

Existentialism: A Philosophical study

^[1] Kamna singh, ^[2] Dr.jagdish singh somvanshi

^[1] Ph.D in English, Bundelkhand University. JHANSI (U.P)

^[2] Department of English, Bundelkhand university .JHANSI (U.P.)

Abstract: - This paper throws light on the philosophical doctrine of existentialism along with its prominent thinkers. An effort has been made here to present a comparative study of "existentialism". It is a 20th century philosophy, which lays stress on the subjectivity and individuality of human existence. Søren Kierkegaard, generally regarded as "the father of modern existentialism" is the first European philosopher, who coined and used the term "Existentialism". He emphasized that "subjectivity is truth, subjectivity is reality". After him so many thinkers like Karl Jasper, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, etc, explored this idea with their own views. They enlightened the world of "Existentialism" with their philosophical views.

I. INTRODUCTION

Existentialism in the broader sense is a 20th century philosophy that is centered upon the analysis of existence and of the way humans find themselves existing in the world. The notion is that humans exist first and then each individual spends a lifetime changing their essence or nature.

In simpler terms, existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. The belief is that people are searching to find out who and what they are throughout life as they make choices based on their experiences, beliefs, and outlook. And personal choices become unique without the necessity of an objective form of truth. An existentialist believes that a person should be forced to choose and be responsible without the help of laws, ethnic rules, or traditions. Existentialism, though one of the most influential philosophies in twentieth century is also one of the most controversial of all. It is not a systematic school of philosophy. It is rather a fountainhead of several revolts in the past against traditional philosophy. It is by its very nature beyond a clearcut, an exact definition. It is actually an off-spring of the combined attempts made by philosophers, thinkers' psychologist, sociologists, artists and literature from different disciplines, periods and places of the world. It is said to have existed ever since man confronted his own frailty and the meaninglessness of existence. Hence it can also be understood more as a way of thought, an attitude to life, a vision, a way of perceiving the man and the world, a "timeless sensibility that can be discerned here and there in the past"¹ a "Style of philosophizing"² than an integrated system.

Thus Existentialism lays stress on the subjectivity and individuality of human existence. The existentialists recognize very well the tragic element in human existence, and hence they lay much importance on the facts of life such as – anguish, anxiety, alienation, boredom, choice, despair, dread, death, freedom, frustration, finitude, guilt, nausea, responsibility etc. They show that deep concern with the fundamental problems of human existence. They affirm that men should choose, decide and act as active participant in life situation. By doing so, he can save the world from deep distress distrust and dissension in every walk of life. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55a is generally regarded as "the father of modern existentialism, and is the first European philosopher who bears the existentialist label."¹¹ He coined and used the terms "existence" and "existentialism"¹² for the first time. He rejected the prevalent political, social, religious ideas which identified man with state, society and church respectively. He thus brought about a revolutionary change in the basic concept of existentialism. He rejected Hegel's "Dialectical Method" and his contention that "Objectivity is truth", and emphasized : "Subjectivity is truth, subjectivity is reality".¹³ He based his philosophy on the subjectivity of human existence and laid emphasis on the individual's "act of choice" or "freedom of choice" or "free choice" and the subjective "will" and "responsibility", raising them to the moral level. As a Christian and theistic existentialism, he believes that man acquires self-knowledge only when he has an "intensified awareness" of an encounter with God. Kierkegaard's existentialist idea, too contributed much to his philosophy of "Being". His major work, 'Being and Time' presents a perfect and impressive analysis of human existence. According to him, although man is in the world, he is "not of the world". His "authentic existence" is possible only when he is "free from his world." Kierkegaard also stressed the importance of the

International Journal of Science, Engineering and Management (IJSEM)
Vol 3, Issue 9, September 2018

self, and the self's relation to the world, as being grounded in self-reflection and introspection. He argued in concluding – Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments that "subjectivity is truth" and "truth is subjectivity"

Karl Jasper (1883-1969a, a German Professor, takes the Kierkegaardian line of philosophical faith. He is convinced that man in the modern age is doomed to failure. However, failure is not necessarily all negative. He proclaims in his way to wisdom : "The way in which an approached his failure determines that he will become."¹⁵ Fail leads man to seek redemption. Existentialism is "a philosophy of "becoming" rather than a philosophy of being. As such, it is anti-intellectualistic and voluntaristic. Jaspers values more highly the élan of an endless seeking and striking than the tranquility of possession regardless of whether it be a question of truth or being or God. Existentialism is "authentic" being. As with Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre, we find that Jasper emphasizes the importance of decision making and freedom in defining the individual. There are limits to our freedom, according to Jaspers. These limitations exist as "boundary situations" including death, suffering, guilt, chance and conflict. Jaspers did believe there was a certain randomness to fate; chance situations arise forcing one to react in a manner not consistent with true freedom. Death stands apart from other boundaries as it is both the source of dread and the reason many choose to experience pleasures. Without death, these might not be a reason to search for pleasure.

