

# Philosophy of Life and its Relation with Philosophy of Education: An Existentialists Approach

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**Abstract**— Existentialism is a way of philosophizing that may lead those who adopt it to a different conviction about the world and man's life in it. Existentialism is mainly a European philosophy that originated before the turn of the twentieth century, but became popular after World War II (1939 – 45). The seeds of existentialism may be traced back to an earlier period of the history of philosophy. During the 18th century reason and nature were given more importance, objectivity was very much emphasized, leading to industrial and technological developments and science was given utmost importance. From the scientific viewpoint, man was also regarded as an object. Man became a slave to machines in developing industrial society. Against this situation existentialism emerged as a protest against the society and asserted the supremacy of individuality of man.

The existentialist philosophy is not a creation of any single philosopher. The existentialist writings scattered in the works of many philosophers, the important ones of which are: Friedrich Nietzsche, Soren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, Karl Jaspers and Albert Camus etc.

This philosophy begins from man, but from man as existent rather than man as a thinking subject, having a definite nature or essence. A man first exists, encounters himself, and defines himself afterwards. Existence comes before man is set with value or essence. They paid more attention to human freedom as well they criticized idealism, naturalism and scientific culture. This paper will discuss how existentialists describe the scientific life today and how that led to life towards tension, worries, frustrations, fear and sense of guilty. And this will investigate their educational views to understand meaning in existence and how to seek value for the existing individual.

**Key words:** Existentialism, philosophy of life, meaning, values.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Philosophy and education are two sides of the same coin, and thus different philosophies bring out a different facet of education and as education can change the philosophy of man and his life. Existentialism as a philosophical idea was revolutionary, dynamic and passionate; it changed the way of

<sup>1</sup> See for more details, Solomon C. R. & Higgins K.M, (2010), *The Big Questions: A short Introduction to Philosophy*, Wadsworth Cengage Learning

<sup>1</sup> See; Girard, Rene (2008), *Mimesis and Theory*, Stanford University Press, p.61

<sup>1</sup> Karl, Jaspers, (1997) *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*, trans: Charles, F.W and Schmitz, F. Johns Hopking University Press, p.167

<sup>1</sup> Kearney, R & Rainwater, M. (eds.), (1996), *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, Routledge, London, p.75).

thinking and brought to forefront the cause of individualism. Moreover its views on education may seem dramatic but taken in right sense and moderation is necessary in today's digital and cyber society. The Philosophy of existentialism brought man, his existence, his emotions and his subjectivity into forefront; they were forerunners of individualism and uniqueness of each man. The philosophy of education of existentialism speaks about aims, curriculum, and the role of teacher, method of teaching, learning experiences and religious and moral education.

This research paper introduces the chief exponents of existentialism along with their fundamental ideals in brief (in section one). The second section will consider the aims of existentialist education and critically evaluate educational philosophy of existentialism. Under that I came to conclusion.

## II. SECTION ONE

### A. Chief Exponents of Existentialism

Existentialism began in the 19th century, but became popular after World War II. The seeds of existentialism may be traced back to an earlier period of the history of philosophy. During the 18th century reason and nature were given more importance, objectivity was very much emphasized, leading to industrial and technological developments and science was given utmost importance. From the scientific viewpoint, man was also regarded as an object. Man became a slave to machines in developing industrial society. Against this situation existentialism emerged as a protest against the society and asserted the supremacy of individuality of man.

Existentialist philosophy is not a creation of any single philosopher. The existentialist writings scattered in the works of many philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Soren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, Karl Jaspers, and Camus etc. Most philosophers ponder the nature of knowledge, but existentialists ask how the nature of knowledge is educationally significant to the lives of individuals. The existentialist sees the individuals as lonely and living in a meaningless, absurd world. Existentialists recognize individual differences and believe that there is no one true life style. They believe that the more tragic side of life more clearly describes human existence and human existence is filled with anxiety. In following I will briefly introduced some major

figures in this school.

Soren Kierkegaard recognizes as the father of modern existentialism and he is the first European philosopher who bears the existentialists label. According to him subjectivity and intensity should be priced as the criteria of truth and genuineness. We touch reality in intense moments of existence especially moments of painful decision. These moments are characterized by deep anxiety, and life is known in such moments and cannot be reduced to just system of ideas.

