

## **Existentialism and Its Exponents: An Exposition**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores existentialism as a modern philosophical movement. It emerged strongly after World War II. The movement reflects human disillusionment, alienation, and the search for meaning in a chaotic world. It emphasizes individual freedom and personal responsibility. There is a need for authentic existence while maintaining a balance between individuality and social harmony. The study examines key existential themes, such as loneliness, alienation, absurdity, and self-realization. It highlights how individuals confront a meaningless universe and create their own values.

The work discusses major existential thinkers, including Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus, outlining their contributions to both theistic and atheistic existentialism. Kierkegaard focuses on faith and self-knowledge; Nietzsche emphasizes the will to power and the creation of values; Sartre advocates human freedom in a godless universe; and Camus presents the concept of revolt against the absurd. Ultimately, existentialism is presented as a philosophy centered on the individual's subjective experience, encouraging self-discovery, resilience, and meaningful engagement with society despite life's inherent uncertainties.

**Key Words:** Disillusionment, Lacunae, Social Values, Hostile Universe, Authentic Existence, Alienation, Loneliness, Amorphous Existence, Nihilism, Anomie, Aggressive Society, Hollowness, Atheism, Existential Hero, Revolt,

## **Introduction**

Existentialism is a modern philosophical movement. It focuses on the individual's experience, freedom, and search for meaning in an often confusing and uncertain world. After the Second World War, it gained prominence as people questioned traditional beliefs and values amid widespread destruction, disillusionment, and a moral crisis. In such times, existentialism emerged as a way to understand human existence and the challenges of living authentically.

At its core, existentialism emphasizes individuality, personal choice, and responsibility. It argues that human beings are not defined by predetermined rules or systems. Instead, people create their own identity through their actions and decisions. This philosophy highlights the importance of self-awareness and freedom of thought. It also stresses the courage to live according to one's own values, even in the face of uncertainty or social pressure.

Existentialist thinkers explore themes such as alienation, loneliness, despair, and the search for purpose. They believe that although life may seem meaningless at times, it is the individual's responsibility to create meaning. This meaning comes through personal experience and commitment. By focusing on human existence and subjective reality, existentialism continues to influence both philosophy and literature. It offers deep insights into the nature of human life and society.

## **Elucidation of the Topic**

Existentialism is a recent philosophical movement dealing with man's disillusionment and despair. "It flourished on the continent, especially after World War II."<sup>1</sup> The demands of the nineteenth century could be met only in the twentieth century. The desire for materialistic, moralistic, and religious creeds was satisfied, but even they felt a void within. What was it that could fill this lacuna in the men? Absolute individuality was not the solution because minimum association was imperative for survival. Then, how best to live one's life and express one's individuality even amidst a group of people? An individual should freely project his thoughts and ideals and live by them, which is the crux of existentialism. Despite all negations, moral, physical, financial, or social, one ought to stand up for one's priorities and survive in peace. The satiation of his soul's desire is of prime importance, but we should also live in social harmony and elevate social values to create a better universe.

Certain existential themes have penetrated beyond the philosophic world to a wide circle of novel readers and playgoers. It is true that existentialist thinkers and

writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus attracted the attention of serious students of philosophy and literature because they offered new ways of life and thought to a world almost torn apart by the chaotic conditions generated by the two world wars. Man was made to realize his immense potentialities of greatness and power amidst the chaos and confusion of a hostile universe. While it is a modern philosophical movement, its roots can be traced to the works of past philosophers and literary writers.

The basic idea behind existentialism is that man conceives himself to be uniquely individual and an autonomous agent transcending his environment, and a subjective creator committed to a personal perception of reality. Such a man is a contingent force and an intensely personal participant in the world about him. The idea was expressed from time to time through different revolts against traditional philosophy. Authentic existence and self-knowledge constitute the basis of existentialism. Socrates's clarion call 'know thyself throbs with existentialist sentiments. Man is described as a frail need, to whom the hostile universe remains incomprehensible, who fails to establish any meaningful connection with the infinite immensity of space. The idea of the space between man and the universe receives an elaborate treatment in Sartre's hands and develops into the concept of our existential void. But, according to Pascal, man 'infinitely transcends man' and asserts his existence for 'essence' in life, and, when the desire is left unfulfilled, he is condemned to a lonely life of terror and anguish.

Alienation was the natural outcome of man's inability to adjust to society and was a force to be contended with. Yet existentialism, to an individual, consequences apart, ought to contribute to society despite all differences. Loneliness reflected a rejection of the person by himself and by society, denoting an amorphous existence. On the other hand, solitude was considered an inherent need for certain individuals to relax and be one with nature. Existential problems surfaced when men sensed a void in life itself. This meaninglessness had to be overcome, and the human condition was salvaged from nihilism and elevated to a regenerated, meaningful existence.

Anomie has been defined as a state of alienation and the disorientation of a personality resulting in behavior that is contrary to social norms. Such complications stem from an individual's inability to access the social infrastructure. This should be promulgated by him by cultivating certain characteristics that shape his perception, or by making a general adjustment or transformation, while simultaneously not deserting or devaluing his values in life.