Karl Jaspers was a man of faith, but not a traditional Christian. Jaspers, much like Kierkegaard, recognized his own faith lacked any basis in logic. This "leap of faith" for Jaspers represented a free choice to believe in an existence greater than that detected by science.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976a a distinguished German philosopher, exerted a profound significance on subsequent existentialist thought, although he rejected categorically the title of existentialist.

Heidegger depicts man in a painful situation in which accomplishment is a mere illusion. Hence such themes as care, anxiety, guilt, fallenness, finitude and above all death abound in his writings. He is original in his concept of "nothingness" which is elaborately discussed afterwards by the French existentialists, particularly by Sartre. There are three fundamental characteristics of existence. There are three fundamental characteristics of existence. The first is "possibility", the second is

"facticity" and the third is "fallenness". These three structures of the being of man constitute 'care' (Sorge). In all his writings there are indications of a trend towards nihilism. His existentialist vision is coloured by the philosophy of man's unmitigated desire to be nothingness itself.

Heidegger himself is quite clear on the point that at a certain formal level he is presenting a theory of the "essential structures" that pertain to existence. "Dasein" :

"By means of phenomenological enquiry, there are certain structures which we shall exhibit – not just any accidental structures, but essential ones which, in every kind of being that factual Dasein may possess, persist as determinative for the character of its being."¹⁷

But the search for "essential structures" in this sense does not undermine the distinction between the "what" and the "who", and thus the character of these essential structures will have to be understood differently in each case. As

Heidegger puts it:

"Accordingly, those characteristics which can be exhibited in this entity are not 'properties' present at hand of some entity which 'looks' so and is itself present-at-hand; they are in each case possible ways for it to be, and no more than that"¹⁸ French existentialism has become probably the best known of all existentialist thinking and in the hands of the French intellectual Jean Paul Sartre (1905....a famous novelist, playwright and philosopher of deep insight, existentialism found its richest treatment. He was a unique expounder of atheistic existentialism on the pattern of Nietzsche – He took active part in the 'French Resistance Movement' during worldwar II and defied German occupation on France. He served French army and even remained the prisoner of war in Germany for sometime. The sudden collapse of France in World War II affected him adversely and brought him to an awareness of his own existence in the midst of the world shattering situation. "His version of existentialism could be seen to be rooted in the thoughts of Marx, Kierkegaard, Husserl and Heidegger. Marx's passion for action to change the world already understood by philosophers, Kierkegaard's insistence on individual's freedom or subjective content. Husserl's emphasis on essential form in phenomenological analysis and Heidegger's emphasis on facticity, freedom and the relationship between essence and existence paved the way for Sartre's existentialism crammed with the problem of man and also his active role in forgetting his own destiny."¹⁹

International Journal of Science, Engineering and Management (IJSEM)
Vol 3, Issue 9, September 2018

He believes in the supremacy of man's existence in a goddess universe. He writes : "Atheistic existentialism of which I am a representative declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence of being that exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or as Heidegger has it, the human reality.²⁰

In a godless universe man himself has to take the place of God. He asserts : "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself."²¹ The dominant figure in existentialism is Jean Paul Sartre; he either coined the term or at least promoted it briefly. Sartre's *Being and Nothingness An essay on phenomenological Ontology* deals with various aspects of human condition. Man himself is both "being" and source of "nothingness". According to Sartre, there are three kinds of being : an object has "being in itself", a man his "being for itself" (en. sola "means non-conscious being which is what it is. Being-for-itself (pour-soi means man's conscious being which has to be what it is i.e., which is what it is not and which is not what it is. Being-for-itself is that form of consciousness in which man is always aware of a "lack" or "nothingness" in him and is always in self-transcendence wherein "our existence from moment to moment is a perpetual flying beyond ourselves, or else a perpetual falling behind our own possibilities : in any case, our being never exactly coincides with itself."²² Human existence is personified anguish and agony. It is characterized by nausea and falseness which make life miserable. Modern man is torn by inner conflict. Life for him is meaningless. In the beginning, man is a kind of existential romantic but after having experienced the bitter realities in life he turns an existentialist. Existentialism, therefore, is a stage is the romantic pursuit of life when man's agony deepens into anguish.

