
UNIT 2 EXISTENTIALISM

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to give a ‘General Introduction’ to existentialism. Study of the various existentialists has to be based on such an introduction, since it is intended to serve as a horizon for the particular thoughts of individual thinkers to be situated. A particular thought can be comprehended in its depth and width only in the light of its general background. In fact, what is vaguely and generally delineated in the ‘General Introduction’ takes different concrete shapes in the thoughts of different existentialists. Hence the ‘General Introduction to Existentialism’ and the ‘Deeper Study of Individual Existentialists’ complement each other: the former is given a *depth* in the latter, and the latter is given a *width* in the former. Besides, even when one is not able to make a study of the various existentialists, this ‘General Introduction’ can serve as a supplement, since it considers most of the existential themes.

In this unit we begin with an introduction on the meaning and definition of existentialism; it will be followed by a look into the general background (what gave rise to existentialism), and sources (the tracing of the gradual growth of existentialism). It is important to look into its various characteristics in order to show the specificity of existentialism as a different way of philosophizing. Finally we take a quick glance at some of the important families (groups) of themes in existentialism. Consideration of these points will hopefully give the searching minds of the students at the Master’s level a solidity of basis for further personal search and academic research into different existentialists.

2.1 INTRODUCING EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism got developed mainly in the first half of 20th century in continental Europe. Although it is primarily a philosophical movement, we can find its ‘roots’ and ‘branches’ (basis and influence) in various fields, such as art, literature, religion culture, etc.. Traditional philosophy did not bother about the problem of concrete existence, like death, love, despair, body, finitude, anxiety, hope, etc. As humans were caught up in the trap of their naked and concrete existence,

they could not get away to an ideal and abstract realm. In such a situation existentialism made its appearance not as a stroke of chance but of necessity. The luxury of philosophizing was not limited to the few arm-chair philosophers; existentialism brought philosophy to the appeal of the ordinary humans.

Existentialism is an elusive notion that escapes all definitions. The term itself is surrounded by a certain amount of confusion, ambiguity and lack of precision, since it includes the widely disparate philosophers and philosophies, ranging from Kierkegaard's theistic commitment to Sartre's categorical denial of the existence of God. Besides, what was intended as a serious type of philosophy has been vulgarized to the level of a fad so that the existentialist label gets applied to all sorts of peoples and activities. At the same time, the difficulty in defining existentialism is in keeping with the nature of its philosophizing. All the thinkers of this movement are against constructing any 'system' of philosophy, and hence it is more appropriate to address this movement as a way of *philosophizing* rather than a *philosophy*. Just as existentialism refuses to be labeled as a 'system,' so also most of the thinkers of this movement do not want to be categorized as 'existentialist.'

Although no adequate definition of existentialism is possible, the following seems to be quite significant: "Existentialism is a type of philosophy which endeavours to analyze the basic structures of human existence, and to the call individuals to an awareness of their existence in its essential freedom." From this definition—so also from most of the other ones—it is evident that existentialism first of all deals with the question of the human who alone is said to be existing. Secondly, existentialism is not a theory about the human, but it is a *call* that keeps on calling the human away from the intellectual and social forces that destroy freedom, and from the stifling abstractions and automatic conformity. It bids and challenges each individual to sort out the existential problems in authentic freedom, instead of taking easy answers from someone else. It pays heed to those existential questions that are usually passed over by the academic philosophers. Instead of retreating to a realm of eternal truths, existentialism hugs close to the terrain of ordinary living. Thus existentialism has brought about a revolution in philosophizing.

2.2 GENERAL BACKGROUND OF EXISTENTIALISM

Although existentialism made its arrival as a corrective to the traditional philosophy, there are certain factors that have accelerated its appearance in the 20th century. As the background of existentialism we present two fundamental experiences in the West: experience of 'nothingness' in the decline of religion, and of 'finitude' in the economico-scientific growth.

