



The Problem Of Existence In Existential Philosophy Of Kierkegaard And Sartre

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ABSTRACT

Existentialism may be considered one of the influential trends of contemporary philosophy. This trend was developed by various thinkers. It mainly emphasizes on the concrete human being with all possibilities that one can become something as per his/her wishes. The existence of human being cannot be defined from a single aspect. In discussing the issue of existence we have to discuss the other aspects of man like, freedom, choice, consciousness, nothingness etc. In this paper an attempt will be made to discuss human existence from the theistic and atheistic approach represented by Kierkegaard and Sartre respectively.

KEY WORDS: Existentialism, existence, freedom, choice, nothingness, being

Existentialism is considered as one of the influential trends of contemporary philosophy. The rise of contemporary philosophy is related to various standpoints, methods, views and world views. These views mutually- counteract and interact sometimes, almost to a baffling degree. It can be stated here that modern philosophy encounters and occasionally acknowledges more in substance than in style – the impact of the post modern thinking. The term ‘existentialism’ is used not only in philosophy but it is used widely in art and literature also. It is a well known term to all. Existentialism becomes popular in the twentieth century from 1930 onwards. It is said that the Norwegian literature critic and poet Johan Sebastian Cammermeyer Welhaven first introduced the term ‘existential’. Later on, Kierkegaard adopted this term. However, the term ‘existentialism’ is difficult to define. According to Warnock M, ‘We may be content to use the term ‘Existentialism’ to cover a kind of philosophical activity which flourished on the Continent especially in the 1940’s and 1950’s, which can be shown to have certain common interests, common ancestry and common presuppositions, and which is now sufficiently clearly a matter of history to make a general survey worth undertaking’ (1). Existentialism states that ‘philosophy is the realization of one’s existence and the expression of the problems and the possibilities through which an individual has to live his life’ (2). Importance given to individual existence is one of the basic features of existentialism. Existentialism is mainly concerned with the human existence. It generally studies the concrete existence of man. It considers that man is a free and self transcending being. It gives importance to human conditions and situations where one has to exist. Existentialism considers that man’s existence is different from

other beings. It discusses some real problems of man what he/she faces in existential situations. Existentialism gives importance to self realization of each man along with his/her motives, feelings, hopes, possibilities and freedom. It prefers personal commitments. It attempts to offer 'a particularly poignant exposition of the predicament of modern man' (3).

Kierkegaard is recognized 'as the spiritual father of modern existentialist philosophy' (4). Existentialism has been further developed in the hands of Nietzsche, Marcel, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Kafka, Ponty, Unamuno etc. Each of these thinkers has his own existentialism. In this paper an attempt is made to discuss the problem of existence from the standpoint of Kierkegaard and Sartre.

The term 'existence' is derived from the Latin word 'existere' which means 'to appear', 'to become' and 'to be'. Literally it means – 'to stand out'. Kierkegaard believes that 'existence' is not a predicate. It is an individuated way of being. It is an activity which gives meaning and purpose to human life. Existentialists admitted that the meaning of human being is related to man's subjective existence. Yet, it is quite difficult to point out what the term 'existence' exactly means. For some philosophers it is a kind of inner attitude.

For Kierkegaard existence is not a subject of demonstration. Man's existence and subjectivity are interrelated. It can be said that man's biological activities, social actions, habitual actions, passion – all give rise to man's existence. Every man has unique existence which is expressed by his/her own freedom, despair and commitment. To continue this existence man strives infinitely. For Kierkegaard man strives to realize authentic self and existence. He says, 'An existing individual is constantly in process of becoming...constantly reproduces this existential situation in his thoughts, and translates all his thinking into terms of process' (5). Kierkegaard considers that 'to exist as a man is to desire, to fear, to be, if not slave of passions, at least passionate' (6). The man who has existence is the master of his/her own life and creates his/her own values. Thus, man's essence is acquired by means of existence. For Kierkegaard choice, freedom, responsibility, despair, guilt etc. are the parts of man's existence.

