Chapter 36

Existentialism

Key Words

Existence, essence, Personal choice, aesthetic stage, ethical stage, religious stage, metaphysical conception of truth, death of God, freedom, existential situation, authentic existence, inauthentic existence, thrownness, existence precedes essence, Dasein, contingency.

Though the intellectual background for existentialism was created in the later years of 19th century, it was more appropriately a 20th century philosophy, as it reflects some of the most prominent features of the cultural, social and political environment that determined the destiny of people who have undergone the traumas, uncertainties and enigmas of the two world wars. The following observation of Charlsworth appropriately describes existentialism.

It was, one could say, more an intellectual mood or atmosphere than a coherent creed or body of doctrine; more an outlook or "mind-set" than a philosophical "partyline"; more a method or approach than a school of thought. And it was very much a creature of the Waste Land that was Europe during and after the last world war. [p.1]

Existentialism initiates a new style and method of philosophizing with new objectives and goals. The talk about existentialism begins with the often-quoted slogan; existence precedes essence. Existentialists seem to be arguing that philosophers and philosophical traditions so far have been concentrating on what is common to all human beings. In other words, there is an overemphasis on what constitutes the essence of man, which is understood in various ways. While the religious and theological literature links it with God, the secular and rational traditions have been emphasizing on human nature which was often identified with universal rationality. Opposing this prevailing trend the existential philosophers stress on the problems concrete human beings encounter in their life. They prefer to understand the concrete man and his problems, without isolating him/her from his/her social, political and cultural contexts. They raise several issues pertaining to the concrete human existence. In general most of them emphasize on the finiteness and situatedness of human existence

As Mounier and Blow point out, existentialism is characterized by a reaction of the philosophy of man against the excesses of the philosophy of ideas and the philosophy of things. It attempts to understand existence in a concrete sense of living or lived reality, by focusing on the individual and concrete manifestations of human existence. As mentioned
above, it accuses philosophical traditions of the past of ignoring the concrete man and his problems. In its approach, it tries to understand human existence not in terms of some fundamental rational concepts, as it was done by many past masters like Plato, Descartes, Kant, Hegel etc. it shows no interest in an *a priori* and impersonal conception of human reality. Instead, it focuses on the concrete living individual in his actual preoccupation with himself and the world. Existentialism broadly tries to derive the meaning of the individual man from living or lived experiences of concrete individuals and their surroundings.

Existentialism is not a philosophical school like rationalism or empiricism. It is hard to isolate common doctrines from the writings of the various existential thinkers, who subscribe to diverse views. Yet we may identify some common themes and concerns. Most of the existentialist thinkers emphasize the importance of an individual man living his own life, rather than just being a member in the crowd. They all consider existential questions like death, meaning of human existence, God and man, values in life, nature of relationships etc., as important. In their attempt to emphasize the concrete human reality, they suspend all questions on the universal and objective values such as the essence of man, value and meaning etc. They rather give importance to questions concerning human freedom and choices and other issues related to this like dread, anxiety etc., Jaspers and Grabau make the following observation about existentialism:

Already in the nineteenth century, movements with this turn of mind kept recurring. People wanted "life," wanted "really to live." They demanded "realism." Instead of wanting merely to know, they wanted to experience for themselves. Everywhere, they wanted the "genuine," searched for "origins," and wanted to press on to *man*himself. Superior men became more clearly visible; at the same time, it became possible to discover the true and the real in the smallest particle.[*Philosophy of Existence*, p.4]

There are atheistic and theistic strands of existentialism. The theistic existentialists like Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, Gabriel Marcel and Karl Jaspers do not deny the existence of god and consider man’s relationship with god as an important philosophical problem. On the other hand the atheistic existentialists like Jean Paul Sartre, Simon de Beauvoir and Martin Heidegger either explicitly deny god’s existence or do not consider it as posing any serious philosophical problem. For them either god does not exist or they do not problematize god. Hence they deny the possibility of any value or meaning that are transcendental. Some thinkers like Alber Camus even treat the essential human reality as absurd.
Some Characteristic Features of Existentialism

As already mentioned, existentialism was not a rational philosophical system. Unlike other prominent schools of philosophy, not all the proponents of existentialism were philosophers. Existentialist ideas were popularised through art and literature as well. Hence they Philosophized not with reason alone. Again, existentialism was a movement, which was inspired not only by philosophers and their writings, but artists, novelists and poets have also influenced its development.

