

Existentialism S A Philosophy of Life and Education

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to survey the historical development of existentialist philosophy, meaning of existence, its philosophical premises and perspectives. Further, this also deals with implications of existentialism in selection of aim of education, organization of curriculum, role of teachers and students and school organization.

Keywords: Existence, nihilistic, being-in-itself, being-for-itself, individuality

Introduction:

The roots of existentialism can be traced as far back as the Sophists, the paid teachers of ancient Greece specified in teaching morals. Although differences are found between existentialism and phenomenology, the two have much in common. Phenomenology deals with the phenomena of consciousness from the first-person point of view and studies the experience of things as they present themselves to the observer. Existentialism, on the other hand, examines the existence and the role the individual plays in terms of his or her feelings, thoughts, and responsibilities. Although have in common and are compatible in principle, hence many philosophers refer to themselves as existentialist-phenomenologist. Sartre was identified as a prominent person of existentialism. As these philosophies have been used in the philosophy of education, they have been so closely allied that some advocates refer to their work as existentialist-phenomenology of education.

Because existentialism is a protest type of philosophy, many of its adherents have not been overly concerned with the methodology and systematic exposition. However, some philosophers have seen existentialism as providing a rigorous methodology for describing lived experience, as well as an interpretative approach to individual experience.

Jean-Paul Sartre was a prolific writer and produced major works in many different genres, including a novel, plays, and formal philosophical treatises. He offers a defence of some of his ideas and, in the course of his defence, presents some central themes of his philosophical views. He claims that existentialism is humanistic and provides insight into human freedom and human responsibility. Although Sartre did not write directly about education, his views have been applied to learning, curriculum, and the ethical aspects of education. Existentialism offers an array of interpretations because it is spread across so many different cultures. Its seemingly tortured and mixed varieties could be a result of nature.

In the education perspective, existentialist believes that most philosophies of the past have asked out people to think deeply about thoughts and abstractions that had little or no relationship to everyday life. Scholastic philosophy, in which thinkers debated such questions as how many angels could sit on ahead of a pin. The answers to such metaphysical question provided nothing except perhaps some psychological satisfaction at winning a debate through argumentation. Existentialists believe that in their philosophy, the individual is drawn in as a participant, ready to be filled with knowledge based on his ideas. Sartre believes that “existence precedes essence” he added that if people have created ideas and practices that are harmful, then they could also create ideas and practices that are beneficial. Existentialist pose that an individual is always in transition, so that the moment people believe they know themselves is probably the moment to begin the examination all over again. They also believe that a good education emphasize individuality. It attempts to assist each of us is seeing ourselves with our fears, frustrations, and hope.

For educators, existentialist want change in attitude about education. Instead of seeing it as something a learner is filled with, measures against, or fitted into, they suggest that learners first be looked as individuals and that they be allowed to take a positive role in the shaping of their education and life. For the existentialist, no two children are alike. They differ in background,

personality traits, interests, and desires they have acquired. Also, they wanted to see an end to the manipulation of the learners with teachers controlling learners along predetermined behavioral path.

Existential theories are widely used in education. According to existentialists, a good education emphasizes individuality. The first step in any education then is to understand ourselves. Making existential methods in the classroom requires a balance in which both teachers and learners as human beings preserve its identity. As Sarte believed that “Existence precedes essence” because the individual human is important as the creator of ideas. Hence, here are some aims of education in this philosophy, to wit:

a) Fostering Unique Qualities and Cultivating Individualities. Existentialists believe that every individual is unique and education must cater to the individual differences. Therefore, the objective of education is to enable every individual to develop his unique qualities, to harness his potentialities and cultivate his individualities.

b) Development of Complete Man. Existentialists want that education helps a man to be a complete man in his natural environment. For the development of complete man, freedom is the essential requirement. Freedom is given to a man with a view to realizing his self and understanding his “being”.

c) Becoming of a Human Person. According to existentialists, one of the most important aims of education is the becoming of a human person as one who lives and make decisions about what the learners will do and be. ‘Knowing’ in the sense of knowing oneself, social relationships and biological relationships development are all parts of this becoming.

iv. Making Better Choices. As choice determines perfectibility and happiness, education should train man to make better choices. As such, aim of education is to enable man to hammer out better choices in one’s life.

d) Leading a Good life. Good life, according to existentialists, is authentic life which is possible when an individual starts realizing his individuality and makes his/her own independent choices. Therefore, education aims at teaching him to lead a good life with its noble obligations an summit.

e) Fostering of Values. According to existentialist, the aim of education should be developing a scale of supreme values consistent with his freedom. The learners must develop a commitment to these values and act for them.