On the other hand, Sartre declares that 'Existence everywhere, to infinity, superfluous, always and everywhere; existence – which is never limited by anything but existence' (7). For Sartre man's existence is related to man's experience, perception, emotion and various aspects of mental life. For him 'naturally there was *no reason* for it to exist, that flowing larva. But *it was not possible* for it not to exist. That was unthinkable: in order to imagine nothingness, you had to be there already, right in the world, with your eyes wide open and alive...' (8). He again says, 'Every existent is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance' (9). Man is always becoming and creates new situations. Sartre says that 'to do something is to create existence' (10). Man's existence is determined through his/her becoming. Man is not complete and always searches for its completeness which is practically unattainable. Man feels nothingness, lack of something at every moment. Man's consciousness reminds him/her the difference with other beings. Thus, man's existence is created with new possibilities. For Sartre only conscious being can have possibilities. If man were not conscious being, then he/she could not realize freedom. Freedom implies that man has possibilities. These possibilities can be actualized by exercising freedom. Thus, consciousness refers to freedom. For Sartre consciousness and freedom are identical. Conscious man wants to fill up the gap between him/her present being and the future ideal being what he/she intends to be. This ideal is realized in freedom. On the other hand, free activities of man refer that man is a conscious being. He says, 'man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world-and de-fines himself afterwards' (11). Sartre says that man is 'what it is not and not being what it is' (12). Again, he says, 'He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes himself' (13). As man is absolutely free, one can be anything what wishes to be. Human existence is related to man's wishes.

Sartre, therefore, declares that 'existence precedes essence' or 'existence is prior to essence'. Sartre says, 'Freedom is existence, and in it existence precedes essence' (14). In other words, man exists as freedom. For Sartre man is freedom. Man necessarily has the consciousness of freedom. Man is responsible for his/her existence. In *Nausea* Sartre states,

'I exist by what I think...and I cannot prevent myself from thinking. At this very moment – this is terrible – if I exist, *it is because* I hate existing. It is I, *it is I* who pull myself from the nothingness to which I aspire: hatred and disgust for existence are just so many ways of *making me* exist, of thrusting me into existence. Thoughts are born behind me like a feeling of giddiness, I can feel them being born behind my head... If I give way, they'll come here in front, between my eyes - and I go on giving way, the thought grows and grows and here it is, huge, filling me completely and renewing my existence' (15).

Kierkegaard states that man's existence can be understood in terms of possibilities. Kierkegaard develops his idea of existential possibility from the Aristotelian idea of 'potentiality' and Socratic idea of 'inwardness'. Kierkegaard thinks that possibility is prior to actuality in the dialectic development of the individual. He tries to describe man's existence as a paradoxical synthesis of necessity and possibility. As man is always becoming, from the standpoint of the future, man's present being is not exhaustive of what he is. For Kierkegaard 'an individual 'is' what he is (what he has been up to the present and what he is not present) and is also what he is not yet, but what he is becoming' (16).

Kierkegaard wants to say that though man's existence is the sum total of the possibilities, a man cannot admit with certainty that among the possibilities that is going to be actualized, is the highest possibility for man. Man has only subjective certainty. It is the result of the 'freedom of possibility'. However, Kierkegaard desires to analyze the nature of one's own possibilities which are received from lived experiences. According to Kierkegaard the ultimate potentiality for which man focuses is the potentiality for the realization of authentic self.

Kierkegaard admits that there are three spheres of life – aesthetic, ethical and religious. These three spheres of existence emerge from a corresponding state of consciousness that determines the particular views of man. The movement of man from one to the other sphere depends on the conscious choice of the individual man. Kierkegaard's discussion on the different spheres of life allows us to step inside and see various modes of existence.

