

THE CONCEPT OF EXISTENTIALISM, ITS CHARACTERISTICS

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Abstract

This article analyzes the socio-philosophical views on Existence: the idea that a person remains at his own discretion, that only he decides what to do and is responsible for his actions, and that each person's existence is unique.

Keywords: Person, existence, worldview, development, society, independent thought, freedom of will, self-awareness, existential approaches.

Introduction

As an intellectual movement that exploded onto the scene in France in the mid-twentieth century, “existentialism” is often seen as a historical event that emerged against the backdrop of World War II, the Nazi death camps, and the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all of which created the conditions for what has been called the “existentialist moment” (Baert 2015), in which an entire generation was forced to confront the human condition and its anxieties such as death, freedom, and meaninglessness.

Although the most famous voices of this movement are French, notably Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, as well as compatriots such as Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the conceptual foundations of the movement were laid much earlier. In the 19th century, pioneers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, and in the 20th century, German philosophers Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Karl Jaspers, as well as prominent Spanish intellectuals José Ortega y Gasset and Miguel de Unamuno. The main ideas are also reflected in major literary works. In addition to the plays, stories, and novels of French figures such as Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus, there were the works of Parisian writers such as Jean Genet and André Gide, Russian novelists such as Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky, Norwegian writers such as Henrik Ibsen and Knut Hamsun, and German-language iconoclasts such as Franz Kafka and Rainer Maria Rilke. The movement even found expression in the works of American writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, and the “lost generation” of mid-century “beaten-up” authors such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs, as well as Norman Mailer, who declared himself an “American existentialist” (Kotkin 2003, 185).

What distinguishes existentialism from other movements in Western intellectual history is that it extends far beyond the literary and academic worlds. Its ideas are reflected in the films of Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean-Luc Goddard, Akira Kurosawa, and Terrence Malick. Its mood is expressed in the paintings of Edvard Munch, Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, Paul Cézanne, and Edward Hopper, and in the distorted forms of sculptor Alberto Giacometti. Its emphasis on the struggle for freedom and self-creation informed the radical and emancipatory politics of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, as well as the writings of black intellectuals such as Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and W.E.B. Du Bois. Its relationship



between faith and freedom and the incomprehensibility of God shaped theological debates through the lectures and writings of Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Martin Buber, among others. With its emphasis on the deep analysis of anxiety and the importance of self-awareness, the movement greatly influenced the development of humanistic and existential approaches to psychotherapy, including those of R.D. Laing, Rollo May, R.D. Viktor Frankl, and Irvin Yalom. With these broad and diverse incarnations, it is difficult to explain what the term "existentialism" means. The word, first coined by Marcel in 1943, is certainly not a reference to a coherent system or philosophical school[1]. Indeed, the main contributors are anything but systematic and have a wide range of views, and of these, only Sartre and Beauvoir identified themselves as "existentialists." When we examine its representative thinkers, we find secular and religious existentialists, philosophers who embrace the concept of radical freedom, and others who reject it. There are those who see our relationships with others as largely about conflict and self-deception, while others recognize the capacity for unconditional love and interdependence. Given these conflicting themes and the lack of a unifying doctrine, it is possible to discern a set of overlapping ideas that bind the movement together.

Nihilism: The emergence of existentialism as an intellectual movement was influenced by the rise of nihilism in Europe in the late 19th century, as the pre-modern religious worldview was replaced by an increasingly secular and scientific one. This historical transition led to the loss of a transcendent moral foundation and contributed to the intensification of the experiences characteristic of modernity: anxiety, alienation, boredom, and meaninglessness. Existence precedes essence: Existentialists posit the self not as a substance or something (or "essence"), but as an existing activity or way of being. We create who we are as our lives unfold. This means that our essence is not given in advance; we exist contingently and are tasked with creating ourselves through our choices and actions[2].

Freedom: Existentialists agree that what distinguishes our existence from other beings is that we are self-aware and exist for ourselves, that is, we are free and responsible for who we are and what we do. This does not mean that we are completely indeterminate, but rather that we are always above or beyond ourselves because of our ability to interpret and give meaning to what limits or defines us.

