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☞ Research Article



## The Existential Predicament: Finding Meaning in a Meaningless World

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### **Abstract**

One of the key issues of Existentialism is taking complete responsibility of one's life and one's actions and making no excuses. It might be conceived of as a movement and not a sensibility. One can think of it in many different ways but the literature that has come out in the years when Existentialism first became popular just after the Second World War and ever since, it often has the connotation of being a particularly gloomy philosophy – one that is obsessed with the notions of anxiety and dread. However, the important thing to consider is that the researchers find Existentialism a very invigorating and positive minded philosophy. The purpose of this paper is to highlight all the major aspects of the philosophical outlook and especially the importance of human determination in making constructive changes in life.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Second World War, Angst, Positive/Negative Philosophy, Surrealism, Culture

### **Existentialism – Still Relevant?**

Why is Existentialism still relevant today? From the period of 1880s to almost 1960s, Existentialism was one of the most dominant schools of thought and it had taken a strong root in American Universities but by the 1980s and 1990s it had become something like a caricature. So, we see all kinds of pop culture references but still despite that fact the Existential thinkers brought about such changes in thinking that even today they are highly respected in the academic circles and some of the themes of the movement resonate with many of us today. What makes somebody Existentialism? There is no one answer; there are divergent opinions about it and there are also various categorizations that apply across a spectrum. And one way to bring these people together is to explicate the fact that there is some sort of a common thread that runs in their writings. Another could be that they had a common milieu regarding their concept of modernity. Despite the common themes, yet not all of these figures actually have all of these themes. There are dividing lines amongst the Existentialists; and the biggest dividing line is that on the one hand we have atheist Existentialists and on the other we have the theist ones. The initial writers like Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky did not consider themselves to be Existentialists yet we place them under the intellectual umbrella of Existentialism. Same is the case with Nietzsche. However, only when the thinkers are analyzed in retrospect then a common thread emerge. Now coming to the key question, is Existentialism passe? Whether Existentialism was itself a fashion, whether it was something that had sort of passed from France to America at a critical time in history just after the Second World War, a couple of striking authors mainly Camus and Sartre had struck the American fancy, had inspired a generation of American authors who at least for a short time called themselves Existentialists, Norman Mailer is an example but then it passed on. So, Existentialism belongs to the 40s and 50s and after that it was seen as a throwback. But it is not accepted today. It is not accepted just because it is much more than a historical phase, something much more than just a period in recent intellectual movements, something much more than a movement of the sort that one can label, stamp, clamp and put on the shelf (Horton 34). It was Sartre himself who said when

he was asked about what is Existentialism and he said that to try to define it is to freeze it, is to treat it as no longer a living movement but something dead, something that can be simply classified. That is quite accurate and in fact Sartre himself was very concerned with the idea that Existentialism as a movement did not have any definitive core even though he himself more than anyone tried to stamp it with his own ideas. The truth is that Existentialism is still a vibrant movement and for that reason the researchers have not spent any time at all try to define what it is. The researchers have noted with some frequency, some terms that keep emerging as absolutely central. Looking at Sartre the notion of freedom and responsibility and looking at Kierkegaard the terms are freedom and choice. Looking back to Nietzsche there is a sense shared with Kierkegaard of enormous personal passion and throughout all the figures there is a kind of strong individualistic streak, sometimes almost an individualistic mania. Think, for example certain aspects of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard in particular (Hendriyanto 80).

But the researchers won't go so far as to define Existentialism in any of these terms although Existentialism is a movement that certainly vibrates around them. Because Existentialism is still very much alive. And although it started as a very European movement and the figures discussed have all been Europeans nevertheless their real home is in America. And in the United States what Existentialism amounts to is more clearly instantiated than any place else in the world. What is that Existentialism. Not to repeat just the same terms again, so to say something much more general and something in way more provincial (Holman 11). Americans are very staunch individualists; at the same time, they are rather keenly aware although they are philosophically uncomfortable with the idea that there is a very strong sense of community that lies at the basis of American society. Even in Nietzsche and to a lesser extent in Heidegger where the idea of improving oneself or the idea of creating oneself is really at a minimum. Nevertheless, this idea of self-assertiveness of some sense of authenticity, some sense of real self-realization comes through as a dominant philosophy and that is what the researchers opine Existentialism is all about.

