



## HISTORICAL ROOTS AND BASIC THEMES OF EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY: AN ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this paper is to explore historical roots and basic themes of existentialism. The paper foregrounds the old philosophical controversy between existence and essence. In this paper I shall try to examine the basic themes, facts and arguments put forwarded by the existential philosophers. It also highlights main features of existential philosophy including uniqueness of man and his freedom which is unfettered and unrestrained. The paper may try to indicate the fact that existentialism is the only philosophy which considers individuality as supreme and emphasizes the importance of man as an individual rather the man in general. In general terms the paper may be approached and discussed how existentialism can be described as an attempt to reach the inmost core of human existence in a concrete and individual fashion.*

*Key notes: Existence, Essence, Freedom, Contingency, Anguish and Absurdity*

#### **Introduction-**

Existentialism is a recent trend in the development of philosophy. It is also known as a philosophical movement of modern twentieth century, which is established comparatively upon to the contributions of the contemporary philosophers. Existential philosophy is interested in authentic human existence and the realization of one's essential freedom and responsibilities. Existentialism is the only philosophy which considers individuality as supreme. "Existentialism emphasizes the importance of man as an individual and his freedom and responsibility."<sup>1</sup> In general terms existentialism may be described as an attempt to reach the inmost core of human existence in a concrete and individual fashion. Therefore it is called a philosophy of a concrete man. Existentialism defined as a philosophical movement that captured the attention of general public. It emphasizes the subjective reality of individual existence, individual freedom and individual choice. There is an emphasis on each person finding their own way in life by making choices and taking decisions.

<sup>1</sup> Sinha Jadunath "Introduction to Philosophy" Central Book Agency (p) Ltd London, Delhi. p 291



Although existentialism, in its developed forms is a phenomenon of recent times but its remote origin can be traced backwards in the history of philosophy. The roots of Existentialism are found in the Socratic dictum 'know thyself'. He is the first philosopher who questioned human existence and considers humans subject of knowledge. St. Augustine has an existential viewpoint of human fallenness, an emphasis on the existing individual and an existential attitude of involvement. During the nineteenth and twentieth century, a number of writers like Fyodor Dostoevsky, C. F. Kafka contributed to the growth of existentialism they are often considered to be forerunners of existentialism.

In the recognizable form existentialism was inspired by the 19th Century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, he is known as the father of existentialism. Besides Kierkegaard there are also many other reputed philosophers who have developed and shaped existential philosophy, these prominent thinkers are Nietzsche, Heidegger, Karl Jasper, Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camps etc.

Existential philosophers have different backgrounds and different outlooks; instead of difference they share general themes which have come to form a philosophical attitude known as existentialism that emphasizes human existence that is the distinctive qualities of individual-person rather than man in general. Hence existentialism is also defined as a tendency or an attitude rather than a philosophical school. It is clear no in existential philosophy human person and his freedom is given great importance. There are chief characteristics of existentialism, among common features of existentialism; human existence and particularly human freedom are predominant. One of the most basic feature of human existence is that humans are creative and active where as things are not. Things are fixed and are only what they are, but humans have the ability and power to choose and can make themselves what they are not and can become what they want to be. Existential thinkers, support human freedom uncompromisingly and represent a rebellion against all systems, established ideas and institutions that obstructs the growth and development of human freedom. Man is everything in the watchwords of existentialism. "Existentialism does not aim at system building its approach is Psychological; it analysis the leaving experience of an individual, existential Philosopher analysis dread, anguish, despair, fidelity, hope, Love etc. and attempts to uncover their meanings"<sup>2</sup>.

#### **Existence precedes essence:**

One of the fundamental concepts and foundational principles of existentialism is that 'existence precedes essence'. The distinction between existence and essence is one of the oldest concepts in philosophy. The essence of a thing is what the thing is where as existence refers rather to the fact that it is. For example, 'I am a research scholar', here 'I am' denotes

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.299

the fact of my existence that I exist while the predicate 'research scholar' denotes the attribute I have (my essence). It was Plato who said that the surrounding world is the world of essences –ideas and the purpose of life is to discover these essences. Essences are already there and they precede existence. Even existence is an embodiment of an essence the self which is a part of a universal essence. Thus in the philosophy of Plato existence becomes pale shadow of essence. Plato holds that essence is prior in reality to existence. The majority of other western philosophers carried forward this theory. Descartes even affirmed the reality of existence because of its essence –thinking, as he said 'I think therefore I am'. Bergson even went to the extreme of saying that 'I do not think, it essence thinks in me', thereby striking a transcendental, desperately deterministic note on human existence. On the problem of existence and essence, St. Thomas Aquinas gave existence the more important place by saying that existence is prior to essence. He said, "It is only in God the essence and existence coincide, I am not, since if my essence was identical with my existence then it would be my essence to exist. In such a case I would be immortal"<sup>3</sup>.

