

ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



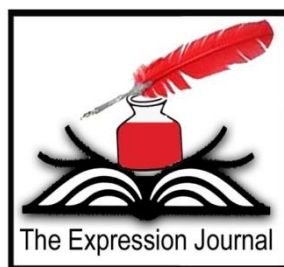
Impact Factor 6.4

Vol. 11 Issue 4 August 2025

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com



Exploring the Concept of Human Existence in Select Existentialist Philosophers: An Overview

Md. Aslam Parwez

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Jaggiwan College, Arrah, VKSU, Arrah

Bhojpur, Bihar, India

.....

Abstract

The concept of human existence is the central subject for existentialist thinkers and has been a primary focus of analysis for philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. The meaning of human existence has been broadly explored and defined by keywords such as freedom, choice, and responsibility. However, it also incorporates different concepts like faith and anxiety which allow for the possibility of finding meaning amidst nihilism, absurdity, and the search for purpose in life. Other thinkers view the search for meaning as a matter of will to power, which they see as an authentic way of recognizing oneself and one's existence. Existentialism also reflects on the finitude and temporality of human life. Sartre's declaration that "existence precedes essence" emphasizes radical freedom and the burden of responsibility in shaping one's own identity. Camus, in contrast, highlighted the absurd condition of existence, arguing that meaning isn't pre-given but must be confronted through revolt and creative affirmation. This paper primarily focuses on these pioneers of existentialist philosophy, who characterized existentialism not as a fixed state but as a project of being, defined by individual freedom and the choice to create meaning. It is through these foundational ideas that existentialism offers a powerful framework for understanding the human condition as a dynamic and self-created journey, rather than a predetermined path. This philosophical lens challenges us to embrace the inherent angst of life and find our own unique purpose in a seemingly meaningless universe.

Keywords

Human Existence Freedom, Choice, Responsibility, Faith, Being and Nothingness, Existentialism, Absurdity, Anxiety, Temporality, Nihilism.

.....



Exploring the Concept of Human Existence in Select Existentialist Philosophers: An Overview

Md. Aslam Parwez

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Jaggiwan College, Arrah, VKSU, Arrah

Bhojpur, Bihar, India

.....

After the World War, man has been feeling more uprooted, insecure and alienated from society. Horrifying memory of the two World Wars and the resultant wide spread destruction, lead to the evolution of Existentialism. Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasises individual existence, freedom, and choice. The philosophy begins from man and his existence as a subject and not an object. Man is thrown into an absurd world where he cannot find any purpose in his life. According to this, human being defines their own meaning in life and tries to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. It proposes that man is full of anxiety and despair with no meaning in his life. The existentialists think passionately about man's existence and treat him not only as a thinking subject but an initiator of action and a centre of feeling. Roquetin in Sartre's novel Nausea (1966) is an example of his being a centre of feeling as he discovers that existence cannot be reduced into essence. We can see in this following line "To exist is simply to be there; what exists appears, lets itself be encountered, but you can never deduce it." (Sartre 188) It focuses on the question of human existence, and the feeling that our existence is purposeless. It holds the opinion that, there is no God or any other transcendent force, so, the only way to counter this nothingness (and hence to find meaning in life) is by embracing existence.

Existentialism came into existence as a result of two cultural forces. The first was the demolishment of traditional culture by the progress made in science and bureaucracy, which inspired early nineteenth century existential authors and thinkers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky. The second force was the socio-cultural destruction of human existence in the Holocaust. It inspired twentieth century thinkers such as Sartre, Camus and the writers of the Frankfurt School. Existentialists like Kierkegaard and Sartre talk about individuals and their subjectivity. Sartre defines subjectivism in two senses: "Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject to choose what he will be and, on the other, man's inability to transcend. The fundamental meaning of existentialism resides in the later." (Sartre 23)

