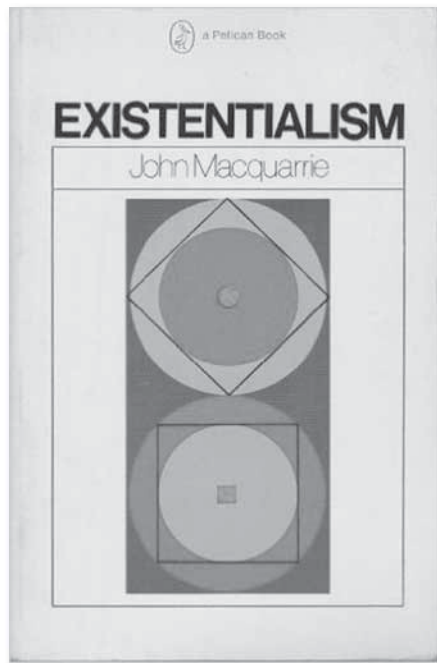


## Book Review

### Existentialism

By Por Boonpornprasert<sup>1</sup>



Macquarrie, John. **Existentialism**. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, c1972 (252 p.)

Prices : Hard cover –\$ 104.60 (3,615.91 THB)

Paperback – \$ 65.43 (2,262.32 THB)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://www.amazon.com/Existentialism-Introduction-Guide-Assessment-Pelican/dp/0140215697>

It might be a little too late – actually a little short of 44 years since its first publication in 1972 – to review such a classic book on the subject of an immensely influential philosophical movement of the 20th century, namely, “Existentialism” by the late John Macquarrie (1919–2007). However, those who are in need of soul searching and desperate to find a way to retrieve the sense of identity in the midst of mess called “current world situation,” such as, the rise of ISIS, Charlie Hebdo carnage, Orlando shooting, global warming, sexism, racism, and a gazillion more on our doomsday list. This portable book marvelously serves as an intelligible guide – and, of course, an excellent one – to an almost unintelligible, individualistic, idiosyncratic styles of writing by existentialist thinkers and their literatures, grouping together common ideas shared by those oh-so-peculiar-and-on-the-brink-of-arbitrariness thinkers in order to make this elusive subject intelligible and to make sense of the whole movement (up until that point) of this style of philosophizing. Before starting the review, let me say a few words about this gentleman’s life and some of his achievements in honor of his contribution to philosophical world. This gentle – looking and soft – spoken chap (he can be seen in videos posted on Youtube, for example, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_DwM-H8eevY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_DwM-H8eevY)) was born in Renfrew, Scotland, in 1919 and was educated at Praisley Grammar School. He studied philosophy at the University of Glasgow under the distinguished scholar Charles Arthur Campbell and obtained a degree in theology. Later he went on to earn doctoral degree from the University of Glasgow in 1954. Macquarrie was appointed Professor of Systematic Theology at

Union Theological Seminary, New York City, and lectured at prestigious institutions like Trinity College, Glasgow, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity, University of Oxford. His published works include, to name but few, *An Existentialist Theology* (1955) *Twentieth Century Thought* (1963) *The Faith of the People of God* (1972), *Existentialism* (1973), *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (1991). However, he is probably best known for his translation work – to be precise, as a co translator along with Edward Robinson – of one of the most influential philosophical literatures of the twentieth century (arguably, of all time), “*Sein und Zeit*,” known in English as “*Being and Time*” by the one and the only “*Martin Heidegger (1889–1976)*.”

Heavily influenced by Martin Heidegger – which is not something of a surprise since Heidegger is arguably the first systematic thinker in this tradition given that prior to him are the likes of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)– the book revolves around the themes systematically given by Heidegger in his “*Existential Analysis*.” Themes like “*Being-in-the-world*” and “*Being-with-others*” are given here to set up the background of existence and to highlight the communal character of the individual – as opposed to the widely belief that existentialism overemphasizes on subjectivism and individualism.

This portable book is structured into 15 chapters in line with the existentialist themes, which are of relevance to human’s intellectual concerns of the period (but which, in my humble opinion, could be applied more or less to our own situation). In the first chapter “*The Existentialist*

*Style of Philosophizing*,” he set the ball rolling with the question “*What is Existentialism?*” Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, an instant and ready-made answer could not be given to the elusive and spiritual nature of the movement. He makes his point by putting a famous quote by Jean-Paul Sartre that: “the word is now so loosely applied to many things that it no longer means anything at all” (p.13). However, later in the section he gives us a slight hint as to what Existentialism could mean. In doing so, he also gives us a sartrean quote: “*Man’s existence precedes his essence*,” (p.15) and go on to say that: “*We mean that man first of all exist, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and find himself afterward* (ibid.). Seen in this light, the questions come up spontaneously as to “*What existence is?*” and “*What essence is?*” And the answer could be found in the third chapter “*The Idea of Existence*.” This is how the book is designed; readers are unlikely to single out one chapter in order to extract an instant answer to a theme given in the book, and are obliged to read in a dialectical manner as the answer unfolds itself. This style of writing is in line with the idea of truth advocated by existentialist thinkers whereby truth is given by way of “*participation*,” and less likely by merely “*observation*.” According to a thinker of this tradition – especially, Heidegger– the latter kind of truth – say, objective truth – is an abstraction of the former kind of truth by participation; therefore, it is of secondary nature. Whereas the truth revealed – or in Heideggerian term “*un-hidden*”– by participation is the primordial one, it is a practical truth revealed to us – again! In Heideggerian jargon “*Dasein*” – in our skills of using things and in handling our relationship

with others. It is the most immediate and concrete truth – the truth of existence, the living truth, the subjective truth. The detailed analysis on this subject is given in chapter six “Knowledge and Understanding.” As we have seen earlier, according to existentialism, the truth does not revealed to us solely in an objective and detached manner; it is unfolded spontaneously in our experience as we participate in what given to us in every particular phenomenon. Therefore, the most concrete and immediate reaction to the un-hiddenness of phenomena is our most subjective element, says, “Mood.” This subject is explored in details in chapter eight “Feeling.”

Last but not least, the ultimate concern for each existentialist thinker is, to borrow the famous dialogue from a Shakespeare’s play “Hamlet,” “To be or not to be that is the question.” To be, to become, and to exist is to take action, not merely thinking. To take action is to make a choice (decision), to exercise our freedom without following the diktat of anonymous or even nonymous others, and to accept responsibility. A detailed study on this subject is rendered, mainly, in chapter nine “Action;” five “Existence and Others;” and Eleven “In Quest of Authentic Existence.”

“If you are in trouble and could not find the way of out of the murky water, and desperate to seek guidance from an existentialist thinker. S/he would tell you “choose!”