

Existential Human Existence

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Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Heidegger and Sartre. These writers have widely differing outlooks, although they share certain general themes which have come to form the philosophical attitude known as existentialism. Since existentialism is a tendency or attitude, rather than a philosophical school, few doctrines are common to all of its primary exponents. However, as indicated by the word itself, its one common characteristic is concern for human existence, particularly man's freedom. A necessary feature of human existence is that men are active and creative whereas things are not. Things are merely what they are, but men have the power to choose and become what they are not. Existentialism, in general, represents a rebellion against established ideas and institutions that inhibit man's personal freedom and choice.

The 19th century Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard was the founder of modern existentialism. Although others previously shared his protest against dominant rationalistic thought of the 17th and 18th centuries, it was Kierkegaard who formed the concepts and terms that influenced subsequent existentialist writers. Kierkegaard's works ranged from "fictional writings to philosophical studies to religious rhapsodies to bitter satirical diatribes." (Popkin, R. and Stroll, A. 1993. p. 303) he used various pseudonyms such as Johannes Climacus, Johannes de Silentio and Anti-Climacus for his series of strange works. Making only a slight impression during his lifetime, Kierkegaard was hardly known outside of his home land in Copenhagen. However, upon the translation of his works in German, French, and English, Kierkegaard's ideas became influential and widespread nearly a century after his death.

Kierkegaard's writing reflects his philosophical argument for his view of human existence.. He established a distinction between existence and "real existence." Along with many of his basic concepts, this resulted from his view of Christian tradition. He related this distinction to the difference between admiring Christianity from a distance, talking and acting like a Christian, to really being or existing as a Christian. Kierkegaard felt that to exist is to struggle and act in the world of men. His basic idea is that personal existence cannot be comprehended in a system, as Hegel describes. Hegel attempted to demonstrate that the world is a rational system. However, his concept is based upon pure assumption, as no one is aware of what the world in its completed form will be. "If the world were a system it would take God Himself, not Hegel, and still less a reader of Hegel's books, to know it." (Benton, W. 1969. p.964) in opposition to Hegel's thoughts, Kierkegaard follows that no one can know his place or his purpose, but that each person must choose, irrationally, the direction of his own existence.

Kierkegaard's reputation as a religious thinker results from his two major works: the brief *Philosophical Fragments* and the lengthy *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Like his other works, they were both published under a pseudonym "Johannes Climacus" although Kierkegaard's name did appear as the "editor". Kierkegaard declares "Truth is subjectivity" and that "All essential knowledge relates to existence, or only such knowledge as has an essential relationship to existence is essential knowledge." (Wiener, P. 1973. p. 189) in other words, subjective illusions are true, but that truth is only meaningful as it appears to a personal subject.

Kierkegaard's meaning of the word "existence" results from his use of it in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. He establishes the fundamental idea that each person exists and has a limited amount of time to choose and to make the decisions which matter to so much to him. In this short time, each person has urgent decisions to make and has the

freedom to make them. However, this freedom may be the source of a person's anguish, as there can be found no certainty upon which these choices are made.

His concepts on truth and subjectivity and personal freedom are the basis for his religious outlook. A very religious man, Kierkegaard found himself having to make choices before God with no possibility of knowing whether the outcome of those choices would be his salvation or damnation. Since there was no way of proving God's existence as an object, one can only accept a belief, blindly and irrationally, that there is some agent called "God" who will effect one's enlightenment. Thus, religion can only be determined for each individual by a "leap" of faith. In his diary, Kierkegaard wrote, "When a concrete individual lacks faith, then neither does God exist, nor is God present, albeit God, eternally understood, is eternal." (Wiener, P. 1973. p. 192) therefore, each person has the freedom to choose a faith, and the freedom to choose the determining factors for this choice. To further understand the religious thought of Kierkegaard, it is necessary to refer to the concept of truth and subjectivity. In the following passage, he refers to distinct ways in which the issue of truth may arise.

"When the question of truth is raised in an objective manner, reflection is directed objectively to the truth, as an object to which the knower is related ... If only the object to which he is related is the truth, the subject is accounted to be in the truth. When the question of truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual's relationship; if only the mode of this relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth even if he should happen to be thus related to what is not true" (Gardiner, P. 1988. p.97).

