

THE ORIGIN, HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF EXISTENTIALISM

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Abstract: The paper critically examines the origin, development and history of the theory of existentialism. It is a philosophical movement which became popular in the modern era. The paper delineates right from the philosophy of Socrates to the twenty first century writers in the various fields of literature. In relation to the theme of existentialism it also signifies the theme, works and various ideas of existentialism. The framework of existential ideology and the philosophical concepts are shown in this paper.

Subject: Authenticity, Meaning of life, Existence, Absurdity, Modernism, Conflicts, Individualism.

Existentialism is a branch of philosophy which means the authentic way of life. It is impossible to have a perfect living of an individual on earth. According to Socrates dictum, “know thyself”, self-understanding and self-analysis are the most important elements of man. This is to show that the idea of existentialism is indirectly touched by him in 400 BC. Even Plato, his disciple, spoke about the essence of life (i.e.) the alpha and omega of a man and its emergence.

Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a Danish philosopher is strongly considered as the father of existentialism. He originally gave the authentic theory of existentialism and how it imposes on human beings. Through this theory he stimulates the question to an individual such as (1) what is the purpose of life? (2) How does the life create meaning to an individual? (3) What is the role of a man towards life? These questions seem to be irrational but it goes beyond the materialistic satisfaction of human life. Erik Lundstedt, the Norwegian literary poet and a critic says that it is from a Danish philosopher Sibbern during conversation with Welhaven and Kierkegaard, the term existential has been coined. Welhaven gives the positive approach towards life and on the whole it is modified by Kierkegaard in the meaning of existentialism. Hence Kierkegaard is influenced by Sibbern in formulating the idea of existentialism. Kierkegaard's *What it means to be a Christian? Training in Christianity* are the popular works based on the exponential themes in the Bible. The man is responsible for his own life; identifying the self and living towards passion. The subjectivity of man's life is visible in the theory of Kierkegaard. The man is free to choose his decision and work with passion. The theory of existentialism not only became popular in philosophy but also in the field of arts, psychology, literature, theology and drama.

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Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), a German philosopher is one of the most influential person of existentialism. His popular works are *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *The Gay Science* (1882), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *Twilight of the Idols* (1889), *The Antichrist* (1895). His works contains the strong influence of atheism and against religious ideas. An archetype of “Superman” is shown by Nietzsche to prove that man has all the abilities to drive out the conflicts in life. He provides the different attitude to come out of incompatibilities of life. The revolutionary thoughts of modernism and civilization of individual are imposed by him. A man cannot be isolated from the problems in his daily life. Agony, despair and sufferings are naturally bound to his life. His ideas are against Christianity and he imposes on the natural thoughts and passion of man and his living. Therefore, Nietzsche courageously forwards a step beyond the conventional notion of religion and freedom. A notion of “Will to Power” propels the inherent nature of living and hence he is strongly considered as an existentialist philosopher.

Next to Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a German Philosopher gives the notion of existentialism from his perspectives. His remarkable works are *Being in Time* (1927), *Kant and the problem of Metaphysics* (1929), *On the Essence of Truth* (1931), *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935), *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935), *Letter on “Humanism”* (1947), *What is Called Thinking?* (1954), *The Question of Technology* (1954), *Identity and Difference* (1957), *On the way to Language* (1959) and *On time and Being* (1961). He discusses about the struggle for authentic way of life. An individual should be closely connected to his self and he is conscious about his existence of life; in no way he/she should be influenced by the objective way of life. He coined the notion of “Daisen” which means “being there.” Heidigger’s philosophy of existence is affiliated to the metaphysical theory of Cartesian which states that a man identifies himself only in the state of anxiety and solitude.

The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) is one of the remarkable persons of existentialism. Sartre is slightly different from Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger; unlike them he projects the freedom in different form. “Life has no meaning a priori... It is up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing but the meaning that you choose.” (Sartre)

When an individual consciously seeks for a freedom, indirectly he has an impact of family, society, religion, culture, political, social and economic forms of his life. Actually these impacts seems to be authentic than inauthentic freedom. Despite having all these bonds, one should search for the freedom in his natural life than forcibly imposing himself to the bonds of society, culture, family, religion, political and economic factor. Sartre’s major works are *Nausea* (1938), *Intimacy* (1939), *Being and Nothingness* (1943), *The Age of Reason* (1945), *Troubled Sleep* (1949) and *Dialectic Reason* (1960).