The term existentialism is associated with the problems such as absurdity of human existence, meaninglessness of human existence, irrational rationality, etc. This philosophy mainly emphasises that working of the world are inherently meaningless, but human being always make a constant struggle to create meaning out of this meaninglessness through the choice of freedom and weight of

responsibility. This results in the divorce between man and his life or actor and his setting. Often, Existentialism as a movement is used to describe those who refuse to belong to any school of thought, repudiating of the adequacy of any body of beliefs or systems, claiming them to be superficial, academic and remote from life. Although it has much in common with Nihilism, and Absurdity, Existentialism is more a reaction against traditional philosophies, such as Rationalism. It asserts that people actually make decisions based on what has meaning to them, rather than what is rational. It interprets the human existence in the world, and stresses its concreteness and its problematic temperament. Existentialists believe that adopting a social or political cause is one of the ways of giving purpose to life. Existentialism provides a moving account of the agony of being thrown in the world.

A Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard developed his own existentialist philosophy where he confronted the crisis which human faces with the absurd and this is seen as the origin of absurdism. As a belief system, absurdism was the result of European existentialist movement. It was the same time when Camus after rejecting certain aspects of philosophical line of thought came up with his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus”. The terrible suspicion haunts the absurd man. Camus in one of his work says “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest – whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories – comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer” (Camus 11) Kierkegaard and Camus give three solutions for resolving the dilemma of human in search for meaning in a meaningless world. They discussed it in their works *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), and “The Myth of Sisyphus” (1942).

1. At first they both accepted the word suicide as solution to this situation but later both of them rejected and Camus said that the act of ending one’s life or existence will become even more absurd.
2. Religion and spirituality was the other solution according to Kierkegaard. But, in spite of being religious Kierkegaard said faith in God to be absurd because it is impossible to know God or understand His purpose. Still this belief in a higher power can help us escape from the absurd and make us free. Camus called it a “philosophical suicide” because it was the act of believing in something which is unprovable.
3. Acceptance of the absurd or the lack of meaning, and living on in spite of it.

Nihilism comes from a Latin word ‘nihil’ meaning ‘nothing’. Nihilism is a philosophy which tells that all values are baseless. It stresses on the idea that reality alone is important. According to a nihilist, all the beliefs, values, faith, morality, etc. are just the human projections. It says that there is no any ultimate value because there is no any grounding of this ultimate value (which gives meaning to all the life or existence) as God is dead.

1. Soren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855)

Soren Aabye Kierkegaard is the official founder of existentialism who in the nineteenth century posed the fundamental existential question ‘what it means to exist’? He is mostly known as the father of existentialism. He was born on 5th May 1813, in Copenhagen and died in 1855. His life was a tragic failure. He was physically deformed because he was having a hunchback and psychologically he was an introvert and solitary. It is commonly interpreted that his thought is direct product of his physical abnormalities and his psychological crippling. Kierkegaardian philosophy is fundamentally an indirect antithesis to Hegelianism. ‘Objectivity’ and ‘Determinism’ are the main element in Hegel’s idealism that is attacked by Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard emphasised the freedom and the necessity of the individual choice, which is in complete opposition to determinism. His main purpose behind this was to make us aware of our

original subjectivity so that we may live authentically, without the support of any antecedent social and intellectual guides.

One can only live authentically when he will bear the sole responsibility for his decision rather he is guided by the idea of determinism or authoritative tradition. This condition of becoming aware of one's own authenticity constitutes a part of self knowledge. Some of the major works by Kierkegaard are: *Either/Or* (1843), *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) and *Edifying Discourses*. In *Either/Or*, he focuses on the task and rewards of adopting an ethical in preference to a consciously hedonistic or 'aesthetic' way of life. *The Sickness Unto Death* offers a systematic psychopathology of progressively deliberate renunciations of a Christian ideal of human fulfilment. Kierkegaard also published in his own name a large number of "Edifying Discourses" dedicated to 'that individual'. The world is indebted for his writings on the existential themes of existence and the idea of the 'authenticated' man and he is rewarded by the title of being 'the Father of Existentialism' on the ground of his achievements.