In the above passage, Kierkegaard stresses the need to differentiate between the two modes for assessing a belief, the objective and the subjective. The objective deals with "what". The subjective is concerned with "how". As far as religious belief is concerned, Kierkegaard emphasizes the subjective mode as the fundamental one. In Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard describes the following situation: he compares two men. The first man, though having a "true conception" of God, prays to him in a "false-spirit". The other man prays to an idol with "the entire passion of the infinite." According to Kierkegaard, the "most truth" is to be found in the side of the second man. He explains that "the one prays in truth to God, though he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol." (Gardiner, P. 1988. p. 98)

Kierkegaard wrote during a time when organized Christianity was very strong. He criticized the formal, worldly Christian conformity, what he called "Christendom", in favour of a revival of the old religion. The moral and social upheavals of the time made Kierkegaard's descriptions of the anguish of choice in face of uncertainty seem unpleasantly opposite, but revealed Christianity called for a certain "leap" that many considered irrelevant to their situation." (Benton, W. 1969. p. 964) these circumstances allowed Kierkegaard's attitudes to be developed in a variety of ways.

In the 20th century, with Kierkegaard's works widespread, other writers further developed the themes he formed in his philosophy of existence. Probably the most substantial and thorough developments of existence in the 20th century are contained in the writings of Karl Jaspers. Like Kierkegaard, Jaspers rejects Hegel's rational metaphysical system. Jaspers, unlike other existentialists, had a scientific interest as his career moved from medicine and psychiatry to psychology. Although skeptical of religious faiths, Jaspers spoke not of God but insisted upon the importance of what he called "transcendence." By this, he appears to mean that some unknown and unknowable source of being is responsible for the incompleteness of our knowledge. According to Jaspers, "there exists no written or established disclosure to act as a basis for what we do. He further states that it is not even possible to prove that we are free; only what exists objectively can we refer to as proven, and freedom is not a characteristic of an

object at all." (Benton, W. 1988. p. 965) therefore, Jaspers' development on existentialism maintained the conviction drawn from Kierkegaard that all fundamental thinking depends upon selfcomprehension.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger further influenced existential thought in his principal work *Sein und Zeit*, translated in English *Time and Being*. From the basis of Husserl's phenomenology and the existentialism of Kierkegaard, Heidegger built his ontology of human existence, especially with the experiences of anxiety, temporality, and awareness of death. Heidegger takes on a view of man as that of V, but with an atheistic rather than Christian outlook. In *Sein und Zeit*, the central concern is the analysis of "Dasein". Practically untranslatable in English "Dasein" refers to the way in which human beings, separate from things, exist. According to Heidegger, "Dasein" has three important characteristics: "facility", "existentiality", and "forfeiture". Heidegger further explains that "Dasein" reveals itself through dread and death. According to Heidegger, it is necessary for each individual to "seek his own relation with Being via the contemplation of his own death." (Weiner, P. 1973. p. 193) Heidegger says that man is thrown without choice into a world; hence it sets limitations for him. Contrasting with Kierkegaard's "leap into faith", Heidegger answers the problem of existence through "resolute decision". In *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger says that "the essence of man lies in his existence" (Wild, J. 1955. p. 65) it was Heidegger's negative analysis of human experience that made his ideas and work influential despite his expressed intention. The next generation of thinkers brought existentialism into the mainstream of modern philosophy. The most famous of them is the writer Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre sought to establish an absolute freedom. Humans are separate from their situation. Unlike things, and can imagine alternatives. Sartre further argues the idea that such things as physical characteristics are limitations to a person's situation. For example, a physical disability is not really a limitation, but instead a particular way of existing in the world.

Sartre further places emphasis on man's values. According to Sartre, because values are chosen and not given, it is impossible to choose in accordance with them. He seeks to represent every choice as that of a choice of values. Thus, he finds no rational argument in favor of one choice over another. Although his view is often regarded as irrationalism, Sartre points out that even the elements of what is rational are not given by the nature of the universe, but must also be chosen.

Like Heidegger, Sartre provides an overwhelming negative analysis of human existence. Sartre has found it easier to show what is wrong with human life than to describe the right way to live. Sartre observed that man is condemned to be free"; that his life is "an ineffective passion"; and that "hell is other people". (Benton, W. 1969. p. 965)

In studying the philosophers referred to as the existentiality, I find that there are no boundaries surrounding this group of thinkers. I have interpreted the underlying elements common to them all to be the idea of freedom and choice pertaining to each individual's existence. However, it is clear that each existentiality thinker displays variations of the general themes established by Kierkegaard. Because of this, it is difficult to categorize existentialism as a philosophy of its own, as it entails so many different viewpoints. Although it may be difficult to define it as a specific philosophical view, existential thought has provided a great insight to human existence and personal freedom. "We are "trapped in existence," living in a completely meaningless world. No principles that we use for ordering or comprehending events have any basis. But we cannot escape having to deal with "existence," having to make sense out of it. All that we can tell is that this world we are confronted with is utterly arbitrary." (Popkin, R.H. and Stroll, A. 1993. p. 312)

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