I have crossed the seas, I have left cities behind me, and I have followed the source of rivers towards their source or plunged into forests, always making for other cities. I have had women, I have fought with men; and I could never turn back any more than a record can spin in reverse. And all that was leading me where? To this very moment... (Sartre)

The Nobel Prize winner Albert Camus (1930-1960), a French philosopher, is closely associated with Jean-Paul Sartre. He talks about the behaviour of mankind and especially when he is an atheist. He represents the absurdity and revolt in his perspective unlike in the traditional sense of Kierkegaard, Sartre and Heidegger. The revolt is not portrayed as terrorism or egoism but it is purely adorned with resistance of human beings with regard to psychological manipulation. He delineates with the historical thoughts, events, images and the dramatical approach rather than speaking the philosophical thoughts directly. He gives less importance to existence and meaning of life unlike other existentialist writers. Despite writing the novels, short stories, essays and dramas he is originally identified as a philosopher. All his works in one way or the other are connected to the philosophical ideas related to human nature and individualism. His remarkable novels *The Stranger* (1942), *The Plague* (1947), *The Fall* (1956) gained applause and he is identified as an existential writer. *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), *The Rebel* (1951) are philosophical essays, his collection of short stories *Exile and the Kingdom* (1957), autobiographical novel *The First Man* (1995) and dramatic works *Caligula* (1938), *The Misunderstanding* (1944), *The State of Siege* (1948), *The Just Assassins* (1949) are his popular works based on existential ideas.

Despite not being an existentialist Dostoevsky's works are fully adorned with existentialist ideas. Dostoevsky gives importance to freedom rather than happiness. Based on the ideology of Marxism, communists tried to eradicate pain and sufferings of the world but Dostoevsky is totally against this principle and he says that pain and sufferings are the necessary elements of human life and provides way to salvation. Dostoevsky and Sartre's ideas are similar in regard to freedom of an individual. Dostoevsky argues that all of a sudden man does not find meaning to his life. It is a static and ongoing process, which means that he gradually finds meaning through his experience. Dostoevsky's popular work *Notes from the Underground* (1864) is considered to be the first novel based on the existential views. His other notable works are *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1868) and *The Possessed* (1872). Most of his novels have an impact on religion and he focuses more on Christian existentialism.

A French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir delineates with existentialism and feminism. She focused more on women's perspective on existentialism. A freedom of thought and authentic life is recognized by women after a continuous suppression from the patriarchal world. This is a new movement which gives hands to the rise of

feminism as well as existentialism in a different way. Her famous works *The Second Sex*, *Ethics of Ambiguity* shows the concept of existentialism in the modern way.

In American Literature the works such as *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Death in the Afternoon* by Ernest Hemingway, *An American Dream* by Norman Mailer deals with the theme of existentialist thoughts. In British Literature Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* gained fame for existential philosophy. This play shows the religious impact and absurdity through the characters Vladimir and Estrogen. In India the theory of existentialism in literature is influenced by social, cultural, historical and textual context. R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*, depicts the emptiness in relationship and the protagonist seeks the meaningful life. Anita Desai's novel portrays the psychological and material conflicts in human beings and her novel *Cry the Peacock* depicts suicide which is a main theme of existentialism. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* shows the spiritual emptiness in the novel. This proves that Existentialism in one way or the other has deeply rooted in literature right from the earlier history to the contemporary age both consciously and unconsciously.

Existentialist writers are of two kinds (i.e) they are atheist and theist. Though Soren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Heidegger, and Nietzsche are atheist, yet Dostoevsky is slightly different from them and concentrated on religion. "The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays." (Kierkegaard).

The theory of existentialism has both positive and negative extremes. The individual possess freedom, passion and authentic way of living is a positive impact. On the contrary, it also leads to individualism, subjectivity and self-centered person which are not a quality of a good human being. Existentialism has been present in the earlier history and many other philosophers followed the idea existentialism unknowingly. There is no separate writer called existentialist because they are generally specified as philosophers and thus they followed existentialist ideas indirectly.

Existence is the right of human existence. Though it became popular in the contemporary era on the basis of modernism, it has been already used by the ancient philosophers. It gives more importance to passion, feeling, love, and understanding of life. It is not the philosophy of untruth or idealism. It deals with the practical and rationalistic views of human life and hence it is closely associated with human thoughts and ideas.

When the idea of existentialism is practiced in the society there is a probability of lovable, understanding and authentic way of living of the people. By this attitude man will be exposed to be sociable and helpful to others. Thus existentialism in the modern era paves the way for the new relationships and new thoughts to the society. In addition to this, it deals with the practical situation of the people and exposes the agony, disparity, absurdity of life, angst in human world. In spite of

these complications it is a challenge to the mankind to project his authenticity, meaningful and passionate life.

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