Experience of 'Nothingness' in the Decline of Religion

Although religion has not totally disappeared from the West, its all pervasive character has been lost. It is no more the uncontested centre of human life. The waning of religion is so complex a fact that it penetrates the deepest strata of human's psychic life. In losing religion humans lost the connection with the transcendent realm of being; they were set free to deal with this world in all its brute objectivity. Besides, they were forced to find themselves 'wanderers' and 'homeless' on the face of this earth that no longer answered the needs

of the inner spirit. Religion and reason reigned supreme in the middle ages. They no longer have the same sway in the contemporary period. The rationalism of the medieval philosophy was well contained by the mysteries of faith and dogma, which were powerfully real and meaningful. Whereas the approach of the modern rationalism was different! With the newly found scientific attitude, humans began to be critical to all that the religion has been standing for. The religion-less human is like the earth set free from the sun—a human picture that is grim, bleak, dark and naked!

A similar experience can be seen in the context of the movement of Protestantism that laid stress on the irrational datum of faith, as against the imposing rational structure of medieval catholic theology. The institutional character of the Catholic Church was in keeping with the rational nature of medieval theology. Faith as an intellectual assent never touched the interior of the human. As against this, Protestantism succeeded in raising the religious consciousness to a higher level of individual sincerity and strenuous inwardness. Faith for the Protestantism is the numinous centre of religion, stripped of all mediating rites and dogmas. But the cosines of the bourgeois civilization made the protestant Western humans more secularized, and their faith began to lose its grip on them. This too made them starkly naked; and their relation to God turned out to be a relation to *nothingness*! It is in the wake this deterioration that the theistic existentialists call the humans to a life of faith as a personal commitment.

Experience of 'Finitude' in Económico-Scientific Growth

Protestantism and capitalism went hand in hand, seemingly to prove that this earth itself is the Promised Land. Capitalism emerged from the feudal society as the enterprising and calculating mind who must organize production rationally to show a favorable balance of profits over costs. Everything is calculatively done in the interest of efficiency. The capacity for easy living seemed to be within human power. But the tremendous economic power of modern society is accompanied by human ambiguities, and rootlessness. Life is reduced to a bundle of needs and wants. The human is looked at in terms of functions. The First World War shattered the apparent stability of this human world. The stability, security and material progress rested upon the void. The human came face to face with oneself as a stranger. The question: 'what is human being?' came out of the bourgeois society in a state of dissolution. With capitalism, society has become more secular, rational, utilitarian, and democratic, with the accompanying wealth and progress. But the unpredictable realities like wars, political upheavals were on the increase. In this impersonal mass society the human is terribly alienated: a stranger to god, to nature, and to the social apparatus, and a stranger to oneself! The economic growth has only entrenched human limitation.

The modern age is characterized also by rapid scientific growth. This is countered by the growing awareness of human inability, fragility and the impotence of reason. On the one hand, there seemed to have no limits to the technological conquest of the nature. But science had to reconcile to the human finitude. Several theories in mathematics, science and philosophy during the first half of 20th century pointed to the human finitude: Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy, Skolem's and Godel's theories on mathematics, Heidegger's philosophy in his *Being and Time*, Spengler's prophecy in his *The Decline of the West*, etc. When events run parallel this way independently of each other, we can conclude

that they are not meaningless coincidences, but meaningful symptoms of humans becoming convinced of their finitude. All these thoughts shed light on the sad plight of the Western humans, and point to the impending finale.

Thus, the two deep experiences of the Western people—that of ‘nothingness’ and of ‘finitude’—have touched their inner being, and from out of this experience the new school of existentialism was born. In this new thought-pattern ‘nothingness’ and ‘finitude’ found themselves at home.

2.3 SOURCES OF EXISTENTIALISM

After having seen the events and contexts that gave rise to existentialism, we take a journey back to see its sources. The little source that began from the Old Testament period gradually gathered momentum, and became a powerful movement in the 20th century.

Hebraic Source

Existentialism can be traced as far back as Hebraism—the life and thought of the Hebrews or Jewish people. There is a clear contrast between Hebraism and Hellenism, the two rival forces that influence and move our world, at least in the West. The Hebrews are concerned about practice and right conduct, whereas the Greeks, with knowledge and right thinking; duty and conscience for the Hebrews, and intelligence or reason for the Greeks. The Hebrews see the human in his/her feebleness and finitude as creatures, standing naked in the presence of God. The Greeks keep all the difficulties and contingencies out of view in their life and thought.

