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# Existentialism: A philosophic stand point to existence over essence

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## 3. Existentialism;

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### **Introduction:**

The term Existentialism is coined by the Danish theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. According to Soren Existentialism “is a rejection of all purely abstract thinking, of a purely logical or scientific philosophy; in short, a rejection of the absoluteness of reason” (Roubiczek, 10). Existentialism, in fact, begins as A voice raised in protest against the absurdity of Pure Thought, a logic which is not the logic of thinking but the immanent movement of Being. It recalls the spectator of all time and of all existence from the speculations of Pure Thought to the problems and the possibilities of his own conditioned thinking as an existing individual seeking to know how to live and to live the life he Knows. (Blackham,2)

### **Meaning of the word *Existence*:**

The word *Existence* is the key concept in Existentialism. It is used in this philosophy in a very special sense. The existentialist uses *existence* to refer specifically to human existence. There is a common belief that only a concrete thing can exist. Existentialists also support this view and describe man as a concrete individual capable of being an existent. The Existentialist considers that to be an existent one has to be capable of being conscious that one exists. In this sense man alone can exist. Kierkegaard was the first person who used the word *existence* in a religious sense. His main interest was the possibility of man’s self realization. According to him, to what extent canMan realizes himself by withdrawing from the irresponsibility, superficiality, and forgetfulness of everyday life? So, for

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Kierkegaard existence is the attainment of self possession in the spirituality directed and determined life of the individual.

### **Existentialism is a 'philosophy of existence':**

According to a widely accepted definition, 'Existentialism' may be defined as a philosophic stand point which gives priority to existence over essence. From the dictionary meaning, existentialism may be defined as a 'philosophy of existence'. It is “---an irrational trend in bourgeois philosophy which appeared in the 20th century in an attempt to create a new world outlook corresponding to the frame of mind of bourgeois intellectuals”.

### **Stand point of Existentialism:**

Existentialism as laid down in the Encyclopedia Britannica emphasizes that

- (i) existence is always particular and individual,
- (ii) existence is primarily the problem of existence; it is therefore, also the investigation of the meaning of Being,
- (iii) this investigation is continually faced with diverse possibilities from which man must make a selection to which he must then commit himself,
- (iv) existence is always a being-in-the -world, so to say, in a concrete and historically determinate situation that limits or conditions choice.

### **Central focus on individual's inner awakening:**

Existentialism insists that philosophy should be connected with the individual's own life and experience. It should be a philosophy worth living. All this is blended in the word existence. The existentialist philosophers concentrate mainly on inner experience of the individual. So for an individual the personal is the real. Philosophy therefore should start from one's inner knowledge, one's own experience, which must be considered as evidence.



### **Existence comes before essence:**

Existentialism believes in Individual's personal experience. Thus it is considered as a philosophy of Being, a philosophy of attestation and acceptance, and a refusal of the attempt to rationalize and to think Being. But the question arises that does man's existence have an essence. In this regard existentialism is most commonly acknowledged with the modern French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre's famous dictum "existence comes before essence", which implies that there is no pre-defined essence to humanity except that which it makes for itself. Sartre further adds, "Man first is – only afterwards is he this or that. Man must create for himself his own essence"(Roubiczek, 121). This lends some authority to German existentialist Martin Heidegger's statement of man being thrown into existence, which existentialists consider as prior to any other thoughts or ideas that human's have or definitions of themselves that they create. Again as Sartre puts it, "... man first of all exists, encounters himself and surges up in the world- and defines himself afterwards." So human being has no essence that comes before his existence.

### **Principles of Existentialism:**

#### **1. Subjectivity:**

The human being as a being is nothing and he will not be anything until he becomes what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism which is also called its subjectivity. Man, in fact, is a project possessing a subjective life and before this projection of the self nothing exists. So given that existence precedes essence, it is only natural that the man be held responsible for what he is. This is the first effect of existentialism that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence upon his own shoulders. Man is thus his own master. It also projects that man is free.

## **2. Disbelief in God:**

Man's freedom develops from the existentialists called atheists' disbelief in God. This gets precisely enclosed in Fyodor Dostoevsky, one of the first existential writers' remark, "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted" (Sartre). This becomes the starting point of existentialism. Sartre also believes that there is no determinism, which means that there is no God or any other power to compel or guide man in his choice. In other words man is free or rather condemned to be free. Here the word condemned suggests that man did not create himself yet he is thrown into the world and is at liberty to make or mar him, there by bearing the responsibility of everything he does.

## **3. Choice as the ultimate evaluator:**

Freedom for man exists in two paradoxical forms namely 'freedom of choice' and 'choice of freedom'. Accordingly, if man is free, he must be free to choose, but he can either make a right choice which really sets him free or a wrong choice which enslaves him again. Therefore human being's role in the world is not predetermined and every person is compelled to make a choice. Thus choice is the ultimate evaluator and the exercise of choice is the core of authentic human existence in which man becomes intensely aware of his own personal existence.