Authenticity: Existentialists criticize our ingrained tendency to conform to the norms and expectations of the public world, as it prevents us from being authentic or true to ourselves. Authentic life is a life that is willing to break with tradition and social conventions and boldly affirms the freedom and contingency of our situation. In general, it refers to a life lived with a sense of urgency and commitment, based on meaningful projects that are uniquely meaningful to each of us.

Ethics: Although they reject moral absolutes and universalizing ideas about right behavior, existentialism should not be dismissed as promoting moral nihilism. For the existentialist, a moral or praiseworthy life is possible. This is when we recognize and own our freedom, take full responsibility for our choices, and act in a way that helps others exercise their freedom. Through these teachings, existence can be analyzed more clearly. Nihilism and the Crisis of Modernity. In the Stoic and Epicurean philosophies of antiquity, in the struggle against sin and lust in the Confessions of St. Augustine, in the intimate reflections on death and its meaning, we can find the first glimpses of what might be called the "existential attitude" (Solomon 2005). In the essays



of Michel de Montaigne, the confrontation with life and the "terrible silence". In the cosmos of Blaise Pascal's *Pensees*. However, it was not until the 19th century that ideas began to coalesce into a genuine intellectual movement. By this time, an increasingly secular and scientific worldview was emerging, and the traditional religious framework that had given life a sense of moral direction and cohesion up until the present day began to crumble. Without a north star of moral absolutes to guide us, the modern subject is abandoned and lost, as Nietzsche wrote, "as if passing through an infinite nothingness"[3]. But it was the rise of modern science and its coldly mechanical view of the world as an insignificant collection of objects in causal interaction that contributed to the anxiety and apathy of the modern era. The rise of Protestantism also played a significant role. Rejecting the hierarchical authority of the church, this new form of Christianity emphasized subjective interiority and created a unique social configuration based on the principles of individuality, freedom, and self-reliance.

The result was the loss of the sense of community and belonging that had been based on the close-knit social bonds of traditional society. The Protestant shift, in turn, contributed to a sense of isolation, a perception of public life as a fundamentally unreal and corrupt domain, and a strengthening of the Christian perspective ("hatred of the world") (Aho 2020; Guignon 2004; Taylor 1989). These historical developments were accompanied by social changes associated with the Industrial Revolution and the formation of the modern state. With the new mechanized working conditions and bureaucratic forms of governance, an increasingly impersonal and alienating social order was established. When Ortega y Gasset introduced his concept of the "mass man," he captured the automation and soulless conformism of the machine age, where everyone "feels like everyone else and yet does not care" (1930 [1993, 15]). In the concepts of the "mass" (Kierkegaard), the "herd" (Nietzsche), and the "They" (Heidegger), existentialists strongly criticized the flattened and systematic ways of being that characterize mass society. The novels and stories of Dostoevsky, Camus, and Kafka, on the other hand, reflect the bourgeois emptiness and boredom of the ruling class, the paranoia and distrust that arise when life is regulated and controlled by faceless officials. These social changes created conditions for nihilism, where modern humanity suddenly became lost and confused, not knowing which path to take or where to look for a stable and lasting sense of truth and meaning. The condition of nihilism includes an astonishing recognition that there is no common cause, order, or purpose for our existence, that all of this is fundamentally meaningless and absurd. Beginning with Plato, Western philosophy prioritized a methodology based on the viewpoint of rational separation and objectivity to achieve truths that are usually unchanging and eternal. By putting into practice what Merleau-Ponty has insultingly called "thinking at height" (1964 [1968], 73), the philosopher adopts a unique and impersonal, "God's gaze" or "looking from nowhere" perspective on the unexpected states of our feelings, our embodiment, or the misconceptions of our time and place. Thus, the philosopher can comprehend the "truth" behind the stream of "appearances," the essential and eternal nature of things (*sub specie aeternitatis*) "from the point of view of eternity." Existentialism proposes a categorical rejection of this view, since we cannot look at the human condition in isolation, from a third-person perspective, since we are already thrown into a self-interpreting event or existing activity, an activity that is always embodied in itself, felt and historically located[4]. Thus, existence is usually understood not only through an inappropriate theory, but also through a careful analysis of first-person experience, the specific,