The Jewish community was held together not so much by law, as with ‘faith.’ Faith is well depicted in the book of Job. In the experience of extreme difficulties, Job in his whole person meets God; it was a confrontation or meeting between two persons in the fullness and violence of his passion, with the unknowable and overwhelming God. The relation between God and Job was one of I and thou. It is not a confrontation between two rational minds, demanding an explanation that will satisfy the reason. They meet on the level of ‘existence’ and not of ‘reason’. Job’s relation to God remained one of faith from start to finish although it took on the varying shapes of revolt, anger, dismay and confusion. In this personal relation the meaning of faith takes its shape. Faith here is not a propositional one, but personal trust. This trust embraces the whole man, his anger and dismay, his bones and bowels, his flesh and blood. No separation of body and soul is made. As a person of flesh and blood, the Hebrew is very much bound to the ‘earth,’ the ‘dust,’ a creature of time. The human is a ‘nothing’ before one’s Creator; one’s temporal existence is compared to wind, shadow or bubbles. Hebraism contains no eternal realm of essences, as an intellectual deliverance from the evil of time. In short, the Hebrews emphasized the contingent and finite individual, standing naked before God in personal trust and faith. The approach taken by the Hebrews is very much existential.

The Hebraic approach can be better seen in opposition to the Hellenistic one. Among the Greeks we note a different picture. The Greeks achieved victory of reason over mythology—victory of *logos* over *mythos*. In the period between 480 and 322 BCE (from Heraclitus to Aristotle) the human enters history as ‘rational animal.’ From Heraclitus Plato learned that there is no escape from

death and change. Tormented by this vision, Plato desired at all costs a refuge in the eternal realm from the insecurities of time. Only the eternal is really real. For him the individual is less real. This is totally against the existentialist approach that seeks to establish the importance of the individual. Plato's was a philosophy of essence, and not of 'existence.' With Aristotle philosophy became purely theoretical and objective discipline. For him reason is the highest part of our personality. The primacy of reason is rested on the fact that everything has a 'reason,' i.e., everything is rationally explicable. Thus the Greeks touched nothing of human finitude, but rather they made an exaltation of human reason.

The emphasis on the personal dimension, as opposed to the rational, made Hebraism to be the very first source from which existentialism began its flow of thought.

Christian Sources

The distinction between Hebraism and Hellenism continued to show itself in Christianity in the form of faith and reason. Christianity belongs to the Hebraic rather than to the Hellenistic side of human's nature, since it is based on faith rather than reason. Christian faith is more intense in the sense that it is beyond and even against 'reason.' The opposition between faith and reason is the one between the vital and the rational. The question is as to where the centre of human personality is to be located: St. Paul places in faith, Aristotle in reason. Christian faith is paradoxical since Christianity is foolishness to the Greeks and scandal to the Jews, because the Greek demand 'wisdom,' and the Jews, sign.' Christian faith is not based on either.

Although Christianity has been on the side of faith rather than reason, there were varying emphases on one or the other even in Christianity itself. Tertullian is one of the precursors of existentialism who stresses the violence of the conflict between faith and reason. Augustine, with his existentialist bend of mind, asks 'who am I?,' rather than 'what is man?' as did Aristotle. This is well expressed in his *Confessions*. He looks at the human not with a detached reason but from personal experience. As a theologian he was trying to harmonize faith and reason. Thomas Aquinas took the theoretical intellect as the highest human faculty, following the example of Aristotle. According to him the end of the human is beatific vision of God's essence. Dun Scotus insisted on the primacy of will and love. Thus the problem between faith and reason reappeared in the form of a controversy between voluntarism and intellectualism. We may put it thus: a controversy between the primacy of the thinker over his thoughts, and thoughts over the thinker. The source of existentialism that started with Hebraism, continued with faith, and then with voluntarism of the Franciscan school in the middle ages.

