and West: Conceptual Workshop**

Erin McCarthy

Department of Philosophy

St. Lawrence University

exeasmail@columbia.edu

Additional Documents:

- About Conceptual Workshops (PDF)
- Student Worksheet (PDF)

### **Introduction**

This workshop comes from a course on Existentialism, towards the end of the course. Students had read and by this point were familiar with Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre as well as Kobo Abe.

### **Reading**

KASULIS, T.P. *Zen Action/Zen Person*. (Chapters 4, 9 and 10.) Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1981.

### **Classroom Activity**

Over the past twelve weeks, we have been exploring the idea of existential philosophy from a variety of perspectives. We have discussed some major themes that appear in writing qualified as “existential”: death, self, freedom, choice...and the almost constant emergence of the idea that “existence precedes essence.” Last class we began to explore the question of whether existentialism is a “Western” philosophical concept, or whether it can be seen to emerge also in Japanese thought, through reading Kobo Abe’s *The Box Man*. Abe was in fact, influenced by the existentialist movement, but what about a philosophy that predates existentialism – one that starts from a very different philosophical starting point? Today, we turn to Zen Buddhism to explore this question.

#### **Part I (60 minutes)**

Divide into groups of 3 or 4. Each group should try to agree on an answer to the following questions. Limit discussion of each question to about 10 minutes. Select one person ahead of time to write down the agreed-upon answer (someone who has not done this yet in one of our group exercises!). If agreement cannot be reached in the allotted time, then the scribe should record the dissenting views as well. Select a second person at the start to keep an eye on the time and to make sure the group proceeds through the worksheet in a timely manner. Write full paragraphs and support your answers with the text.

1. Existentialism as a movement is often identified to have started with Sartre. Write a paragraph or two explaining what it is that distinguishes the work of Sartre (and Camus)

as “existentialist” from the other authors we have read up to this point (Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger, Abe.)

2. Based on what we have read and discussed thus far, write a paragraph to describe an existentialist view of relations with the Other.
3. According to Kasulis, what is the relationship in Zen Buddhism between existence and essence of a person?
4. How does the Zen concept of person compare to the existentialist concept of person?
5. What is the difference between the zen concept of nothingness (mu) and the existential (Sartrean) concept of nothingness?
6. And finally, what do you think....can Asian philosophy be considered existentialist?

Part II: Class discussion of results