An introspective individual is generally on the lookout for solitude. His personal philosophic treatises are an interior monologue, cherished in one's own company, deadening our awareness of life around us. He equates life to a mystery, conjuring improbable sensations at every turn. Existentialism concerns human values, attitudes, and relationships that determine man's role in society and the freedom or bondage he is subjected to. If he is under undue pressure, he will have to adopt survival strategies to save himself from an aggressive society. There will be an extension of personality, the development of a new dimension of the individual, which will override these critical situations. The hollowness that man feels in the depths of his soul is existential in nature, and this must be countered to bring the individual into the mainstream of life, rescuing him from perennial isolation.

Ultimately, on perusing through a number of books, we conclude that existentialism is concerned with the fundamental situation of the individual and his position in society. Man's views are determined by his circumstances and lifestyle, and finally, despite varying anomalies, it is the subjectivity of man that is of prime consideration, rejecting systematization in any form. Existentialism advocates socialism among individuals, fostering self-improvement while contributing to humanity's common good.

Soren Kierkegaard is like an existentialist 'tree.' Writers like Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jaspers, Dostoevsky, Marcel, and others who followed him are its branches.

Kierkegaard, the Christian existentialist, recommends to man the way to authenticity and to genuine personal existence, which involves him in nothing less than a leap across a bottomless chasm. Man acquires self-knowledge through an awareness of the conditions around him. But self-knowledge is possible when man expresses faith in God, starting from doubt and ends with Faith in God. 'This lack of faith is what Kierkegaard calls 'alienation, " which causes sickness or despair in man. Truth, religion, and man's solemn responsibility for the amelioration of society are the three basic concepts of his philosophy. If every individual attains self-knowledge and decides to transform himself, they automatically would be contributing toward social regeneration, since every individual is a part and parcel of society.

Friedrich Nietzsche, who mounted a direct revolt against the state, orthodox religions, and the philosophical system, argued that man must exercise his free will in creating values for his own evolution. Nietzsche declares through Zarathustra that for the modern man, "God is dead"<sup>2</sup>. This is an interesting theme

upon which the atheistic existentialists have concentrated to convey the most awful fact: that the individual is thrown into a dreadful situation.

Nietzsche recognizes man's potentiality of becoming God and tells the old Pope in *'Out of Service* that God, who is dead, should be completely abandoned. "Away with such a God: Better to have to God, better to set up destiny on one's own account, better to be a fool, better to be God oneself."<sup>3</sup> . His philosophical theory was based on the assertion of the self, the 'will to power,' and the doctrine of the superman, that man can become superman without the assistance of God.

Existentialism found its highest expression in the hands of Jean-Paul Sartre, a unique exponent of atheistic existentialism. He says that the world is radically hostile, and man cannot exist on any rational basis. His literary and philosophical works reveal the existential situation and depict its essential hopelessness. But his message is not entirely negative. A man can, with a measure of relief, confront naked reality without recourse to illusions provided by reason and thereby enter into 'authentic' existence. Sartre shares the view of human will emphasized by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Sartre also believes in the supremacy of man's existence in a godless universe. Sartre is of the opinion that, "if God does not exist, there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality"<sup>4</sup>. He goes on to declare that man's immense potentiality, and in order to be, he has to exercise his 'will' and to project his being for essence in life. Sartre adds, "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself"<sup>5</sup>.

Existentialism is treated on the highest level of atheism, as Albert Camus's works reflect. Camus has shown the individual at the threshold of revolt, which begins when he faces the utter unreasonableness of existence and the obscurity of life. In a world characterized by a lack of significance and coherence, the revolting existential hero, rejecting the absolute values of romanticism, must create his own personal values.

"Meaning has to be created, not found, and it has to be created by the individual out of the actual experience of revolt"<sup>6</sup>. This kind of revolt is termed as the "absolute revolt"<sup>7</sup> by Camus, "who believes that revolt is one of the essential dimensions of mankind"<sup>8</sup> . Man, after having experienced the absurdity of life, faces the problems of suicide or murder. Le Mythe de Sisyphe is Camus's philosophical treatise, which begins with a discussion of suicide and ends with the theme of revolt.

Though its central message is that truth against the obscurity of existence consists, not in suicide, but in continuing to live.

### **Conclusion**

Existentialism is a significant modern philosophy that places the individual at the center of human experience. It emerged strongly in response to the chaos, destruction, and uncertainty of the modern world, especially after the World Wars. The philosophy emphasizes freedom, responsibility, individuality, and the search for meaning in life. Existentialist thinkers believe that human beings must create their own values and identity through personal choices and actions rather than depending entirely on social, religious, or traditional systems.

The ideas of major existential philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus reveal different approaches to understanding human existence, freedom, alienation, faith, revolt, and authenticity. While Kierkegaard stresses faith and self-realization, Nietzsche advocates the creation of personal values, Sartre highlights human freedom and responsibility, and Camus presents revolt against the absurdity of life as a meaningful response to existence.

Ultimately, existentialism teaches that although life may appear uncertain, lonely, or meaningless, individuals possess the power to shape their own destiny through conscious choices and authentic living. It encourages self-awareness, courage, and meaningful participation in society. Therefore, existentialism remains an influential philosophy that continues to inspire literature, philosophy, and human thought by emphasizing the dignity, freedom, and potential of human existence.

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