In this philosophy, the role of a teacher is to initiates the act of education and influences the lives of his learners throughout his own life. The teacher is very active and welcomes challenges to his ideas from the learners. As Kneller quoted “ If there is anything that the existentialist teacher can do for his learners, it is to bring them to a more critical analysis and understanding of the meaning and purpose of existence, so that with time men may become more than a mere repetitive creature perpetuating the bestial habits of his similar ancestors”.

OVERVIEW:

In this paper an attempt has been made to illustrate the nature of existentialism as a philosophy of life and education. The ideas of the leading existentialists have been briefly stated. It is followed by a short explanation of the chief characteristics of existentialist thought. Discussion on existentialist world view, conception of knowledge, truth and values is also given. Under the title educational implications, the definition of education, aims of education, curriculum, methods of teaching, concept of discipline and concept of pupil-teacher relationships have been made. At end, a brief summary is also provided to enable you to have quick grasp of the main ideas high lighted in the lesson.

OBJECTIVES:

After having gone through this lesson, you should be able to:

1. Write the name of the originator of contemporary existentialist thought.

2. Narrate briefly the ideas of leading existentialists like Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, F.W. Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers and Jean Paul Sartre.
3. Write a brief note on the essential Characteristics of existential thought.
4. Explain in your own words the existential world view.
5. Discuss subjectively the concept of knowledge and truth as perceived by existential thinkers.
6. Analyze passionately the nature of values professed by the existentialist.
7. Work out the existential scheme of education:
8. Write the definition of education as formulated by existentialists.
9. Spell out the goals of education, educational objectives and tasks in consonance with existentialist thinking;
10. Write few lines on the curriculum of a free existentialist:
11. Write a note on existentialist pedagogy;
12. Elaborate the nature of discipline and ideas about student-teacher relationship in the light of existentialist thinking.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that represents a revolt against the methods and outlooks of traditional Western Philosophy. This philosophical movement includes philosophers, theologians, writers and artists. Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, theists and atheists. These thinkers, having varying shades of views, agree on a few central doctrines. Existentialists represent an attitude and outlook that emphasizes human existence – that is the distinctive qualities of individual persons – rather than the man in the abstract or nature and the world in general.

VIEWS OF SOME LEADING EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHERS:

In order to grasp the meaning of existentialism as a philosophical movement, it would be pertinent for us to familiarize ourselves with the viewpoints of some leading existential thinkers.

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855):

As a Danish philosopher Kierkegaard was the originator of existentialism movement in the West. To him, individuals alone are real he puts questions like what is the meaning of existence? Why is individual after all? The answers to such questions can only be found by peeping inward and finding one's subjective self.

Critical dogmas, dilemmas, paradoxes of individual life are not solved by intellectual explorations of facts nor by laws of the thinking about them. Their resolutions emerge through conflicts in soul, anxieties, agonies and perilous adventures of faith into unknown territories.

Reality of everyman's existence proceeds from inwardness of man, not from any thing that mind can codify because objective knowledge is always at one or more times, remote from truth. "Truth", said Kierkegaard, 'is subjectivity'. Because, it was in the subjective sphere in the inward relation of one-self to oneself and to the subjectivity of other that one becomes aware of God and of a relation to him.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976):

As the pioneer of movement of phenomenology, he says, "there is nothing beyond man's self, that can solve the problems of man's existence. To him, there are three aspects of being. i.e. activity, existentiality, forfeiture.

By factivity he meant we found ourselves, thrown into an historical situation and a world which we cannot choose. World exists mainly to be at hand for us, to be 'handled', it is stuff for our use. Depicting existentiality, he maintains, as the world is stuff at hand we can make the situation in which we find ourselves, entirely our own can make it our own design. To describe forfeiture, he says, 'we are part of the crowd and tend to betray ourselves by living in the same superficial ways as everybody else'.