## **4. Anguish(Anxiety):**

Sartre observes that in choosing and committing himself to it, man gets committed not only to himself but also to the humanity as a whole, and so he says, "In fashioning myself I fashion man." This leads to a state of anxiety or anguish that descends upon man as he realizes that through his choice he is acting as a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind. The realization of a profound responsibility gives rise to anguish, which is a part and parcel of authentic human existence.

## 5. Nothingness:

There is a self-and-world understanding that emerges in anxiety called nothingness. Human existence, thus, appears as the nothingness of being, as a negation of every reality. Existential philosophy that deals with the nature of existence, in fact, fluctuates between Being and nothingness and concludes by regarding nothingness as the only possible revelation of being. Heidegger affirms that, "Human existence cannot have a relationship with being unless it remains in the midst of nothingness" (Britannica article). Man's entire existence is believed to be suspended between the two poles of nothingness- that before birth and that after death. Heidegger rightly points out that "...personal existence is launched between nothingness and nothingness and it is nothingness that is real, everything is absurd" (Black ham, 96) So in place of God there is nothing and it is this nothingness, the central experience into which man plunges himself and where he truly seems to face the core of his being. As Heidegger observes, "At the very core of existence, nothingness is dissolving being into nothingness" (Roubiczek, 125). Strangely enough, nothingness never refers to non-existence, but always to something that exists. So as Nietzsche predicts and Heidegger confirms, nothingness grows until it swallows everything, and in the end nothing is left except nothingness. Thus, Simone de Beauvoir contemplates, " I look at myself in vain in a mirror, tell myself my own story, I can never grasp myself as an entire object, I experience in myself the emptiness, that is myself, I feel that I am not" (Roubiczek, 125).

## 6. Absurd:

The acceptance of nothingness leads to the concept of the absurd which becomes a leitmotif in Sartre's opinion of existentialism. Absurd is basically a state of alienation from the world. Accordingly, to become fully aware of the absurdity of life is for Kierkegaard, a way of experiencing it most meaningfully. The awareness of the absurdity of existence enables to transcend all superficial thought and discover the inner reality. But once the



transcendental is dismissed altogether, the absurd becomes the final objective, and there is no further attempt to make it meaningful.

## **7. Death:**

Man does at times decide to escape from the banality of anonymous existence, which hides the nothingness of existence, or the non-reality of its possibilities behind the mask of daily concerns. His understanding of this nothingness leads him to choose the only insurmountable possibility that belongs to him, called death. Kierkegaard believes that one's being is an existence towards death. Heidegger observes that death is a pure fact like birth. An individual is not "free in order to die" (Blackham, 136) but a free being who dies. He believes that death has a bearing upon all other possibilities since it eventually extinguishes them. Contrary to the conception of Heidegger, for Sartre, "... death is not my possibility at all, it is a cancellation always possible of what I can be, which is outside my possibilities" (Blackham, 135). Death, thus, becomes accidental in its occurrence and therefore appears absurd. So far from assigning a life its meaning, it may leave that meaning in a state of suspension. For extreme existentialists, death supports all the negative experience and is the final proof that life is meaningless.

## **Existence in transcendence:**

Kierkegaard believes that death can also be a challenge, as the knowledge of its inevitability confronts one constantly with eternity and infinity thereby goading the individual into focusing on the transcendental. Specifically, human existence is the anticipation, the temporal dimension to which the present and the past are subordinate and secondary. Existence is always stretched out towards the future. Thus, existence is also transcendence. To transcend means to move towards something that is not one's own existence. It implies a movement towards things and towards other men, with which man is related in every situation in which he finds himself. Sartre, in this regard, aptly points out



that, “Man is all the time outside of himself.” He adds that it is in losing himself beyond himself and by pursuing transcendent aims that man himself is able to exist. Eventually, as Sartre puts it “... man is self-surpassing” nature that he becomes the heart and centre of his transcendence. So with transcendence becoming constitutive of man in the sense of his self-surpassing, and with subjectivity registering his perennial presence in the universe; that existentialism acquires the quality of humanism. Sartre, thus, adds up .

### **Emphasis on primacy of Individual existence:**

Existentialism, clearly, is not concerned with explaining, nor changing, nor contemplating the world, but rather with lived participation in it. The Dutch humanist, Erasmus goes on to define existentialism as a twentieth century approach that emphasizes the primacy of individual existence over any presumed natural essence for human beings. He says that the existentialists generally suppose that the fact of a man’s existence entails both his unqualified freedom to make of himself whatever he wishes and the awesome responsibility of employing that freedom appropriately without being driven by anxiety towards escaping into inauthenticity, even though the entire project may turn out to be absurd.

### **Conclusion:**

On taking a panoramic view on various aspects of existentialism it becomes crystal clear that defining existentialism will be like treating it as a dead doctrine. On the contrary, it is a living attitude that is yet defining and creating itself. Nietzsche seconds this view with a comment that, only that which has no history can be defined. Likewise, Sartre observes that, “It is in the nature of an intellectual quest to be undefined. To name it and define it is to wrap it up and tie the knot” (Soloman, 244). By and large we can conclude that existentialism is, thus, not a movement or a set of ideas. It is a growing series of a set of



attitudes that has found and is still finding philosophical expression in the most gifted writers, over the years.

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