Most of the existentialists consider man as an existent subject and not just a thinking subject. They stress on the man who feels, wills, loves, hates and do many other things in the world. Yet one may not find any common doctrine that was advocated by all existentialists. The philosophers who were identified with it were very different from each other. There were theists, atheists, phenomenologists, hermeneuticians, absurdists etc. But most of them were opposed to abstract metaphysical speculations and also to the systematization of reality. There was an explicit emphasis on individuality.

Another very important feature of existentialism is that it was a reaction and response to certain important historical and political developments occurred during 19th and 20th century Europe. It was also a response to certain dominant approaches in ancient and modern philosophy, which according to the existentialists have given importance to essence over existence. As observed by Vergilius Ferm, existentialism was a reaction against the totalizing philosophy of Hegelian idealism. Ferm adds that, by conceiving becoming as a passage from non-existence (notBeing) to existence (Being) Hegel advocates the absorption of existence into essence. [p. 407]

The Social and Historical Factors

Existentialism was an offshoot of certain social and historical developments Europe had witnessed in the 19th and 20th centuries. As Nietzsche—who was a prominent 19th century thinker and who exerted significant influence on many of the existentialists—observed, the death of god was one major characteristic feature of 19th century Europe. By this metaphor, Nietzsche was pointing to the declining influence of religion in the life of people. There was a visible loss of faith in the society. Religion had provided a unity of all aspects of life, which
became a chimera with the advent of modernity. With societal modernization, social life and the individual himself encountered a fragmentation.

Moreover, 20th century in the beginning had witnessed a world war, which was followed by another more devastating one that killed millions of people. During this period Europe had witnessed unparalleled cruelties. All these have given rise to feelings of despair and disbelief in all established social, political and moral order. Again, the rise of totalitarian ideologies like Fascism, Nazism and Communism too had made the individual human being helpless and voiceless. None of them have reserved a space for the individual. In philosophy, Hegelianism had dominated European culture with its all-absorbing absolutism. The industrialization and urbanization that emerged with the advent of modernity made man a mere tool.

The existential thinkers maintain that traditional and modern philosophical categories are inadequate to understand human reality. Man has been viewed differently by different philosophical systems in the history of European thought. While some thinkers like Plato had emphasized on the rational aspects, thinkers like Descartes had associated the capacity to think as the essence of man. For certain others man constituted a unity of mind and body and for some others the essence consists in the material aspects. Accordingly there were various reductionist views about the nature and essence of man. As observed by Vergilius Ferm, contrary to all these approaches, the existentialists have stressed on the uniqueness of the concrete and real as against the abstract and possible. But they do not focus on existence as such, but have given importance to our way of encountering existence. According to Ferm, what makes the existentialists different from other thinkers is that, it was not an objective interest in an existence which is indifferent in regard to the multiple existents but a subjective interest in that peculiar existent which every one of us is. And it is in the concrete human selfwhere the locus existence is discovered. [p. 408]

The 20th century existentialism, as mentioned above, draws its inspiration, not only from philosophers, but also from poets and novelists. The first and foremost influence upon the existentialist philosophers was the philosophy of the Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard [1813-1855]. The writings of Friedrich Nietzsche [1843-1900] also had phenomenal influence on their thinking. Again, the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky [1821-1881] and the German writer Franz Kafka [1883-1924] too have influenced them. We shall now
examine some of these aspects which have contributed to the development of existentialism as a philosophical movement.

The Philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard’s philosophy was a reaction against the Hegelian Absolute System which absorbs all individualities and particularities. He is widely regarded as the founder of existentialism, as it is in his works we find a systematic exposition of the existential themes for the first time. The relationship between man and God occupied a central place in Kierkegaard’s theory. Since he was against all abstract theorization and absolutism that abolished the concrete individual, he opposed the rational explanations past philosophers had given in order to justify God’s existence. Christian theologians and philosophers have always tried to do this. As Susan Leigh Anderson observes, according to Kierkegaard, faith constitutes a sphere all by itself and every misunderstanding of Christianity may at once be recognized by its transforming it into a doctrine, transferring it to the sphere of the intellectual. (pp. 51-52)

The subjective experiences of the concrete man gains supremacy in his framework. Man in relation to his destiny and his relationship with God gains an important place in his philosophy. The personal choices man makes in his actual life is an important philosophical issue for him. Therefore, subjectivity and personal choice are central themes in his thought and subjective and personal things are more important than objective and universal realities. Everything is subjective and personal and objectivity is a myth. He repeatedly asserts that subjective and personal choice is the crux of human existence. In this connection he talks about three major spheres of existence an individual can chose to live in; aesthetic, ethical and religious. In the aesthetic sphere, one lives for physical or intellectual pleasure and seeks the most immediately pleasing. In the ethical level, one accepts moral responsibility and leads a life of duty to the moral law. The third stage is the highest one, where one devotes one’s life to God. Here one gives up everything; ethical standards and even the idea of universal good.

Each of these spheres of existence stands for a stage in life, with each containing its own system of values. The evolution from the lower to the higher is not natural or logical. Instead it is a matter of individual choice. The individual just decides that he has to move to
the next. Hence Kierkgaard emphasizes the role of choice, which nevertheless is always a personal choice which is not guided by any meta-principle. The individual has to make an a-rational leap of free choice which cannot be further defended. Kierkgaard narrates an individual who is passionate and discontinuous and is proceeding by sudden leaps and crises.

**Influences of Dostoevsky, Kafka and Nietzsche**

The great Russian novelist, Dostoevsky had problematised human limitations, agonies, anxieties and helplessness in his novels and stories and also raised the important question regarding man’s relationship with God. In his novel *The Brothers Karamasov*, one of the characters, Ivan observes that, what is strange and what would be marvelous, is not that God should really exist, but that such an idea and the idea of the necessity of God, could enter the head of such a savage, vicious beast as man. Again, on another occasion, Ivan retorts:

> And so I accept God and am glad to, and what’s more, I accept His wisdom, His purpose which are utterly beyond our ken; I believe in the underlying order and the meaning of life: I believe in the eternal harmony in which they say we shall one day be blended.....Yet.....in the final result I don’t accept this world of God’s, and, although I know it exists, I don’t accept it at all. It’s not that I don’t accept God, you must understand, it’s the world created by Him I don’t and cannot accept. [*Brothers Karamazov*, Ch. 3]

The novel as a whole and many other works of Dostoevsky problematize God and man’s relationship with God. Moreover, Dostoevsky had also discussed in detail several other philosophical issues that concrete human beings face in their life; issues pertaining to human interrelationships, questions of greed, anxiety, death and destiny etc.

Franz Kafka’s writings had dealt with the problems the individual human being faces in the modern, industrialized world. He primarily addressed the isolation of the individual in the world which becomes increasingly strange to him due to various factors. The individual's place in the world, the anxiety and guilt experienced by him are also dealt with by Kafka.

Nietzsche’s philosophy was arguably the greatest influence among all. His thought had inspired the atheistic existentialists substantially. Nietzsche has shown that truth, which the European philosophical and moral traditions have treated as a concept with paramount importance, was perspectival. We have already discussed his contributions in detail in an early chapter. He discussed about the death of God and the nihilism of morals proposed by
him, envisages a situation where everything is permitted in a Godless world. Knowledge and truth are provisional and they change over time and with the ruling class. He therefore, describes Truth as an edifying name given for what are really vital lies. The *Will to Power* declares that there are many kinds of ‘truths,’ and consequently there is no truth.