bodily, and blood characteristics of everyday life, the feelings, relationships, and obligations that we make ourselves. This is a philosophy that begins from the perspective of the individual who deals with life and opposes what existence is given. Subjective truth the existentialist critique of theoretical separation was founded by Kierkegaard, whose hatred was directed primarily at G.V.F.Hegel, a philosopher who adopted the "perspective of eternity" for the construction of a metaphysical system that provides a complete knowledge of reality. While Kierkegaard has a different and panoptic point of view, Hegel's system always encompasses a deep personal project of being human and the specific needs and concerns of the existing individual. According to him, "it makes the subject accidental and thereby turns existence into something indifferent, something lost" (1846 [1941, 173]). In response, Kierkegaard changed the traditional orientation that favored objectivity, and when it came to the question of existence, his subjective truth "is the highest attainable truth" (1846 [1941, 182]). This means that the abstract truths of philosophical separation are always subordinate to the concrete truths of the existing personality. "The real subject," writes Kierkegaard, "is not a cognitive subject... the real subject is a morally existing subject" (1846 [1941, 281]). And subjective reality cannot be logically justified or explained; it stems from the individual's existing obligations, influences, and needs. Therefore, it does not reveal timeless and objective truths; it reveals "the truth that is true for me"[5]. For Kierkegaard, living with this truth always brings a sense of anxiety and confusion, since it is objectively unclear; it has no logical basis, and no one else can understand or connect it. This is a perceptible, not a known, truth.

In this sense, the existing individual "discovers what thought does not think" (Kierkegaard 1844 [1936, 29]). However, giving preference to conditional and illogical realities of existence does not mean that Kierkegaard is promoting the position of "irrationalism" He, on the contrary, argues that the point of view of rational separation cannot help us to enter into self-determining commitments and projects that are important for an existing person. The truths of flesh and blood cannot be reduced to a systematic explanation, as such truths do not provide us with objective knowledge. On the contrary, they illuminated the passionate and urgent feeling of how we should live our lives. They say to the individual: "I don't need to know what I should do" (Kierkegaard, 1835 [1959, 44]). Perspectivism- Nietzsche repeats Kierkegaard's erroneous ideas about methodological separation and philosophical systems, but he puts forward a pragmatic and forward-looking account of truth. He argues that philosophers do not discover objective truths through independent thinking, as claims of truth are always formed and internalized within specific socio-historical contexts. For Nietzsche, truths are understood as the best social structures; they are created or invented by a historical people and endure only when they are socially useful. According to Nietzsche, truths are historically passed down through generations, perceived as uncritical "facts." But from the perspective of perspective, "facts are nothing, only interpretations exist. The world has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings" (Nietzsche 1901 [1968], §481). Nietzsche's genealogy History of Western philosophy How truths are mainly invented.

"Only through forgetting," he writes, "can a person achieve the level of imagining themselves to possess "truth" (Nietzsche 1889a [1990a], §93). This means that people are already attached to socially constructed perspectives, from which they cannot or cannot be separated. Thus, existence is "living in its own promising forms and only in them." "We cannot see our own angle"



(Nietzsche 1887 [1974], §374). There is no aperspective "truth." The epistemological difference between "appearance" and "truth" is a pseudo-problem, which is always parasitic in the promising forms in which we live. Nietzsche emphasizes the presence of a psychological impulse in our general belief in objective truth. It protects us from the terrible randomness and variability of existence. Nietzsche understands that humans are fragile and frightening beings, and belief in truth, even if it is an illusion, has social and pragmatic utility, providing a measure of consistency and reliability. We need these truths for psychological protection, to help overcome another disorderly and dangerous creature. Thus, "truth" is "an error that cannot exist without certain types of life." (Nietzsche 1901 [1968], §493).

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