2. Friedrich William Nietzsche (1844-1900)

Friedrich William Nietzsche, the German philosopher, is the next important figure in the existentialist philosophy. His important works are *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and, *Twilight of the Idols* (1889). In the last years of his life his most aggressive atheistic book was published namely "The Antichrist" (1895). The key concept of Nietzsche's existentialism can be seen in his first book *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche in his protest wants a complete renunciation and revelation of existing values. He not only wants a full acceptance of life as essentially tragic but he also wants a full acceptance of life as essentially joyful and he demands an unbounded, ever striving self expression. Nietzsche in his book *The Gay Science* declared that "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" (181). We have killed God with reason, rationalistic philosophies, and rationalistic science. We have killed him with our pretensions to objective truth and since God is dead, religion is also dead. So, each of us is on our own. Nietzsche predicted that 'a new episode in the history is to begin'. He imagined of seeing the beginning of a 'more manly, a warlike age, where man would become "Superman" who will carry heroism and strong character into pursuit of knowledge. In *Will to Power* he argues that it is the will neither simply to self preservation nor it is the effort to experience pleasure and avoid pain. From ethical perspective, pain and suffering are the unavoidable element of one's life. According to Nietzsche, an appropriate judgement value to the subject matter is dependent on the strong action of the individual; it is the outcome of suffering and relentless action. But he also emphasises that pleasure seekers or hedonist are not able to give subtle judgement. Thus, Nietzsche contributed to existentialism by introducing his 'concept of the death of God' (his atheism) which made man responsible for his own destiny, 'the Superman' (his ethical relativism), and 'the Will to Power'.

3. Karl Theodor Jaspers (1883-1969)

He was the professor of philosophy at Heidelberg University and he also made important contributions to pathological and psychiatric research. His works include *Psychology of World Views* (1919), *Man in the Modern Age* (1931), *Philosophie* (1932), *Reason and Existenz* (1935), *Philosophy of Existence* (1938) and, *The Question of German Guilt* (1946). Jasper's philosophical idea was influenced by the idea of Kant and Hegel but it had great impact of Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's philosophy. According to him, the genuine philosophy must originate from one's individual existence which would address itself to other individuals in order to help them gain a true understanding of their existence. His philosophy "can be best characterised as a disciplined and organised description of the critical fringes of human existence,

such as impenetrable limits, unmitigated freedom, and the experienced indefinite expanse of space, time and consciousness” (Koestenbaum 254). Jaspers introduced two states of being: the *Dasein* and *Existenz*. *Dasein* is existence in its most minimal sense which concerns with objectivity and science whereas *Existenz* is the real and valuable in man. It refers to the richness of authentic being. “Jaspers defines it as the authentic self and as the experience of total freedom, of infinite possibility and of loneliness” (Shashi 125).

Jaspers like Kierkegaard also gives importance to individual’s freedom that constitutes choice, awareness and selfhood. Jaspers himself claimed, that ‘Decision makes *Existenz* real’ which means that a person is the product of the different choices and decisions he/she has taken in his/her life. To choose means to be free and man’s freedom is his being. Sometimes he might supersede the moral freedom that contains the problem of moral responsibility. The other important concept of Jaspers’ philosophy is the “encompassing”. The notion of transcendence aptly describes the reality of human existence. It speaks about a person’s own journey to create himself/herself. Transcendence is about a struggle in actual life. It is the ultimate experienceable horizon. For Jaspers, transcendence is man’s spiritual transcendence to be made possible through participation in the life of the world. He attempted to advance personal existence into experience of transcendence.

Transcendence is about a struggle in actual life that man has to face and undergo in order to form himself/herself as a person. It is about human growing. Transcendence also seems to suggest a particular state or being that is beyond our perception, that goes beyond our grasp and comprehension which at the same time is unknown. Both senses of transcending, as the Divine and as an act of growing, are descriptions of a human person’s journey towards his/her Being. Jasper calls his own philosophy as *Existenz* philosophy and he basically speaks about the ‘human person’s journey towards his/her own transcendence’. His “*Existenz* philosophie” is his unique contribution to existentialism. Thus, Jaspers major contributions to the development of existentialism include his concept of two states of being that is “*Dasein*” and “*Existenz*”, “Boundary Situations”, “Transcendence”, and “Encompassing”.

4. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)

Heidegger was a German philosopher who denied of being an existentialist because he unlike other existentialist was not only concerned with the problem of personal existence but with the problem of being in general. He is seen as the most influential philosopher in the field of existentialism because he shared the themes, ideas, and language of this subject. His some of the important works are *Being and 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). His work *On Time and Being* united two philosophical approaches– the existentialism of Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl in an enquiry into being, specifically, human being. For Heidegger there is only one basic question in philosophy: the question of being. In his philosophy, the question of being can be answered only by the active participation of the conscious mind. So to understand the phenomenology of the world he termed this as ‘*Dasein*’ which means ‘being there’ in German. Only *Dasein* can be said to have or not to have meaning; hence Being is meaningful solely in terms of human existence. Man exists through his choices and his being, therefore is entirely indeterminate. Other things like trees, rocks and animals and angels and God are also there but they lack aware consciousness of their existence unlike human being. To exist or to become an authentic being means to be concerned about oneself (one’s freedom, decision, responsibility,

and action). True being is self being, involving not only consciousness, but responsibility and free decision as well. Temporality is an important characteristic of Dasein as man is not only his present but he is also his past as well as future. "Being human is always a process of becoming oneself, living into possibilities, into one's future" (Sheehan 357).

Man continually transcends towards future and so his being itself is temporal. Death is an important factor in Heidegger's philosophy because for him there is no reality of an individual before birth and after death. He asks us to accept this fact and he says that one who accepts this reality of death will be freed from the fear of the inevitable death and the imaginary hell. Only then a person can practice his free will, choose his action, his existence and ultimately his essence. He also argues that being of an individual means being-in-the-world which suggests that the very constitution of the individual is constituted by relation of self with others and with the world. Existentialism is a philosophic doctrine of beliefs pertaining to absolute freedom of choice. It emphasizes that the universe is absurd based on the phenomena of anxiety and alienation. It is a philosophy of crisis, encompassing a group of attitudes present in philosophical, religious, and artistic thought and expressions that came around the World War II. The roots of existential thought can be traced throughout the history of philosophy and literature. In modern expression, it had its beginning in the writing of the nineteenth century Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard. The German Philosopher Martin Heidegger is important in its formulation and the French novelist philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Camus have done the most to give its present form and popularity. Existentialism has found art and literature to be unusually effective methods of expression evidenced in the novels of Franz Kafka, Dostoyevsky and Camus. In the plays and novels of Sartre, it has found its most persuasive media. The nucleus of Kierkegaard's philosophy is that reality is individual and its characteristic feature is subjectivity of truth. Kierkegaard directs the humanity to liberate themselves from the illusion of objectivity, a tendency that compel a man to accept the general rules that determine his behaviour and life, and move inward by engaging his mental concentration on individuality. His idea of subjectivity developed is based upon Socrates' dictum 'Know Thyself'. Karl Jaspers' philosophy emphasises upon inner action of man:— "Existentialism is to catch sight of reality at its origin and to grasp it through the way in which I, in thought, deal with myself – in inner action" (Jasper 3-4).