F.W. Nietzsche (1844-1900):

He was against objectified or technified knowledge. He laid emphasis on passion, anxiety and decision of individual man and had a sense of tragic predicament of humanity in modern civilization. He said, 'nothing is true', so that, therefore, everything is permeated. Nothing is true because it all depends on the needs of the species, there is not constant, absolute truth, but merely changing physiological requirements. Truth is that kind of error without which a certain species of living beings could not exist. He said, 'the world of appearances is the only world, the true world the true world is a lie added to it. 'Regarding the concept of god, he said, 'God is dead'. We have killed God. God has died. Belief in him is a nonsensical superstition. It refers to loss of faith.

Karl Jaspers (1833-1969):

He says technical civilization is a social disease. In his work, 'Philosophy is for Everyman' he writes, the human beings we are seems self-evident and yet is the most enigmatic thing among all other things in the world. Wherever we may come from, we are, we exist. We find ourselves in the world with other human beings. Man is alone in the measureless, speechless world. He alone endows the muteness of things with speech. Man in his essence, has been defined as the organism that talks and thinks, as the organism that creates his own society in the form of city. Man cannot be conceived as a fixed quantity. The essence of man is in constant movement he cannot remain as he is. He finds himself continually changing his social condition. He is always being born under new conditions. Each time he is born, he is a new beginning.

All life is encompassed within birth and death. But only man knows it. Death faced everyone. Only knowledge of death makes it a reality for us. It becomes a stress situation. The answer to this situation has to be found in our existential awareness of our self. Fear of death is fear of nothingness, a groundless fear.

Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980):

His views, represent pessimistic views of man and society. He says we are born to perish but do not lose heart, triumph lies in starting some human project, inventing some purpose and these will render meaning to the world. Otherwise everything will become meaningless and purposeless. So authenticate your existence. Great majority of people never do it, because they are worshippers of idols, such as idols of humanity, idols of objectivity, idols of science. In the realm of value he is of the opinion that we should avoid unethical actions. Unethical action is the contradiction of the self by the self which results in 'Mauvaise foi' or guilt feeling or self deception.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EXISTENTIAL THOUGHT:

Existentialism is a movement of protest against the traditional philosophy and modern society which poses menace to turn the very existence of man into a tool or an object. It is a protest in the name of individuality, against the concept of reason. It revolts against the impersonal nature of the modern industrial or technological age, against scientism and positivism. It sounds a death knell to system building.

Existentialism diagnoses man's predicament. It is an attempt to describe man's personal existence and its conflicts, the origin of these conflicts and the anticipation of overcoming them. Existentialism believes in the primacy of existence. It emphasizes on the inner immediate experience of self awareness. The fundamental drive or urge is to exist and to be recognized as an individual. When man becomes so recognized, he gains a sense of meaning and significance in life. It seeks to justify man's existence that he is not a de-trop, not an excess, not a useless surplus in the world. His existence is not a change event, not an accident, not an error of some kind.

Existence precedes essence. Man first exists and only later on defines or conceptualizes himself. Here, existence implies a full, vital, self-conscious, responsible and growing life. Existentialists distinguish between what a thing is (essence) and that it is (existence). Man first is and then he asks himself, what he is.

Existentialism places emphasis on man's inner life and his immediate subjective awareness. Man's inner life with its moods, anxieties and decisions becomes the center of attention. Existentialism represents man's rebellion against all attempts to ignore or suppress the uniqueness of his subjective experience. It stresses man as pure subjectivity and not as a manifestation of a cosmic or life process. Subjectivity is here to be understood in its spontaneous, creative sense that man does not possess freedom, he is in his existence. And existence is interpreted as a peculiarly human mode of being.

To existentialists freedom and responsibility goes hand in hand. Freedom is not something to be proved or argued about, it's a reality to be experienced. Man has considerable freedom within his reach if he will but grasp it. Freedom is working out the demands of one's inner nature and expressing one's genuine or authentic self, it is facing choices, making decisions and accepting responsibility for them.

Existentialism highlights the facts of human weakness, "insecurity and limitations. They have been concerned with men's sense of anxiety, despair, dread and guilt, loneliness, human finitude and death. Unsure of his meaning and destiny man faces the future and ultimately death with understandable feeling of disquietude. What he dreads the most, perhaps is, the annihilation of his own existence. Existentialist finds the essence of his existence in the very tensions and contradictions which condition one's loneliness and anxiety. Anguish and melancholy lead to existential despair and the crises prepares man for the leap into authentic existence.

Thus, existentialism is an assertion of the significance of the self in the face of frustration and the impersonality of modern civilization.

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