Blaise Pascal (1623-62) is uniquely different from other philosophers of his time with his existentialist type of thinking, and thus he too is referred to as a source of existentialism. He was living in a world of science, especially of astronomy. Pascal spoke about the homelessness of the human in the infinite space. Reason cannot help this homelessness of the human. Faith takes up where reason leaves off. One has to search and find the sign-posts, that would lead the mind in the direction of faith, in the radically miserable condition of the human. Religion is the only cure for this desperate condition of the human that is inadequate, empty, and impotent. Living in an age of science, he experienced the feebleness

of human reason as well. Reason cannot deal with God or Religion as its objects. Hence his famous outcry: “not the God of philosophers, but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” He also is said to have said: “The heart has its reason that reason does not know.” He has expressed very powerfully about the radical contingency that lies at the heart of human existence. He could find ‘the contingent’ in the apparently insignificant in human existence: in the length of Cleopatra’s nose that marked the destinies of mark Antony and of Roman Empire; in the grain of sand in Cromwell’s kidney, that put an end to his military dictatorship. ‘Nothingness’ for Pascal opens both downward and upward. He lives in the age of microscope and telescope, when the finite cosmos is expanded in both the direction, toward the infinitesimally minute and the infinitely great, and the human occupying a mid-position between both. This mid-position is the perfect image of human finitude, invaded from both sides by nothingness. The short duration of our life is swallowed up in the eternity before and after. Such thoughts of Pascal make him an existentialist, and gave rise to the existentialism of the 20th century in full vehemence.

2.4 GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism does not refer so much to a particular philosophical system as to a movement in contemporary philosophy. Since it includes several philosophies with opposing characteristics, it is difficult to show any set of clearly defined characteristics that will mark off existentialism from all other forms of philosophy. All the same, we can still point to certain general characteristics of existentialism.

The first characteristic of existentialism is that it begins philosophizing from human being, rather than from reality in general. The human being that is referred to in existentialism is a *subject* that *exists*, rather than an *object* that *is*. Formerly the human has been submerged in the physical cosmos as just one of the items in nature. The existentialist subject is not the epistemological subject—the subject that stands apart as the knower to the known, rather it is the ontological subject that exists. Here the term ‘to exist’ has a meaning, more comprehensive than the term ‘to be.’ The term ‘existence’ has to be taken in the dynamic and active sense of the ‘act of being,’ rather than the mere ‘fact of being;’ and it implies a width of meaning that includes the human as the centre of feeling, of experience, of freedom, of actions and thought, and thus an incarnate being-in-the-world. Such a subject is passionately involved in the actualities of existence, and philosophizes not merely with reason, but the whole person with one’s feelings and emotions, with will and intellect, with flesh and bones, philosophizes. Thus existentialism begins with the human as existent.

Although existentialism begins with ‘existence,’ it does not take ‘existence’ as a notion, but as experienced by oneself. Thus we can say that existential philosophy arose from the existential experience of existence. Different philosophers has had varying experience of existence, and it is with one’s basic experience of existence that each philosopher carries out one’s philosophizing: in Jaspers it was an awareness of the brittleness of being, in Heidegger, Dasein as being-towards-death, in Sartre, the experience of existence as nauseating and superfluous, in Marcel and Buber, the experience of the ‘I’ as necessarily related to a ‘thou’, in Levinas, the experience of the epiphany of the other and of one’s ethical responsibility in the face of another, etc.

Existentialism can be described as an attempt to philosophize from the standpoint of ‘actor’ rather than of ‘spectator.’ The attitude of Aristotle was that of a spectator, looking at the world impersonally. Kierkegaard on the other hand philosophizes from his own personal experience. Philosophy arises as a response to the questions, to be met on the existential level, rather than on the conceptual level. The existentialist does not stand back from the problems as an impersonal analyst or spectator, but grapples with them as one who is involved in them. The questions are not matters of ‘intellectual curiosity’ but of ‘vital concern.’ Marcel’s distinction between *mystery* and *problem* corresponds to ‘actor’ and ‘spectator.’ The problem lies over against me to be analyzed by me as an epistemological subject. I do not approach the problem with my uniqueness, but as an impersonal I, that could be replaced by anyone, even by a machine. A mystery, on the other hand, is a question which involves the very ‘being’ of the questioner. The problems can be solved and an exhaustive solution can be given; but no solution can be given for a ‘mystery.’ The standpoint of an ‘actor’ is found in all the existentialist thinkers. Marcel and Kierkegaard were personal thinkers, who reflected on questions arising from personal experiences. There is a close relation between biography and philosophy in the case of Kierkegaard. For Marcel philosophy was part of his spiritual itinerary.