In the aesthetic sphere man accepts passively the life that is given to him/her by random choices. It determines one's nationality, country of birth, race, religion, family and social identity. In this sphere man lives in 'immediacy'. In this sphere importance is given to beauty, health and wealth. Many people adopt this sphere to escape from the difficulties of life. Kierkegaard states that the approach to this sphere of existence is tragic. When man gives importance to these worldly values, he/she is surely destined for a life of despair, because some day his/her health, beauty, wealth will decay. However, Kierkegaard admits 'refined aesthete' who consciously chooses aesthetic way of life. He says that in aesthetic existence one calculates how to enjoy life. But he/she unreflectively accepts the fundamental given conditions of life which determines his/her existence. So, in the aesthetic sphere man does not accept responsibility. Man simply considers that his/her existence is an unavoidable consequence. Thus, man's existence leads to fatalism. The motive of man's life is restricted to enjoy pleasure. According to Kierkegaard this motive of life shares common view with hedonism. As the importance is given to external pleasure, in this sphere man cannot develop potential humanity. But the refined aesthete can develop sensual pleasure which leads to boredom. Kierkegaard considers boredom as the root of evil. To avoid it man can apply the 'rotation method'. According to this method one can create his/her own personalized world of pleasure. For this one has to remain as a spectator and manipulator of life. It will allow man to remain free and to escape

from boredom. Unfortunately, this approach fails and the refined aesthete reaches the state of despair. Thus, man realizes that his/her inner spirit craves for a more meaningful existence. The next level of human existence is the ethical life. This kind of transition 'requires the subordination of one's worldly ambitions and desires to *inner standards* guided by a strong sense of *commitment to one's moral duty*' (17).

In the ethical sphere man tries to realize ideal self. In this sphere importance is given to inner world than outer world. Man exercises freedom and accepts responsibility for his/her actions and future happenings. Thus, the meaning of the existence of a man is determined by free choices. But ethical life needs some universal values like justice, love and peace. It helps man to free him/herself from the impulse to satisfy him/her immediate interests. Man thus, realizes his/her capacity of becoming. Ethical man becomes an active participant of society. The ethical person accepts responsibility, performs duties, he/she has honour to friendship, family and career. However, Kierkegaard considers that the purely ethical approach of life does not always work. Human life is full of ambiguity and paradoxes. Nobody can state with certainty that whatever has done enough for ethical requirement. Thus, ethical man has to live, sometimes, in self deception. On the other hand, if we submit us to the universal values then we will lose individual responsibility.

Kierkegaard says that the failure of ethical existence leads man to 'ethical despair'. So, individual man places him/her in religious existence. In this sphere man realizes the impossibility of fulfilling the ideals of ethical existence. In the religious sphere man accepts the revelation of God with faith. Religious man can understand that worldly values cannot be our life's purpose. Man has to put it in the right place. The religious man lives in truth which rationally cannot be demonstrated. In this sphere man lives in faith. Religious life is the synthesis of the finite and the infinite. Here, man realizes that he/she cannot fulfill the infinite requirements.

Kierkegaard admits that man's existence can be established in between ethical and religious existence. So, Kierkegaard gives importance to ethico-religious existence. He believes that the character of man is formed within this sphere. Every man can seek to realize his/her existence in it. But denial for the potentiality of the authentic existence may be called what Sartre calls as 'bad faith' or 'self deception'.

Sartre states that though man is absolutely free, sometimes man pretends and acts to show that he/she is not free at all. This attitude of man attempting to hide freedom in him/herself is called 'bad faith'. It is the result of freedom and imagination what a man likes to be. Sartre defines 'bad faith' as 'a certain art of form-ing contradictory concepts which unite in themselves both an idea and negation of that idea...self deception seeks to affirm their identity while reserving their differences'(18). Bad faith 'consists in seeking what one is, and denying it; asserting that one is what one is not' (19). Sartre says that as we are free, we are responsible for every deed. But we sometimes refuse to take burden of our work. Instead of taking responsibility we attempt to find excuses, reasons, causes and forces to show that we are compelled to act in a certain manner. In such situation we develop tricks and devices to evading it. Bad faith is a deliberate avoiding of freedom and pretending to be determined. Sartre states two types of bad faith – becoming thing like, that we act in such a way that we have no choice, and playing a part assigned by others.