As such, existentialism is a revolt against any kind of determinism and an affirmation of the free nature of man; they affirm that existence is prior to essence, that man is fundamentally free to create his essences. Man is not only free but ironically he is condemned to be free. Sartre's monumental work 'Being and Nothingness' is basically a formulation of this theory of man. As Black ham writes; "But for Sartre there is no creator of man. Man discovered himself. His existence comes first; he is now in the process of determining his essence. Man first is, and then he defines himself."<sup>4</sup> The whole idea of precedence of essence over existence has been challenged by existential philosophers, and declares, existence precedes essence. Therefore "Man is conceived of as a free, responsible, aspiring and striving becoming"<sup>5</sup>. Instead of as a helpless, despondent being a creature waiting to realize what is given to him.

As Sartre himself explains this concept to us, "what is meant here by saying that 'Existence precedes Essence', it means that first of all, man exists, turns up appears on the scene, and only after-wards defines himself"<sup>6</sup>. Man from existentialist's point of view is indefinable; it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterwards he will be something. Hence man is nothing other than what he makes himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism.

### **Contingency of human life:**

Another significant concept of Existentialism is the 'contingency' of human life, the 'givenness' or the 'thorownness' of human life. Existentialists believe that existence of a

3Bhadra M. k. "A Critical Survey of Phenomenology and Existentialism", Allied Publishers, New Delhi,1990,p .127

4Blackham H.J. Six Existentialist Thinkers", Macmillan Co., Landon ,1951,p18.

5 Sartre; "Existentialism" The Philosophical Lib. New York ,1952, p,18.

6 Sartre Jean Paul; Existentialism is a Humanism tr. By Philip Mairet, Public Lecture, 1946.P 28.



person means his period from birth to death. In between we have been thrown into a social life and the characteristics of this social life are the contingent circumstances of our life. This contingency is often characterized by experience of dread, horror, anguish, solitude, bewilderment, uncertainty and finally limited by death. As Jean Wahl puts it, “man is in this world, a world limited by death and experienced in anguish, is aware of himself as essentially anxious; is burdened by his solitude within the horizon of his temporality”<sup>7</sup>. Man will have to search out the meaning of his life in this world. Existential philosophers have also drawn the picture of such a man and they try to show how man can move towards his destiny of authenticity through an uninterrupted bitter struggle. From this perspective existentialism can be called, a philosophy of modern man, where he is revealed in the condition of his thrownness on the thorns of life. Buddha also recognized human life as full of suffering; human suffering was an occasion of his philosophizing. Jean Wahl describes in a very simple way the contingency of human life ; “ I am there such as I am ; and I neither know why or how; the only thing I know , truly and inexorably , is that someday I am going to die. And that is what limits all my possibilities and my future. My future limited, finite and I knowing it what is my situation in this world. I know that my existence is precarious and short and that I can lose it at any moment; that is why there is the substratum of anxiety, fear and anguish.”<sup>8</sup>

We are all aware of our situations in life, limited by death, and existentialists rightly remarked that man is the only being in the world who knows that sometime he will die. That is why his existence is through- out permeated by dread, anxiety and fear. He cannot escape or transcend this situation. He has to be prepared to face dread, anguish, and fear resolutely and courageously. He must learn to live with anguish, dread and anxiety. He must learn to love death like great men and a score of other great men for whom dying for a meaningful cause was of greater importance than living a purposeless life.

