

**TOPIC FOR- SEM- III ( PHIL-CC 10)**

**CONTEMPORARY WESTERN PHILOSOPHY**

BY- **DR. VIJETA SINGH**

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

P.G. DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

PATNA UNIVERSITY

## **Existentialism**

Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It is the view that humans define their own meaning in life, and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe.

This philosophical theory propounds that people are free agents who have control over their choices and actions. Existentialists believe that society should not restrict an individual's life or actions and that these restrictions inhibit free will and the development of that person's potential.

### **History**

Existentialism originated with the 19<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, but they did not use the term (existentialism) in their work. In the 1940s and 1950s, French existentialists such as Jean- Paul Sartre , Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir wrote scholarly and fictional works that popularized existential themes, such as dread, boredom, alienation, the absurd, freedom, commitment and nothingness. The first existentialist philosopher who adopted the term as a self-description was Sartre. Existentialism as a distinct philosophical and literary movement belongs to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but elements of existentialism can be found in the thought (and life) of Socrates, in the Bible, and in the work of many pre-modern philosophers and writers.

### **Noted Existentialists:**

- Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) Nationality Denmark
- Friedrich Nietzsche(1844-1900) Nationality Germany
- Paul Tillich(1886-1965) Nati...United States, Germany
- Martin Heidegger ( 1889-1976) Nati...Germany
- Simone de Beauvoir(1908-1986) Nati...France
- Albert Camus (1913-1960) Nati....France
- Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) Nati....France

## **What does it mean to exist ?**

- To have reason.
- Physical and mental awareness of your surroundings and choices.
- Participation in life through interaction with others.
- Understanding your personal nature.

### **According to existentialism:**

(1) Existence is always particular and individual—always my existence, your existence, his existence, her existence.

(2) Existence is primarily the problem of existence (i.e., of its mode of being); it is, therefore, also the investigation of the meaning of Being.

(3) That investigation is continually faced with diverse possibilities, from among which the existent (i.e., the human individual) must make a selection, to which he must then commit himself.

(4) Because those possibilities are constituted by the individual's relationships with things and with other humans, existence is always a being-in-the-world.

With respect to the first point, that existence is particular, existentialism is opposed to any doctrine that views human beings as the manifestation

of an absolute or of an infinite substance. It is thus opposed to most forms of idealism, such as those that stress Consciousness, Spirit, Reason or Ideal. Second, it is opposed to any doctrine that sees in human beings some given and complete reality that must be resolved into its elements in order to be known or contemplated. It is thus opposed to any form of objectivism or scientism, since those approaches stress the crass reality of external fact. Third, existentialism is opposed to any form of necessitarianism ; for existence is constituted by possibilities from among which the individual may choose and through which he can project himself. And, finally, with respect to the fourth point, existentialism is opposed to any solipsism (holding that I alone exist) or any epistemological idealism (holding that the objects of knowledge are mental).

### **Two Different Types of Existentialists:**

#### 1. Godly (Kierkegaard-Catholic; Tillich-Protestant)

- Believe God exists, but people are alienated from Him.
- Man is alienated from his God-like self, and the problem of his life is trying to close that gap.
- Freedom involves accepting the responsibility for choice and committing to the choice.

#### 2. Ungodly (Sartre and Camus)

- Do not believe God exists.

- Because there is no God to give purpose to the universe, each man must accept individual responsibility for his own becoming.
- In choosing for himself, he chooses for all man “ the image of man as he ought to be.” He has to make good choices that others could follow.

### **Major Themes:**

Because of the diversity of positions associated with existentialism, the term is impossible to define precisely. Certain themes common to virtually all existentialist writers can, however, be identified. The term itself suggests one major theme: the stress on concrete individual existence and, consequently, on subjectivity, individual freedom, and choice.

### **Existence Precedes Essence:**

“ People are born like a blank slate and create their essence or being through their unique experiences.”

Existentialism is defined by the slogan ‘Existence Precedes Essence’ this means;

- We have no predetermined nature or essence that controls what we are, what we do, or what is valuable for us.

- We are radically free to act independently of determination by outside influence.
- We create our own human nature through these free choices.
- We also create our values through these choices.

“We create our own nature” : We are thrown into existence first without a predetermined nature and only later do we construct our nature or essence through our actions.

### **Absurdity:**

Absurdism is the belief that nothing can explain or rationalize human existence. Humans exist in a meaningless, irrational universe and any search for order will bring them into direct conflict with this universe. There is no answer to Why am I ? Life is absurd and reason is useless in dealing with the depths of human life. Man seen in this light is full of contradictions. Man creates himself through the choices he makes and and thus takes responsibility.

### **Alienation or Estrangement:**

“We only exist right now, right here ”....Alienation from all other humans, from human institutions, from the past, from the future. The development of science has “ separated man from concrete earthly existence, and forced him to live at a high level of abstraction. We have collectivized individual man out of existence, driven God from the heavens or from the hearts of men . Man lives

in alienation from God, from nature, from other men, from his own true self.

### **Fear, Dread and Anxiety:**

Kierkegaard held that it is spiritually crucial to recognize that one experiences not only a fear of specific objects but also a feeling of general apprehension, which he called dread. Dread is a feeling of general apprehension to make a commitment to a personally valid way of life. He interpreted it as God's way of calling each individual to make a commitment to a personally valid way of life. The word anxiety (German Angst) has a similarly crucial role in the work of the 20<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Martin Heidegger; anxiety leads to the individual's confrontation with nothingness and with the impossibility of finding ultimate justification for the choices he or she must make. Anxiety stems from our understanding and recognition of the total freedom of choice that confronts us every moment, and the individual's confrontation with nothingness.

### **Encounter with Nothingness and Death:**

If man is alienated from nature, God, neighbour, and self, what is left? Death hangs over all of us. Our awareness of it can bring freedom or anguish. Nothingness is our inherent lack of a self. We

are in constant pursuit of a self. Nothingness is the creative well-spring from which all human possibilities can be realized.

### **Freedom: Choice and Commitment**

The most prominent theme in existentialist writing is that of choice. Humans have freedom to choose. Each individual makes choices that create his or her own nature. Because we choose, we must accept risk and responsibility for wherever our commitments take us. Existentialists have held that human beings do not have a fixed nature, or essence, as other animals own nature. In the formulation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, existence precedes essence. Choice is therefore central to humane existence, and it is inescapable; even the refusal to choose is a choice. Freedom of choice entails commitment and responsibility. Because individuals are free to choose their path. Jean-Paul-Sartre said “A human being is absolutely free and absolutely responsible. Anguish is the result”.

Thus the basic principle of existentialism is that ‘existence precedes essence’ for human beings. ‘Essence precedes existence’ for objects. Objects always have a definite purpose and this purpose is known prior to the creation of the object. On the other hand, humans are not born with a definite purpose.

**THANK YOU**