Another characteristic of existentialism is that it functions as a corrective to the traditional tendency of engulfing the human in the physical cosmos. It stands as a protest against all that threatens human’s unique position as an ‘existent.’ This is why Kierkegaard revolted against the Hegelian exaltation of the absolute at the expense of the individual. He was also against submerging the individual in the collectivity or universality. Heidegger calls the human from being the ‘they-self’ (*das Man*) to one’s ownmost self. Sartre wants the human to take over one’s freedom in good faith rather than to evade it in bad faith; in short, existentialism asserts the human freedom, and calls the human to appropriate it; thus existentialism functions as a corrective to the traditional tendency of depersonalization and of reduction of the human in collectivity.

If existentialism has been a corrective to the traditional way of thinking, then its advent was taken as a ray of hope to the humans in a situation of strangled thought. In various respects the humans have been strangled. To the religionless human, cut off from the divine, hope is given with a person-centred religion. To the humans who are unable to find in themselves the answers to the problems that beset them, the message of existentialism seems to be addressed. Jaspers shows that even in the face of earthly disasters, the human can still affirm one’s relationship to the transcendent. Heidegger speaks to the human thrown into the world, that s/he is faced with the possibility of choosing the authentic self.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) Briefly describe the historical background for emergence of Existentialism.

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2) Discuss the characteristics of Existentialism

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2.5 IMPORTANT THEMES IN EXISTENTIALISM

It is impossible to give an exhaustive list of all the themes in existentialism. But there are certain outstanding themes that often recur in most of the existentialists. We tabulate them into different families.

Existence, Individuality, Freedom, Choice, Creativity, Possibility

Existentialism is centred on the human, characterized by existence, and it insists on a return to the concrete, individual existent as against the essence and nature of things. It emphasizes the primacy of existence over essence. For most of the existentialists the essence of the human consists in one's existence. Existence is a dynamic notion that implies a constant attaining of the self in the self-directed life of the individual. To exist as individual means to become individual in freedom and choice. As existent, the human creates oneself. By virtue of one's freedom the human is not only what one has become, but also what one can become. To escape into the crowd is same as running away from one's responsibility to exist as an individual. It is uncomfortable to stand alone in one's uniqueness; hence it needs courage to exist, to assert oneself as an individual. In a widely growing situation wherein anonymity is the saving virtue, numerical superiority is the decisive consideration and mass opinion is the criterion of truth, all the existentialists call on the human to exist, to become, to choose as an individual in freedom and courage.

Finitude, Death, Guilt, Anxiety, Nothingness

Although humans are primarily free and self-creative, their quest for authentic personal being meets with resistance, and sometimes even frustration. Humans' ability to choose is restricted by their ultimate possibility, death, that places a limit to their choice, and on which they have no choice. As the ultimate possibility and facticity, death surrounds human existence with the boundary wall, revealing humans' *limit-situation*. The human experiences the presence of the 'not' (nothingness) in one's being; and before this existential awareness of one's finite freedom, one experiences dread or anxiety. Anxiety is had before the nothingness of human existence. The presence of nothingness in the human is same as human finitude or ontological guilt, that makes guilty action possible.

Authenticity and Inauthenticity

In the face of one's finite freedom, humans have the possibility to be *authentic* or *inauthentic*. These terms (authenticity and inauthenticity) are mainly employed by Heidegger, but others too make the distinction between what the human should be (authenticity), and what one is prone to be normally (inauthenticity). Both theists and atheists make this distinction. Different philosophers propose different ideals as the authentic mode of existence. Thus for Kierkegaard,

authenticity consists in making a leap of faith, and in becoming totally committed to a life of subjectivity and truth. For Heidegger, the authentic Dasein has to choose to be itself in the face of the temptation to be the they-self. For Buber and Marcel authenticity is grounded in communion and intersubjectivity. The I-thou relation between two human beings bestows authentic existence upon them as they reach out to the absolute and eternal thou. For Sartre authentic human is one who accepts one's freedom in good faith. For Camus, authentic existence is a life of resistance amidst the absurd. It demands a rejection of the physical and the philosophical suicide.