And who then is man? He who must affirm what he is. To affirm means to declare; but at the same time, it means: to give in the declaration a guarantee of what is declared. Man is he who he is, precisely in the affirmation of his own existence. This affirmation does not mean here an additional and supplementary expression of human existence, but it does in the process make plain the existence of man. But what must man affirm? That he belongs to the earth. This relation of belonging to consists in the fact that man is heir and learner in all things. But all these things are in conflict. That which keeps things apart in opposition and thus at the same time binds them together, is called..." intimacy". (Heidegger 616)

### **Structuralism of Existentialism**

Certainly, if we look at the climate in Europe Existentialism is passe, and in American universities it is in a kind of pandering way follow the latest fashions in Europe, one does not hear too much about Existentialism anymore. It is eclipsed by two generations of philosophers since Sartre, although Sartre lived longer enough to see in fact both of them. The first generation is dominated by a single figure in Paris someone with whom Sartre's personal

relationships were quite strained but as you may have gathered from other things, Sartre personal relationship were quite strained with almost everyone, the character that the researcher has in mind is the anthropologist philosopher Claude Levi Strauss who made quite a reputation for himself with a philosophy which is called Structuralism.

The details of what counts as structuralism is something way beyond the scope of this paper but to begin with it was in fact an anthropological insight and what Levi Strauss was worried about the comparisons of the structures that almost each and every society has in mutualism (Kaufman 33). And what he tried to do in his various studies of myth, ritual and social custom was to find a system, a set of structures which were common to every society and the idea was, in particular of different societies to be understood within that structure. But despite his search for universals Levi Strauss clearly had an anthropologist view of the world. And what he attacks in Sartre is very well taken namely the idea that Sartre really is, despite all things paints the contrary not the universal picture of humanity so much as a hyper-intellectual Parisian who took his phenomenology in the manner of an unjustified oversimplification about the manner in which human life and human consciousness are like (Knight 44). Levi Strauss emphasizes in particular in his studies of what he called the savage mind, the primitive mind, is the differences between different people and in particular the differences in the notion of consciousness which could be accurately applied to different cultures. Maurice Merleau Ponty, Sartre's friend makes a similar criticism when he asks Sartre whether a peasant in Latin America who is never been educated who has never heard a radio who has no idea how people in other countries live can be expected to have the kind of choices and consequently the kind of responsibility that Sartre is talking about. Levi Strauss makes an important point but that is only that first generation in which Sartre and other Existentialist thinkers are attacked. Second generation is in some ways is more insidious with regards to Existential thinkers. Their narration is spot on and those philosophers are currently called postmodernist critics and in particular the philosophers Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida. They have a number of theses in common although here again what we find is a group more of individuals than of collectivities (Kundera 62).

But two theses come to the fore which are in striking contrast with Existentialist philosophy. The first is characterized in the rather stunning phrase which is used by both Barthes and Foucault; the death of the author and it refers to something which has often been commented upon, often been ridiculed and it is the awareness that whenever we read, say for example, a book, what we think is that the book is penned by a writer and that is the main thing to keep in mind while reading a book and through this idea other offshoots emerge in critical analysis. Of course, there is a sense in which people write books but to confuse the writer of the books with the author is exactly the kind of fallacy that Foucault and Barthes are concerned about. To talk about the death of the author it is particularly dramatic way of bringing into life the thesis that had been flying around in literary criticism in circles for quite some time (Murphy 30). It has to do with the way to read and understand books which is not the primary concern here but it also has to do with the idea that the subject and subjectivity, the two key concepts in not only Sartre but the whole Cartesian tradition have in some way been displaced

and misunderstood and to read a book in terms of the intentions of an author is precisely to misunderstand it. The second notion has to do with an impersonal play of forces which in people like Foucault and Deleuze replaces an emphasis on agency and particularly responsibility in Sartre. In reading about Nietzsche for example, Gilles Deleuze in a very well-known book in France argues in place of Nietzsche's talk about the dynamics of action he talks instead about the impersonality of forces in particular the sorts of forces that Nietzsche points to in his mythology the Apollonian vs the Dionysian and so on. The reactive forces of slave vs the more aggressive forces of the master but the idea is that we get rid of any semblance of human responsibility and decision making and we get rid of that image that one has presented in one's exposition of Nietzsche's Genealogy in which the slave or slaves make a kind of brilliant decision to undermine the masters. All such talks disappears and instead what we are left with is a picture that looks very much in a superficial reading like a physical treatise (Richardson 77).

