

The Enduring Relevance of Existentialism in the 21st Century

Introduction

Philosophy, the systematic inquiry into fundamental questions about existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind, and language, has shaped human thought for millennia. Among its diverse branches, existentialism, a philosophical movement that emphasizes individual freedom, responsibility, and the subjective experience of existence, continues to resonate profoundly in the 21st century. Emerging in the 19th and 20th centuries, existentialism challenged traditional philosophical frameworks by placing the individual at the center of inquiry. This paper explores the core tenets of existentialism and argues for its enduring relevance in a contemporary world characterized by rapid technological advancements, social fragmentation, and a pervasive sense of meaninglessness. We will examine how existentialist concepts such as freedom, authenticity, anxiety, and the encounter with the absurd provide a framework for navigating the complexities of modern life and fostering individual meaning-making in a world increasingly devoid of inherent purpose.

Chapter 1: Core Tenets of Existentialism: Freedom, Responsibility, and the Subjective Experience

Existentialism is not a monolithic doctrine but rather a collection of diverse philosophical perspectives united by a shared emphasis on the human condition. One of the central tenets of existentialism is the notion of radical freedom. Existentialist thinkers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, argue that humans are fundamentally free, meaning that we are not predetermined by nature, essence, or external forces. Sartre famously proclaimed that “existence precedes essence,” meaning that we are born into the world without a pre-defined purpose or nature. We are condemned to be free, forced to create our own meaning and values through our choices and actions.

This radical freedom is inextricably linked to responsibility. Because we are free to choose, we are also responsible for the consequences of our choices. Existentialists emphasize that we cannot evade responsibility by blaming external factors or appealing to deterministic explanations. We are the authors of our own lives and must own the choices we make, even when those choices lead to negative outcomes. As Dostoevsky put it, “If God does not exist, everything is permitted.” This statement highlights the daunting weight of responsibility that comes with the absence of a higher power to dictate moral codes.

Another crucial aspect of existentialism is its focus on the subjective experience of existence. Existentialists reject the notion of objective truth, arguing that reality is always filtered through the lens of individual perception. This emphasis on subjectivity leads to a deep concern with the emotions and experiences that define the human condition, such as anxiety, alienation, and the awareness of death. These experiences are not seen as pathologies to be overcome but as

fundamental aspects of what it means to be human.

Chapter 2: Existential Anxiety, the Absurd, and the Search for Meaning

The existentialist understanding of freedom and responsibility inevitably leads to the experience of anxiety. Existential anxiety, or *Angst*, arises from the awareness of our own finitude and the realization that we are ultimately responsible for creating our own values and meanings in a world that is inherently meaningless. As Søren Kierkegaard, a precursor to existentialism, argued, anxiety is the “dizziness of freedom,” the unsettling realization that we are free to choose but lack any external guide to tell us what to choose.

This anxiety is often intensified by the encounter with the absurd. The absurd, in existentialist terms, refers to the fundamental conflict between our innate desire for meaning and order and the apparent meaninglessness and chaos of the universe. Albert Camus explored this concept extensively in his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus,” where he depicts Sisyphus, condemned to eternally roll a boulder uphill only to have it roll back down, as an archetypal figure of the human condition. Camus argues that we must embrace the absurd and find meaning in our rebellion against it, even if that rebellion is ultimately futile.

In the face of anxiety and the absurd, existentialism offers a call to action: to embrace our freedom, confront our anxieties, and create our own meaning in a world devoid of inherent purpose. This search for meaning is not a search for some pre-existing answer but rather a process of self-creation. We define ourselves through our choices and actions, and in so doing, we create our own values and meanings. This emphasis on self-creation is what gives existentialism its profound relevance in a world where traditional sources of meaning, such as religion and social norms, are increasingly questioned or rejected.

Chapter 3: The Relevance of Existentialism in the 21st Century

In the 21st century, existentialism provides a valuable framework for navigating the challenges of a rapidly changing and increasingly complex world. The rise of technology, globalization, and social media has led to a sense of fragmentation and alienation, leaving many individuals feeling disconnected from traditional communities and institutions. In this context, the existentialist emphasis on individual freedom, responsibility, and the subjective experience can be empowering.

The technological advancements that define our era, while offering unprecedented opportunities, also raise profound ethical and existential questions. The proliferation of artificial intelligence, for example, challenges our understanding of what it means to be human and raises concerns about the potential displacement of human labor. Existentialism encourages us to confront these challenges by reflecting on our values and defining our own roles in a technologically driven world.

Moreover, the emphasis on authenticity, a key concept within existentialism, is

particularly relevant in an age of social media and performative self-presentation. Existentialists encourage us to be true to ourselves, to reject the pressure to conform to external expectations, and to embrace our individuality. This call to authenticity can be a powerful antidote to the pressures of social comparison and the pursuit of external validation that often characterize online interactions.

Finally, the existentialist focus on the awareness of death and the finitude of human existence can help us to appreciate the present moment and to live more intentionally. By confronting the inevitability of death, we can gain a clearer perspective on our priorities and make choices that align with our values. In a world that often prioritizes material possessions and fleeting pleasures, existentialism reminds us of the importance of living a meaningful and authentic life, even in the face of adversity.

Conclusion

Existentialism, with its emphasis on individual freedom, responsibility, and the subjective experience, remains a powerful and relevant philosophical framework for understanding the human condition in the 21st century. While the challenges of our time – technological advancements, social fragmentation, and a pervasive sense of meaninglessness – may seem daunting, existentialism offers a path towards self-discovery and the creation of individual meaning. By embracing our freedom, confronting our anxieties, and living authentically, we can navigate the complexities of modern life and find purpose in a world devoid of inherent meaning. The enduring relevance of existentialism lies in its capacity to empower individuals to take responsibility for their lives and to create their own values in the face of the absurd, ultimately fostering a more meaningful and authentic existence.

Sources:

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