Community, Intersubjectivity, Love, Commitment, Faith

The themes of togetherness, I-thou, being-with, etc., are fundamental to Marcel, Buber, Levinas, etc. No existentialist considers oneself to be solipsist. Even Sartre accepts the presence of the other, though with a hateful stare. Thus even Sartrean notion of hatred is a mode of intersubjectivity. The I is necessarily related to a thou. Those who take the positive aspect of intersubjectivity, consider that this relation is characterized by availability, fidelity, commitment etc. The other is a genuine means of enriching one's existence. Marcel and Buber speak of the I-thou relationship. The other is not an object, a problem, an it, or a functionary, not even a 's/he' but a 'thou,' a subject with whom I communicate. Heidegger speaks of the essential character of Dasein as being-with. According to Levinas, the face reveals the indubitable presence of the other. Even in later Camus, a sense of togetherness and community become the dominant theme. When this relation of commitment is extended to the Transcendent being, it is referred to as 'faith.'

Absurdity, Homelessness, Rootlessness, Meaninglessness

To the contemporary human, absurdity or meaninglessness has become a catch-word. It stands for humanity's plight as purposelessness in an existence out of harmony with its surroundings. The 20th century neurosis is the neurosis of purposelessness, valuelessness, hollowness and emptiness. Most people continue with the business of living in it, but the existentialists cry out in anguish that they are gratuitous in an impossible world. The main spokespersons for human absurdity are Sartre and Camus. For Sartre 'absurdity' is the awareness of oneself as superfluous. One finds oneself as unnecessary, and thus there is no reason for one to exist. Camus considers absurdity as an awareness of oneself as condemned to tragic purposelessness. He traces to absurdity the dilemma of modern human, groaning under the structures of organized injustice and hypocrisy. In this tragic situation the human should not try to run away from it by suicide, rather one should accept it as a rebel. The fate of meaningless existence becomes tragic when one is conscious of it. The tragic hero of the *Myth of Sisyphus* bears his burden without joy of hope, refusing any of the palliatives offered by religion or philosophy, and without distractions of pleasure or ambition.

Depersonalization, Dehumanization, Objectification, Functionalization

Existentialism made its origin as a reaction to the reduction of the human to a mere object in the universe. Marcel and Buber fight against treating the human as an 'it' rather than a 'thou'. The disproportionate growth of 20th century technology is instrumental to the frightening erosion of human values and dignity by the use of strict 'scientific method' in investigations, and functional approach

in dealings. The human is made an 'object' of analysis, and a commodity of transactions. As against this calculative approach, the existentialists suggest that the other be considered as a 'thou,' as another existing subject. Depersonalization can be present in two ways: (i) by keeping the human in an impersonal collectivity of anonymity, mediocrity and facelessness. People are regimented and packed together in the service of the powerful, or (ii) by reducing the humans as mere objects for one's purpose. This is what takes place in the so-called free situation of capitalism and globalization.

2.6 LET US SUM UP

As a philosophical movement, existentialism is based on phenomenology initiated as a method for the first time by Husserl. This does not mean that the existentialists merely copied what Husserl proposed; far from it. In fact the existentialist thinking is centered on existence, bracketed by Husserl. But the underlying basic inspiration that guides the type of thinking in phenomenology and existentialism is the same.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) Explain the understanding of Existentialists on human relationship.

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- 2) Discuss the 'limit situations' of human existence.

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2.7 KEY WORDS

- Intersubjectivity** : Theme of togetherness, I-thou, being-with, etc., a relation that is characterized by availability, fidelity, commitment etc.
- Dasein** : Heidegger speaks of the essential character of being as being-with.

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