And that of course is just the idea because what these two notions together the Death of the Author and this notion of this impersonal play of forces intend to do is really kill subjectivity and in particular the notion of subjectivity as Sartre understood it. On the one hand something very important is going on here but on the other hand there is a kind of conspiracy of silence regarding Sartre's own significance for both of these movements: structuralism and postmodernism or what is sometimes in the United States is called Poststructuralism. The conspiracy of silence has to do with just how much Sartre's own notion of consciousness in subjectivity in forms and in a way informs the basis of the kind of philosophy that Foucault and Derrida, Deleuze and Barthes want to argue. His name is virtually never mentioned in their texts but reading for example the biography of Foucault by James Miller one finds Foucault sitting in a lecture with Deleuze and saying to each other how this is really the main target against which all of their philosophy is to be directed (Rowe 50). Whether Sartre is in a way the model or whether he is simply the target, nevertheless his importance in French philosophy since his death is something which has been a very well-kept secret. But it is not just the question of his being a target, something which will be discussed later, but if you seriously view Sartre's view of consciousness and take very seriously the sorts of things he says about nothingness and so on, he comes up with a picture which can be very easily accommodated to the postmodernist picture. What the postmodernist wants to do when they reject subjectivity and with it reject phenomenology is to say that there is only really a third person way of looking at ourselves. That the first person way in a way is corrupt or self-deceptive, that when they describe the impersonal play of forces and when they describe a book without an author what they are rejecting in many ways is precisely that notion of consciousness which Sartre anticipates and the idea that consciousness is not something which can be readily individuated or something which can be readily identified and in many ways one might say what they are confusing in Sartre is the distinction which he makes very early between consciousness and subjectivity on the one hand and the self on the other.

### **Ontology of Existentialism**

The most important Existential writers were the French authors Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir all of whom in various ways responded to the German occupation of France. And all of whom stressed the importance of taking personal action (White 18). They did not act in the same way but they came out of this experience where human being must choose to act. And so, the conclusion would deal with Existential ideology with reference to the context of the 1940s and then suggest why Existentialism attained such a great deal of focus post the period of Second World War. The people started loving Existentialism also because of the fact that many literary writers came to the forefront and their difficult and complex set of thoughts was molded in literary texts, especially novels. And this is much more appealing to people than the technical writing of academic philosophers. But Existential ideology also gained popularity because it highlighted the importance of our behaviors and so for all of its pessimism it also had a rather optimistic claim that an individual human action could make some difference. And the very least it could define a meaningful life (Becker 56). So contrary to the botheration of the British literary philosophical tradition with epistemology the Existentialist developed a new kind of concern with the problems of being and consciousness. This is what philosophers call the problem of ontology; the linguistic philosophers were concerned with epistemology and that question of how do we know what we know but the Existentialists focused on consciousness, on being on the problem of reality on one's relations to it. And these ontological issues had already gained prominence in the 1920s and 1930s through the writings of philosophers such as Husserl and Heidegger and both of whom stressed the nature of Existence. Heidegger and Husserl very concerned with how one defines the meaning of human Existence.

Husserl had explored the manner whereby the self-conscious subject gets mindful of the objects that are surrounding him., the way in which awareness interrelates with the outside and Heidegger for his part had stressed that people need to act in such a way so they their actions are inscribed in the loophole of time. And this concept of Being would be very important for later authors (Bellow 70). There were also other German philosophers who contributed to these ideas, one of whom was the German philosopher Karl Jaspers and he became well known for arguing that people must act with free will. He argued that human beings can act freely and his thought also attracted wide attention. Jaspers said that it is the awareness of death that creates an anxiety in human beings but it is also this anxiety about death that pushes people to pursue an active life. When you think about your own death you feel a certain urgency to act in the world and this is an interesting problem that the Existentialist came back to again and again how does the consciousness of your own death push you to take action. And the Existentialist always put a lot of emphasis on that problem. The French Existentialists especially Sartre drew on all of these ideas to develop their own conception of free human action and they explored the phenomenological question of how one becomes conscious of being in the world. And then they try to link consciousness to free actions that could be used to affirm the individuals' Existence (Barret 22). There is a great deal of emphasis on resistance and on action. So, the German philosophical influences were crucial, the German

thought of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had an important impact on later Existentialism but the German occupation of France and the very painful experience of war, repression and military occupation also contributed to the emergence and popularity of Existentialism. So, the Germans had both a philosophical and material impact on the emergence of this movement. Despite the differences amongst the Existential thinkers, especially Camus and Sartre came out of the World War II with a communal certainty that people's autonomy does have a huge impact and it makes a great alteration in a strange, illogical, irrational, and absurd world.

That human action gave purpose and meaning to what was otherwise a meaningless Existence. From the beginning there were many critics of Existentialism and many of these critics said that the philosophy was flawed because it was too subjectivist. It placed truth in the hands of the individual actor or it assumed that individual was free to do whatever they wanted to do and the critics said that Existentialism did not understand the social, the cultural and psychological constraints on individual action (Adams 34). In fact, this critique of Existentialism may partly explain Sartre's move towards Marxism, the researcher believes that he wanted to show that Existentialism could have a strong collective or social agenda. It could take a collective action. There are other critics who saw in Existentialism a kind of naïve optimism and optimist that said that even amidst the absurdity of this world individuals are free, they can be whatever they want to be, they can do whatever they want to do and many critics said that is not true. That the constraints of social and historical conditions are such that people are not really free and yet this idea that humans are free, that human actions does make a difference in a senseless world was very appealing to people after 1945 and it was the idea that other writers would pick up in post war literary works.

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