Friedrich Nietzsche is regarded as a key figure in the rise of existentialism. According to him Christianity is to be overcome by putting in its place the doctrine of superman, that is, man surpassing himself. Martin Heidegger from his written gave very impressive analysis of human existence; the prominence of the important themes of existentialism like care, anxiety, guilt and above all death is brought out here. Jean Paul Sartre stressed that man's existence precedes his essence. "Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore, nothing else but the sum of his actions nothing else but what his life.

### *B. Fundamental Ideals in Existentialism*

There are few significance features in existentialism, those are existence precedes essence, the important of subjectivity, man's freedom, criticism of idealism, criticism of naturalism, and scientific culture, and the attention on human weakness and security.

This philosophy begins from man, but from man as existent rather than man as a thinking subject, having a definite nature or essence. A man first exists, encounters himself, and defines himself afterwards. Existence comes before man is set with value or essence. It is because to begin with man is nothing, has no essence, he will be what he makes of himself. Man defines himself in his own subjectivity, and wanders between choice, freedom, and existential angst. Existentialism often is associated with anxiety, dread, awareness of death, and freedom.

Existentialism is the philosophy of subject rather than of the object. Each individual by probing into the depths of one's subjectivity can discover the truth of one's being and discover his authentic role in life. This is a creative process which gives rise to fresh insights. The basic feature of human person is his freedom-unfettered and unrestrained. Society and social institutions are for the sake of man and not vice versa, as believed by idealists and others. There is no 'general will' to which the 'individual' will is subject.

Existentialism has emerged and developed as a reaction against idealism. Existentialist philosophers are highly critical of idealism and conceptualism. They criticize idealist's contention about universal element and man's good being subject to general good. They regard the search for essence a mistake pursuit and according to them it is not the essence but existence which is real.

The existentialist philosophers are also critical of the philosophy of naturalism. According to naturalists, life is subject to physic-bio-chemical laws, which in turn, are subject

to the universal law of causation. Human acts are mechanical as the actions of an animal. This, however, is anathema to the existentialists and they stoutly defined the freedom of man. As a matter of fact, man is so free, according to Sartre, that he is fearful of his freedom. With tremendous progress in science and technology, rapid industrialization and urbanization have taken place. This has given rise to crowded towns in which individual is lost. Everything is done or happens on a large-scale and all personal values, individual likes and dislikes are altogether lost sight of. Today, it is not the individual who chooses his end; computer or statistical laws and data make rather all decisions. Thus, science has made the value of man negligible. This is why the existentialists are opposed to scientific philosophy and culture.

In this scientific culture, life of today, the individual is leading a life of tension, worries, frustrations, fear and sense of guilt. His individuality is getting continually blundered; therefore for security of individuality the individual should be given an environment free of worries, anxieties and tension. In this way existentialism is a philosophical movement that is generally considered a study that pursues meaning in existence and seeks value for the existing individual. It unlike other field of philosophy does not treat the individual as a concept, and values individual subjectivity over objectivity. As a result, questions regarding the meaning of life and subjective experience are seen as being of paramount importance, above all other scientific and philosophical pursuit.

## III. AIMS OF EDUCATION IN EXISTENTIALIST THOUGHTS

### *A. The Concept of Knowledge*

The existentialist believe that knowledge exists as it relates to the individual's interpretation of it. Science is not a big issue because philosophers such as Sartre saw science is something, which was created by man. Kierkegaard thought that education should be subjective and religious. And Buber considered that there should be a sharing of knowledge used for the good of man, which will only happen in a subject-to-subject relationship where individuals should not be treated as objects

### *B. The Aim of Education*

Existentialist believe that the most important kind of knowledge is about the human condition and the choices that each person has to make, and that education is a process of developing consciousness about the freedom to choose and the meaning of responsibility for one's choices. Hence, the notion of group norms authority, and established order-social, political, philosophical, religious, and so on-are rejected. The existentialists recognize few standards, customs to traditions, or eternal truths; in this respect, existentialism is at odds with the ideas of idealism and realism.

Existentialist education has certain place for the total development of personality though education. Education should aim at the whole man. It should aim at a character formation and self-realization. In the existentialist classroom, subject matter takes second place to helping the students to understand and appreciate themselves as unique individuals who accept

complete responsibility for their thoughts, feelings and actions. Since feeling is not divorced from reason in decision-making, the existentialist demands the education of the whole person, not just the mind.