The concept of Truth, which had been the most important and most edifying concept in the history of metaphysical traditions, had been challenged by all the existential thinkers. Kierkegaard has asserted that objective truth is existentially irrelevant and Sartre rejected all conceptions of universal truth. The rejection of the metaphysical conception of truth therefore, is a central theme in existentialism. We shall now discuss some key themes of existentialism.

**Existentialism: Key Themes**

Here again, if we try to identify commonalities we may not be successful, as there are hardly any theory or doctrine which all the existentialists subscribe to. Yet certain concepts like freedom, responsibility, individuality etc. appear in the writings of many of them. Though not everyone conceives these concepts in the same manner, almost all of them problematize them. For instance, while Sartre conceived freedom as an inevitable feature of human existence and asserts that, “man is condemned to be free”, many others do not adopt such an extreme stance on human freedom. The idea of responsibility is a derivative from the notion of freedom. It can be argued that, since we have freedom in our fundamental projects and attitudes we are responsible for the people we become. The existentialist thinkers have emphasized on individuality, rather than on the abstract universal idea of man in general. Hence the problems faced by the concrete individual and his/her search for authentic selfhood are important for them. The ideas of self-creation and authentic existence were dealt with utmost importance by these thinkers.

The focus on the concrete individual and his/her problems prompted these thinkers to analyze concepts like angst, dread, anxiety and anguish in relation with concrete human existence. When we reflect on our freedom we realize that we are responsible for whatever happens to us and this results in a form of anxiety to which there are no metaphysical solutions offered. This dreadful situation constitutes our existence. In other words, it is our
existential situation from where there is no escape. According to many existentialists, man is bound to face this, as devoid of any religious and metaphysical consolations, he has to cope up with it and find his own solutions.

There are various possibilities for man to cope up with his existential situation. He may either try to escape from it taking recourse in religious or metaphysical doctrines about universal human nature, or simply by running away from it and remaining unreflective about his life and his destiny. Or he may face it and try to make sense of what he does with a conscious awareness about his limitations and freedom. Hence, in a broad sense, there are authentic and inauthentic ways of existence. According to Sartre, those men who refuse to take responsibility refuse to accept that they are free. They wish to believe that they are conditioned by factors which are not under their control. Sartre calls this bad faith. This is to exist inauthentically. One has to accept one’s existential situation, which consists in realizing one’s finitude on the one hand and freedom on the other.

Such concepts like finitude, guilt, alienation, despair, death etc., were not topics of discussion in traditional philosophy. By focusing attention on the individual, the existentialists isolate the concrete human being from all those factors that connect him to the totality, to the universal human nature. The political reality of early 20th century had prompted such isolation. It was an era of wars which killed tens and thousands of innocent human beings. The totalitarian regimes justified their repressive rule by the ideologies of Nazism, Fascism and Communism and all these made the individual totally helpless. The existentialists thus had acknowledged the tragic elements of human existence. Some like Camus have proclaimed that life is absurd, while some others were hopeful about human destiny.

**Existence Precedes Essence**

This is an expression coined by Sartre, which nevertheless represents the spirit of the entire existentialist movement. With an emphasis on the concrete human existence, Sartre has challenged the long tradition in philosophy that had always prioritized abstract universal and impersonal essence over actual human existence. It amounts to a rejection of the universal human essence, which would make all human beings mere copies or shadows of this universal essence. By conferring precedence to essence the existentialists thus proclaims that we do not have a “standard” existence or are created in accordance to a universal standard.
Instead, we create ourselves through the exercise of our personal freedom. Unlike other entities where their essential properties are fixed a priori, human beings make themselves through their choices and actions. Therefore, there is no a priori essence like human nature or essence that determines man. They have no model, blueprint, no ideal essence, or perfect nature to which all of them would subscribe to or participate with (Plato).