The foregoing discussion leads us to arrive at the conclusion that Existentialist thought and manner broadly stress on the following:

1. Existence is always particular and individual always my existence. Your existence, his existence.
2. Existence is primarily the problem of existence, i.e. of its mode of being; it is, therefore, also the investigation of the meaning of being.
3. The investigation is continuously faced with diverse possibilities from which the existent i.e. man must make a selection, to which he must then commit himself.

4. Because these possibilities, are constituted by man's relationship with things and with other men, existence is always a being-in-the-world, i.e. in a concrete and historically determined situation that limits or conditions choice. Man is therefore called Dasein ("there being" because he is defined by the fact that he exists, or is in the world and inhabits it. With respect to the first point, the existence is particular. Existentialism is opposed to any doctrine that views man as the manifestation of an absolute or of an infinite substance. It is thus opposed to most recent form of idealism such as those that stress continuous, spirit, reason Idea or oversoul.

Secondly, it is opposed to any doctrine that sees in man some given and complete reality that must be resolved into its element in order to be known or contemplated. It is thus opposed to any form of objectivism or scientism since these stresses of cross reality of external fact.

Thirdly, Existentialism is opposed to any form of necessitarianism; for existence is constituted by possibilities from among which man may choose and through which he can project himself.

And finally, with respect to the fourth point, Existentialism is opposed to any solipsism (holding that I alone exist) or any epistemological idealism (holding that the objects of knowledge are mental). Because existence, which is the relationship with other beings, always extends beyond itself, towards the being of these entities; it is, so to speak transcendence.

Starting from, these bases, Existentialism can take diverse and contrasting directions. It can insist on the transcendence of Being with respect to existence, and, by holding this transcendence to be the origin or foundation of existence. It can thus assume the theistic form.

On the other hand, it can hold the human existence, posing itself as a problem, project itself with absolute freedom, creating itself by itself, thus assuming to itself the function of God; As such existentialism presents itself as a radical atheism. Or it may insist on the finitude of human existence, i.e., on the limits inherent in its possibilities of projection and choice. As such existentialism presents itself as humanism.

From 1940 on, with the diffusion of Existentialism through continental Europe, its directions have developed in terms of the diversity of the interest to which they are subject : the religious interest of metaphysical (or nature of being) interest, the moral and political interest. This diversity of interest is rooted, at

International Journal of Science, Engineering and Management (IJSEM)
Vol 3, Issue 9, September 2018

least in past, in the diversity of sources on which Existentialism has drawn. Having developed in different and contrasting directions, Existentialism has furnished philosophy and the whole of contemporary culture with conceptual tools. Such terms as 'problematicity', 'chance', 'condition', 'choice', 'freedom' and 'project' can be employed usefully for the interpretation of existence. The literary artists all over the world were also influenced in a very significant manner by the existentialist emotions. The noted writers like Franz Kafka, Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, Eugene Ionesco, Proust Malraux, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, T.S. Eliot, Samuel Becket, James Joyce, William Godling, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and quite a few other have meaning fully employed this theme in their immortal works. In post independence Indian English writings too we witness quite explicitly such concerns, which forms the subject matter of the next chapter.

REFERENCES

1. W"lter K"utm"n, Existenti(lism for Dostoevsky to S(rtre (cle(vel(nd (nd New York : Maridian Book, The world publishing Co. 1968a P. 12
2. John M"qu"rrie, Existenti(lism (H(rmondsworth, Middle sex Engl(nd : Penguin Book Ltd., 1986a P. 14
3. John M"qu"rrie, Existenti(lism Op. Cit. P.53
4. Paul Roubiczek, Existenti(lism for (nd (g(inst 9. quoted from N. Sinh(, A primer of existenti(lism (New York : 1957a P. 25
- 5.Kierkegaard, Concluding unscientific postscript to the 'Philosophic(l fr(gments, Tr. D(vid F- Swenson, Lilli(n M(rvin Swenson, (nd w(lter Lowrie, A Kierkeg((rd (nthology ed. Robert Bret(ll (London : Geoffrey Cumberlege, O.U.P. 1947a P. 131
6. Karl Jaspers, W(y to Wisdom Tr. E.B. Asht(n (New York : Russell F. Morre Co. Inc. 1952a P. 23
7. John Macquarrie, Existenti(lism (Engl(nd : Penguin Books Ltd. 1986a P. 57
8. Martin Heidegger Resources Web Page, Existenti(lism notes (St(nd(rd Encyclopedi(of philosophy (Heidegger, 1962a
9. Ibid, 67
10. M.N. Sinha, A primer of existenti(lism Op. Cit, 32
20. Jean Paul Sartre, Existenti(lism (nd Hum(nism, Op. Cit 124
21. Ibid, 249