The other important quality we can trace from existentialism is that they rightly point out that subjective knowledge is even more important than objective knowledge. They rightly hold that truth is subjectivity. It is a human value and values are not facts. Reduction of values to facts has led to widespread loss of faith in values. Therefore, along with the teaching of science and mathematics, the humanities art, literature should also be given suitable place in curriculum at every stage of education. Most of the ills of the modern man are due to over-objective attitude. This requires a subjectivist correction in the light of existentialist ideas.

The present industrial and economic, political and social environment is valueless. Therefore, it helps confusion and corruption, tension and conflicts. The existentialists seek to provide an environment proper to self –development and self-consciousness. This environment in the school requires contribution from humanities, arts and literature. These will help in the development of individuality in the education so that he may cease to become a cog in the social wheel. Rather he should develop to a self-conscious and sensitive individual.

### C. Learning and Teaching

Existentialist education is child-centered. It gives full freedom to the child. The teacher should help child to know himself and recognize his being. Freedom is required for natural development. Education should convert imperfection into perfection. Education should be according to the individual's needs and abilities of child. The relation of the child to himself should be strengthened by education. In other words the first and foremost aim of existential education is to develop the authentic self of child. Nietzsche held that the duty of teacher towards student is “to liberate and empower individuals toward authentic, autonomous and creative life”

Education should create consciousness for `self. The existentialists argue that persons are not only mind, but also feeling and emotions. Consequently, students must learn to feel, to become and `authenticated individual`. `Becoming` requires conflict and frustration by which persons grow in their personality and understanding.

Existentialism`s main concern is with the existence of `self. ` Sartre explained two modes of self and called them as self-in-itself and self-for-itself. Self-in-itself is what a person becomes in his life by making efforts. Education should help in the development of `self-for-itself of student. According to existentialism, students must develop a consistent scale of values, authenticate their existence by being committed to these values and so act as to be prepared to die for these values than to live without them. Dying for one`s own country constitutes the supreme sacrifice.

Education should help child to achieve self-realization. “The student should become personally concerned with the realization of his own nature and with what Tillich calls the courage to be himself” Existentialism believes that a good education is one that assists each of us in seeing ourselves with

our fears, frustrations and hopes, as well as the ways in which we use reason for good and ill. The first step in any education, therefore, is to understand us. Nietzsche advocated an education that develops in individual the ability of self-overcoming. Education as a process does not assist a self-overcoming individual to overcome so far accepted valuations; rather, education serves paradoxically as a means for their transmission. “The impetus for any Nietzschean education. If indeed there can be such a possibility begins and ends not with society, not with democracy, not with the school, not with the teacher, but with that multiplicity of individual characterization known collectively as the self”

Existential education assumes the responsibility of awakening each individual to the intensity of his/her own selfhood. The self for existentialists constitutes a choosing, free and responsible agent. A learning situation is called for in which the structure and significance of the self is meaningfully conveyed.

Every individual has to face many tragic situations in his/her life. Most important and inevitable tragic event is death. One of the main aims of existentialistic education is to inculcate proper attitude towards death. Teachers must make student realize that death can be expelled into an experience for better understating of good life and one`s obligation in it. Man should be aware of his death in every moment of life. This realization of death will help in enjoyment of each and every moment of his life due to the fact that he is prepared for death. Existentialism holds that education helps an individual to realize the best that he is capable of. “In doing so education must help in individual to realize the `facticity or contingency` of his existence to face the categories of this facticity-dread, anguish, anxiety and fear-resolutely and courageously and finally prepare him to meet death with pleasure”

Education should train men to make better choices and also give the idea that since his choices are never perfect, consequences cannot be predicated life is a continuous process of making choices and all choices are personal and individual. A man`s life is a project and each of us is his own architect of life. Choice is always a necessary condition of human life, it is always, to some extent, inescapable, but it is only authentic choice that enables us to stand out as individuals.

The basic function of the school is normative. It should act to encourage the maximum development of individual autonomy or free choice. The fundamental problem confronted by the school is, as Heidegger states, “How one becomes what one is?” Developing the capacity for free choice encompasses two basic steps; (Step one) Cultivating the ability to make free and rational decisions and (step two) developing the inclination to make such decisions in the first place. Of these, the latter is clearly the more important phase. The basic aim of existentialist education is to develop a sense of commitment to free choice.