According to Kierkegaard, man's original possibility is related to one's own potentiality-for becoming a self. In this context he states about self reflective knowledge to discover many possibilities. On the other hand, Sartre also states about the reflective consciousness of man. In reflective consciousness one is aware of his/her consciousness. This kind of consciousness 'directed towards consciousness' (20). Due to this kind of consciousness man discovers lack of something in him/her. For Sartre man is lacking something for something. This lack of something in man refers to possibilities. Thus, 'whatever my possible may be, its opposite is equally possible' (21). It can be

said that the possibilities are the foundation of human being. The possible is a kind of lack which man makes it to be. It is a kind of option upon man. It is an escape from itself towards something. Sartre says that there is no end of possibilities till death.

Kierkegaard believes that man can project unlimited number of possibilities. If there is God, everything is possible. He says, 'The decisive thing is that for God all things are possible' (22). So, man can imagine infinite number of possibilities as it is related to God. Kierkegaard wants to say that 'Every possibility is either a hypothetical or conceptual possibility or an imagined possibility before it is realized and appropriated' (23). On the other hand, for Sartre man's possibilities are related to the concrete situation, in the concrete world. Man's possibility is not related to the abstract or conceptual possibility. He says, '...the possible cannot be reduced to a subjective reality. Neither is it prior to the real or to the true. It is a concrete property of already existing realities' (24). Again, he says, '...the possible cones into the world through human reality' (25). But Kierkegaard's explanation of existential possibility cannot be reduced to empirical possibility. He says, 'When I think that I will do this or that, this thought is yet not an action, and ...it is qualitatively distinct from action; nevertheless, it is a possibility in which the interest of action and of reality already reflects itself...The real action is not the external act, but an internal decision in which the individual puts an end to the mere possibility and identifies himself with the content of his thought in order to exist in it' (26).

However, Kierkegaard states that existential possibilities have relevance to the self being of man, to the development of character and personal being. These are the 'spiritual' possibilities. This leads to the sphere of choices. The transition from possibility to actuality is made possible by reasoned choices. The goal of ethical existence, for Kierkegaard is not a theoretical life, but its goal is 'an activity in which the 'ideality' of the self is realized...in the concrete finite existence of the individual' (27). On the other hand, Sartre says that man desires to be a complete being or being-in-itself. The ultimate aim of this projection is that man wants to be its own foundation. This ideal is compared to become God. He says, '...man is the being whose project is to be God' (28). But during life time nobody can achieve this goal of completeness. Yet, man knowingly tries all his/her best to attain it. So, Sartre says that 'Man is a useless passion'(29).

Both Kierkegaard and Sartre consider death as a unique event of man's life. It is closely related to human existence and possibilities. They have agreed that death is the end of future possibilities. Death brings completeness to one's existence. For Sartre only after death we can explain one's life what as he/she was. After death, all possibilities of man are shut down. Though we cannot avoid death, we can face it. Man can create him/her to challenge death. Yet, death is one of the significant parts of human existence. Kierkegaard shares the same view of death. For him death may occur at any moment. Death signifies that all our possibilities are based upon unstable foundations. However, consciousness of death inspires and motivates a religious state of consciousness. It makes realization that each moment may be the last moment of life. Thus, death teaches us to value each day of our life. It teaches us to appreciate every moment of our existence which is based on freedom of choice. Kierkegaard believes that 'the thought of death gives the earnest person the right momentum in life and the right goal towards which he directs his momentum' (30). In the light of Christian belief Kierkegaard states that death is the end of one's finite existence, but it is not a final end. In death all individuals become equal. Kierkegaard says that by surrendering personal desire and ambitions to God, man can give up all attachment to worldly existence. Thus, the fear of death plays vital role in the creation of human existence.

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