Heidegger states that man enjoys limited freedom conditioned by fate. He is the maker of his own life. He is responsible for what he is and what he will be. There are unlimited choice and decisions for him to make his life authentic but he is full of uncertainties and that limits his action and thought. The responsibility of choosing, deciding and acting makes him sad and provide him with a capacity to negate all the limitations. Thereby he finds a threat to his existence. Almost all the existentialists show a concern with the problem of man, his existence, freedom and choice and responsibility in every field. They state existence precedes essence. Man first exists and then he looks at the world, contemplates and acts as an individual. He is a clean slate when he comes into the world and during the course of his life he defines himself. Existentialists give much importance to the facts of life like sin, anguish, anxiety, despair, dread, death, choice, and freedom. The existentialists strongly believe that by bringing man back to his existence, by restoring his freedom, and by giving him chance to choose and decide like a responsible individual the maladies of modern society can be cured. Sartre encourages man to confront brute reality without recourse to illusion, provided by reason and thereby enter into authentic existence. Sartre, the most famous representative of existentialism, propounds in his philosophy that human being is the maker of his destiny and is condemned to make his own decision. He daringly asserts, "there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he

conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after the thrust forward existence"(Sartre 22).

Sartre logically makes his remark very much assertive towards the individual's existence as prior to the individual essence in his masterpiece text *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (1956) as "I exist as the Right to be what I am" (99). In this text Sartre's motif behind writing the book was to demonstrate the existence of free will. He criticises rationalism, idealism, and empiricism, and discusses his own theory of consciousness, being, and phenomena. He gives importance to phenomenology as he quotes Nietzsche's idea called "the illusion of worlds behind the scene" (Sartre 46). He also describes the nature of two types of being based on the nature of phenomena as being-in-itself and being-for-itself. He further discusses in this the origin of negation, bad faith, nothingness, etc. He had a fundamental purpose in this concept to demonstrate that free will exists. He holds pessimistic mind-set towards human existence. According to him the presence of human being is irrational and absurd. He distinguishes human beings from other animals based on human freedom. He asserts that thrown into this world, the human being is condemned to be free. He is solely responsible for what he is, his guilt and actions. Choice and freedom are the things that he must find and make. Sartre believes that mankind defines itself through the act of living. In other words, first a man or woman exists and then the individual endeavours to change his or her essence. He repeatedly says in his literature that life has no meaning and the search for meaning in existentialism is the search for self. It is the doctrine that states that existence takes precedence over essence and holds that man is totally free and responsible for his acts. This responsibility is the source of dread and anguish that encompasses mankind.

Works Cited

- Al-Sarayreh, Dafer Y. *Absurdity, Alienation, and Death: Existential Affinities in the Fiction of William Faulkner, Albert Camus, and Naguib Mahfouz*. 1998. Ohio University, unpublished dissertation.
- Brod, Max, editor. *Briefe*. Schocken Books, 1985.
- . *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*. Schocken Books, 1949.
- Burnham, Douglas, and George Panpandreopoulos. "Existentialism." *Internet Encyclopaedias of Philosophy*. 10 Oct. 2023, www.iep.utm.edu/existent/.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Vintage Books, Penguin, 1955.
- . *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Penguin, 2000.
- . *The Rebel*. Translated by Anthony Bower, Penguin Modern Classics, 1971.
- . *The Stranger*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1977.
- Day, P. "A Comparative Study of Crime and Punishment in Ousmane Sembène's *Le Docker Noir* and Albert Camus's *L'Etranger*." *Africa Today*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2006.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Penguin, 1968.
- Janouch, Gustave. *Conversations with Kafka*. Translated by Faramarz Behzad, London, 1971.
- Jaspers, Karl. *Philosophy of Existence*. Translated by Poch and F. Gorbin, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971.
- Laing, R. D. *The Divided Self*. Cox & Wyman Ltd, 1965.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 1974.
- . *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Arnold Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, Random House, 1968.
- Pollman, Leo. *Sartre and Camus: Literature of Existence*. Fredrick Ungar Publishing Co.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Philosophical Library, 1956.

The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 6.4)

www.expressionjournal.com ISSN: 2395-4132

- . *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Yale University Press, 2007.
- . *Nausea*. Translated by Robert Baldick, Penguin, 1966.
- . "An Explication of The stranger." *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Germaine Brée, Prentice Hall, 1962, pp. 129-140.
- . *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. Translated by Bernard Frechtman, The Wisdom Library, 1949.
- . "An Explication of The stranger." *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Germaine Brée, Prentice Hall, 1962.