Another aim of existential education is to prepare child for social adjustment. Education should be such that it makes the student able to see beyond personal interest and goal. Existentialists argue that social education should teach to respect for the freedom of all. Respect for the freedom of others is essential, for freedom is almost certain to conflict. Good education prepares man to will his freedom and at the same

time, to will the freedom of all others. When he asserts the value of any action he is asserting a value with this universal appeal “ I am responsible for myself and for all.”

Marcel and Jaspers believe that recognition of the freedom of others leads to mutual love and affection. Man must participate in the activities of others but not by surrounding and negating their own personalities. Since man as a being always lives with other being, education involves a process of integration into the forms and structures, groups and institutions of society. Individual is enhanced though this integration into the social structure. Education imparts familiarity with forms of social intercourse, morals and customs and rules and laws. It associates the ability to adapt with the courage to resist. Education seeks to safeguard the individual citizen in his professional and in politics, but it is not confined to imparting familiarity with forms of public behavior, to the acquisition of professional expertise and to the generation of an understanding of politics. Education extends beyond integration into society.

#### *D. To develop unique personality and sense of responsibility of child*

Every individual is unique. Education must develop in him this uniqueness. It must cater to individual differences. Existentialism disagree with the standards made by universal education as it is made up for all the deals generally with average and compels the student to conform to the law of average instead of practicing his unique qualities. It dose not pay attention to exceptional. For existentialist, every man has a unique variety of methods and organizations, which should be developed accordingly.

Existential education emphasizes the importance of individual responsibility; as for them there is no escape from wholly individual responsibility. It is the duty of existentialist teacher to assist the student to assume responsible selfhood, to grow up and face the world responsibly.

Existentialism holds that for all the choices people make they cannot blame others, whether that be their parents or society and they cannot even blame the conditions in which they find themselves. Moreover, there is nothing to guide them in their choices; no principles or rules can guarantee that any choice is right. People must simply make their choice and accept the consequences though the consequences may be unpredictable. Every choice carries our complete personal responsibility. “Existentialists hold that people decide their own fates and are responsible for what they make if their lives, because we are self-creating or self-fashioning beings in this sense. We have full responsible for what we make of our live”

According to Sartre, Choices are accompanied by forlornness because there is to human being who can enter into your subjectivity and understand your situation well enough to help you decide what to do, therefore, you alone must bear the responsibility for your choices. Choices are accompanied by anxiety because certain of our choice may bring harmful consequences to others or us and our responsibility for these consequences is inescapable.

#### *E. The Nature of Curriculum*

Existentialists prefer to free learners to choose what to study and also determine what is true and by what criteria to determine these truths. The curriculum would avoid systematic knowledge or structured disciplines, and the students would free to select from many available learning situations. The learners would choose the knowledge they wish to possess. The humanities are commonly given tremendous emphasis. They are explored as a means of providing students with vicarious experiences that will help unleash their own creativity and self-expression. For example, rather than emphasizing historical events existentialist focus upon the actions of historical individuals, each of whom provides possible models for the student`s own behavior.

Existentialists approach to education is almost an inversion of the realist approach. In the field of curriculum while the realists exclusively emphasize science, the existentialists find out that science and objective education severs our relation with ourselves. Science cannot help in inner realization and achievement of peace. This, however, does not mean that science education should be ignored. It only means besides science the curriculum must include humanities ethics and religion. In keeping with this viewpoint contemporary engineering college have included some philosophy and, ethics and social studies, in their curriculum. Without this synthetic approach to curriculum the aim of character formation and personality development will be defeated.

Existentialism recognizes the `individual differences` and lays emphasis on diverse curricular suiting the needs, abilities and aptitude of the individual. Realization of self forms part of the curriculum. Self-examination and not social obedience is the first lesson. According to existentialism, curriculum should be mainly liberal since “liberal leaning is most likely to a lay a foundation for human freedom” Curriculum should satisfy the immediate as well as the ultimate needs. It should be so designed that a student does have every experience that makes up his life. The function of education is not to hide the ugly and enhance the beautiful, nor to hide the latent evil and focus on all pervading good.