### **Freedom:**

Another significant theme, most nearer and heart of existential philosophy is human freedom. It is present and prominent among existential philosophers and writers. Existentialists refer that freedom to be a genuinely existing and valuable feature of human condition. The basic feature of human personality is his freedom that is unfettered and unrestrained. Man is basically free. According to Sartre, “Freedom is identical with existence and man is not only free but he is condemned to be free.”<sup>9</sup> This infinite freedom entails upon him a heavy sense of responsibility. So Existentialism strongly stresses freedom of individual. In spite of the individuals being determined by the body, the world, the society, and the past of and culture,

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<sup>7</sup>Wah Jean; A Short History of Existentialism, Phil. Lib. New York, 1949,p, 31.

<sup>8</sup> “Ibid”, p 42.

<sup>9</sup> Sartre, Jean Paul; “Human freedom”(ed.)W.Baskin, phil. Lib. ,new York,1966,p 40.



he has freedom to choose his goal and make himself out of his chosen decisions. His decision and choice, his end or ideal, his moral affirmation, give a meaning and value to his life.

### **Absurdity**

The concept of the Absurdity contains the idea that life has no meaning beyond what meaning we give it. Existential philosophers believe that life is absurd; it does not have any pre-given meaning it is meaningless and it has no ultimate purpose, but we humans need to make sense of it and to give it a meaning. In the world anything can happen to anyone any tragic event may occur and could plummet because of the world's absurdity. Albert Camus stated, "That individuals should embrace the absurd condition of human existence while also defiantly continuing to explore and search for meaning<sup>10</sup>".

### **Anguish**

Anguish is another fact of existential philosophy it is also called anxiety, dread and uneasiness. It is a feeling of unease you get when you start to recognize that life is absurd. It is common to many existentialist thinkers. It is generally held to be a negative feeling arising from the experience of human freedom and responsibility. A person's awareness of his unlimited freedom can be source of anxiety or anguish. Our freedom makes us anxious because there is nothing other than our freedom which can stop us from performing dangerous, destructive, embarrassing or disreputable acts at any moment. Hence when we choose our actions and decision this act of choosing is sometimes source of anguish. Kierkegaard said, "human beings enjoy a freedom of choice that we find both appealing and terrifying"<sup>11</sup>

### **Forlornness:**

This is the feeling of loneliness you get when you realize that no one can help you, it make sense of your existence. Existential forlornness is closely related to existential anguish; it is a result of facing up to the full consequences of the non-existence of being left of one's own, of having been abandoned; it is the experience of utter aloneness. Sartre said that humans are forlorn. In this statement he is stressed the idea of being without help without any kind of guidance from transcendence. Rather he believes that humans are trapped with their sense of being free. This sense of freedom brings conditions of forlorn. In these situations nobody can alleviate pain of loneness and isolation. Under these conditions an individual's freedom reveals, he exercises his freedom by choosing his course of action and taking decisions according to his/ her choice. This choice says Sartre is cause forlorn or anguish.

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<sup>10</sup> Camus, Albert, *Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Vintage Books. ISBN 0-679-73373-6, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Marino, Gordon. "The Danish Doctor of Dread". *New York City: The New York Times*. Retrieved May 18, 2013.

### Authenticity:

Authenticity is another significant concept of existential philosophy. Authenticity is the degree to which one is true to one's own life despite external pressures. Life of authenticity is to live in a way that is in tune with the truth of who they are as humans and in the world in which they resides. One's realization of freedom, responsibility and Individuality is an important part of developing an authentic life. Lack of authenticity is considered bad faith in existential philosophy. Authenticity involves a person confronting reality and facing up to the hard truth that he at all times a free being who will never obtain coincidence with himself. Sartre in War Diaries writes that "authenticity consists in adopting human reality as one's own"<sup>12</sup>. Heidegger also defined authentic man, "a man being one who escaped from the banality of everyday existence by recognizing his finitude and courageously facing up to the fact of death"<sup>13</sup>

Hence existential philosophy holds that an individual can truly change the way as he think and feel about his life by believing differently, by acting rather than simply reacting, by asserting his will rather than simply allowing himself to be swept along by circumstances, by always taking responsibility for making himself and his actions. Existentialism is the only philosophy that emphasizes human existence and the qualities which are distinctive in man. It signifies restoration of man to himself and calls him to face the problems and to realize the possibilities of his own existence as a 'concrete individual'.

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<sup>12</sup> Sartre War Diaries, p,133.

<sup>13</sup> Olson Robert G.AS, An Introduction to Existentialism, Dover Publications Inc, New York1962, p.149.