In the process of self-creation, man makes his/her essence. Man first exists, then through his actions creates his essence. Since the individual man’s being and existence are treated as important, his passions, emotions and instincts are also to be treated as philosophically relevant. Nietzsche’s concept of will to power was a great inspiration to many existential philosophers, as it highlighted the passion for life with all its intensity and concreteness. Kierkegaard talks about the passion to exist, while Heidegger talks about authentic and inauthentic existences of man.

The essence of a thing is normally understood as what that “thing actually is”. That which is definable in a thing is called its essence. It is what is intelligible about an object. The history of philosophy has predominantly treated essence as superior to existence and many like Hegel have even absorbed it into essence. On the other hand, the existence refers to what the thing is. It is not easily definable. Existentialism gives priority to existence over essence. It is characterized by concreteness and particularity and it implies the givenness of a fact. For instance, we say that the computer exists. Here the existence of the computer is not my creation. The computer exists as something. We can simply say that, “it is”.

The word “to exist” is derived from the Latin word ex-sistere, which means to stand out or emerge. It thus implies the negation of nothingness. It suggests that a thing now stands out from nothing. To exist is to have a place in the real world and therefore, concreteness is asserted. Existence is concrete and particular. On the other hand, essence is abstract and universal. Essentialism is a central idea in traditional philosophy. Under the aegis of essentialism, philosophical systems have always contended that existence is illusory, while essences are universals and are unchangeable and real. For instance, Plato conceived only essences as realities and treated existence of particulars as illusory, contingent and changeable. In modern philosophy we find in Hegel a total dissolution of existence in essence. Hegel’s totalizing philosophy, which advocates absolutism makes individual human
existence an unreal and illusory postulation, which will vanish with reason where everything is unified with the absolute.

Criticizing this totalizing philosophy of traditional thinkers, the existentialists have emphasized the concrete human existence. They intend to distinguish the unique way in which man exists in the world. They thus attempt to highlight the ontological peculiarity of man’s being which is characterized by facticity, thrownness and particularity. Hence man’s exercise is characterized by these limitations and they define him. Existentialism also focuses on the scope and purpose of human existence and therefore highlights aspects like freedom and contemplates about the possibilities of authentic existence.

Almost all of the existentialist philosophers highlight the importance of individuality, particularity and subjectivity. While Kierkegaard emphasizes the contingent and the particular features that refuse to fit into some system constructed by rational thought, Heidegger characterizes man’s being as a Dasein or a being-in-the-world. Sartre particularly highlights the aspect of freedom and contingency. None of them talk about any truth which is objective or universal. Instead, there is an emphasis on subjectivity, disclosure and unconcealment. The lived experiences of individuals with passions, emotions, fears, anxieties, confusions etc. are stressed upon.

Quiz

1. Which of the following is emphasized by Existentialism?
   (a) The common element in all humans  (b) The essence of man  (c) The concrete existence of man  (d) The ultimate destiny of man.

2. An existentialist would not emphasize on?
   (a) The finiteness of man  (b) What is a priori in man  (c) The situatedness of man  (d) The agonies of the individual

3. Which of the following is important for Kierkegaard?
   (a) Logical evolution from the lower sphere to the higher spheres of life  (b) Individual is morally responsible on all occasions  (c) Arational personal choices made by the individual  (d) Explain God’s existence rationally.

4. Which is not important for Kierkegaard?
   (a) Objective and universal realities  (b) The personal choices man makes in his actual life  (c) Man in relation with his destiny  (d) Subjective experiences of the concrete man.

5. Which of the following is not true of our existential situation?
(a) It is often dreadful  (b) Man cannot escape it  (c) It is uncertain (d) Man can escape it through rational planning

Answer Key

1. [c]  
2. [b]  
3. [c]  
4. [a]  
5. [d]  

Assignments

6. Discuss the unique features of existentialism.  
7. Explain some key themes of existentialism.

References

Books


Web References