As far as subjects are concerned, Van Cleve Morris said, “ If existentialism ever gains a foothold in educational thinking it will probably begin its work in the `self-creating` subject matter. “Existentialism doesn` t believe in formal curriculum consisting of set of body of studies to be pursued but a curriculum, which features the reverberatory effect upon heart and mind of passionate good reading and then personal contact. “The subjects of the existential curriculum are unspecified, although any subject can be, at the right moment, the tool, the vehicle to engage the individual in his or her striving to become.”

The existentialists offer suggestions about how, subjects can be best used, for example, social studies is not for adjustment as treated traditionally, but it is for the dreaded freedom and history should not merely concern itself with natural events but with activities of men who are free to choose the line of their action.

The curriculum should be chosen, sorted out and owned by the learner since each individual has specific needs and interests related to his or her self-fulfillment. The student in situation, making a choice should be the deciding factor. Freedom or

choice of individual requires fundamental which become a must in the content of the student's existential situation. Being situated in the world, he is apt to choose. For this purpose leaning of universal fundamentals must gain importance in curriculum. As put by Sartre. "One should do what everyone else do but be like nobody else" Existentialists afford students great latitude in their choice of subject matter, since they believe it would provide students greater occasion for personal growth and expression.

Existentialism emphasizes educating traditional subject matter to make the student realize the givens of the world in which he has to exercise his freedom. By learning these subject matter student comes to know that although he has freedom to achieve his purpose in this world but he cannot do whatever he wants with it.

Existentialism places great importance to the learning of humanities i.e. history, literature, philosophy and art. "The existentialists believe that humanities have spiritual power" Though humanities man's aesthetic, emotional and moral productivities are exercised. Humanities reveal the inner feelings and thoughts of man i.e. his guilt, sin, suffering, tragedy, death, hate and love. They deal with the essential aspects of human existence such as the relation between people, the tragic as well as the joyous side of human life, the absurdities as well as the sensibleness. These subjects are explored as a means of providing students with sensational experiences that will help unleash their own creativity and self-expression. In short, existentialists want to see humankind in its totality- the perverted as well as the exalted, a mundane as well as the glorious, the despairing as well as the hopeful.

The existentialist from their educational philosophy encouraged Art and music. They believe that when actively listening to music, the child is encouraged to respond individuality and creatively to feel the music. The existential curriculum in all cases will be that which is capable to personify knowledge enhance the involvement of the student.

Existentialism advocates the teaching of history in order to help the students to change the course of history and to model of the future. The existentialist sees history in terms of man's struggle to realized his freedom. The Student, too must, commit himself to whatever period he is studying and immerse himself and its problems and personalities.

Psychology may also be included in existential curriculum since existentialism has a psychological foundation. Psychology as a subject is a medium for the realization of many real emotions in man, like fear, frustration, love and so on. One cannot make an effort to make him existentially free without knowing his real emotions and feelings. According to Jaspers psychology is able to give answers to all type of philosophical problems, which are subjective. Heidegger's existential phenomenology is deeply rooted in psychology.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Existentialist education is a humanistic approach to knowledge and human life. They accepted that children are individuals. No two children are alike, therefore they are going to learn differently. For them education should accommodate these needs and students should be encouraged to do things

because they want to do them. Therefore existentialist accept that child need a freedom of choice, spontaneous play, open expression of feelings, and student participation in the democratic control over community life in the school. Teachers should treat student humanely, as people. As well the relationship between teacher and student should developed in order to promote goals in education.

As a philosophy of life existentialism focus the three domains in life to promote those are aesthetic, ethical and religious path. Therefore, existentialist curriculums pay more attention to enhance this ideal. From religious education they expect to promote the moral education not only that it shows the path for self-realization. Existentialist methods focus on the individual. Learning is self-paced self-directed, and includes a great deal of individual contact with the teacher, who relates to each student openly and honestly. But idea has a limited application because education in our society, and most other modern societies, involves institutionalized learning and socialization, which required group instruction, restriction on individual behavior and bureaucratic organization. But in existentialism it has no place for such view. However, in existentialism educational philosophy as a philosophy of life it has emphasis and accepted that the important of the intellectual development, which include divergent thinking, creativity, reasoning and the ability to make judgment and to analyze as well, solve the problems. Moral, spiritual, cultural, and social development which involves social qualities in children to make them fit for society.

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