



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

(Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 7.560 (SJIF 2024)

Existentialism and the meaning of life

Khubaib Khalid Khan

Amity Institute of Social Sciences,
Amity University,
Noida (Uttar Pradesh, India).
E-mail: khubaib8858@gmail.com

Dr. Suyasha Singh Isser

Assistant Professor,
Amity Institute Of Social Sciences,
Amity University,
Noida (Uttar Pradesh, India)
E-mail: ssisser@amity.edu

DOI No. **03.2021-11278686** DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doi/10.2024-78981539/IRJHIS2405003>

Abstract:

This paper delves into the rich philosophical landscape of existentialism, a movement that highlights the individual's quest for meaning, freedom, and authenticity in an indifferent or even hostile universe. Tracing its roots to the works of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, existentialism challenges traditional norms and emphasizes subjective experience, personal choice, and the inherent absurdity of life. Through examining key themes such as the burden of freedom, the search for authenticity, and the confrontation with death, the paper outlines existentialism's core tenets and its insistence on the individual's responsibility to forge their own path. Featuring discussions on major figures in existentialism, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Martin Heidegger, and Albert Camus, the paper highlights the enduring relevance of existentialist thought in addressing the complexities of modern existence. It argues that existentialism offers a potent framework for understanding human life, emphasizing personal transformation and the creation of meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. This exploration sheds light on existentialism's significant contribution to philosophy, literature, and the broader discourse on human nature and society.

Keywords:

Research objectives:

1. To examine various existential theories and their impacts
2. To explore perspectives of different thinkers and come up with an integrated answer to the questions they posed

Research questions:

1. What is existentialism?
2. What is the meaning of life, if there isn't then why keep on living?

Introduction:

In the exploration of existentialist philosophy, three figures stand at the forefront, shaping the contours of a movement that grapples with the complexities of human existence: Søren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre. This paper seeks to illuminate the intricate tapestry woven by their thoughts, tracing the philosophical lineage from Kierkegaard's existentialist seeds to Camus's absurdist insights and Sartre's elaboration on freedom and responsibility. At the heart of their philosophies lies a common endeavor to confront the inherent absurdity of life, the inevitability of death, and the individual's quest for meaning amidst an indifferent universe. Kierkegaard (1992), often considered the father of existentialism, introduces the pivotal concept of "subjectivity is truth," emphasizing the importance of individual experience and the personal journey of faith as a response to the existential dread. His dialectical approach to faith, encapsulated in the figure of Abraham in "Fear and Trembling," sets the stage for existentialism's deep dive into the paradoxes of existence. Albert Camus (1991), through his concept of the absurd, articulates the conflict between the human desire for significance and clarity and the silent, unresponsive universe. His works, notably "The Myth of Sisyphus," explore the futility of the search for meaning and the subsequent embrace of life in spite of its absurdity. Camus's philosophy challenges the individual to live authentically and rebel against the absurd, finding solace in the acceptance of life's inherent meaninglessness. Jean-Paul Sartre (1992), perhaps existentialism's most vocal proponent, builds on these foundations with his assertion that "existence precedes essence." For Sartre, freedom is not only a fundamental aspect of human existence but also a burden, as it places the entirety of one's essence and the responsibility for creating meaning squarely on the individual's shoulders. His existentialist maxim underscores the notion of radical freedom and the inescapable responsibility each person bears for shaping their life and world. The Roots of Existential Thought The roots of existentialism can be traced back to the works of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, who laid the groundwork for future existentialists. Kierkegaard, often considered the father of existentialism, emphasized the importance of the individual and the necessity of making passionate, subjective choices. Nietzsche, on the other hand, declared that "God is dead," challenging the foundations of traditional morality and highlighting the liberation and burden of creating one's own values.

Key Themes in Existentialism:

1. Freedom and Responsibility: At the heart of existentialism is the belief in absolute freedom and the accompanying burden of responsibility. This freedom is not liberating but rather a source of angst, as individuals must choose without guidance from objective or universal standards.
2. The Absurd: A central theme in existential thought, particularly in the works of Albert Camus, is the concept of the absurd. The absurd arises from the conflict between the human search for inherent value and meaning in life and the silent indifference of the universe.

3. **Authenticity:** Existentialists stress the importance of living authentically, which involves acknowledging one's freedom, making genuine choices, and accepting the consequences. Authenticity stands in opposition to bad faith, a state of self-deception in which individuals deny their freedom and responsibility.
4. **Despair and Suffering:** The recognition of one's freedom and the inherent absurdity of life can lead to feelings of despair. However, existentialists argue that confronting despair directly is essential for achieving a meaningful life.
5. **Death:** Death is a recurring theme in existentialist thought, serving as the ultimate limitation of human existence. The inevitability of death gives life its urgency and shapes the choices individuals make.

Major Figures in Existentialism:

Jean-Paul Sartre: Perhaps the most well-known existentialist, Sartre developed the concept of "existence precedes essence," arguing that individuals first exist and then define themselves through their actions. For Sartre, freedom is both a gift and a curse, as it entails total responsibility for one's existence. (1992)

Simone de Beauvoir: A pivotal figure in existentialism and feminism, de Beauvoir explored the ethics of freedom and the complexities of human relationships. Her seminal work, "The Second Sex," examines the construction of gender roles and the oppression of women, highlighting the existential struggle for authenticity and freedom. (2011)

Martin Heidegger: Although he later distanced himself from existentialism, Heidegger's analysis of "being" and his emphasis on authenticity influenced many existential thinkers. His magnum opus, "Being and Time," delves into the nature of existence and the concept of "being-toward-death." (2008)

Albert Camus: Camus introduced the concept of the absurd and argued that life's meaninglessness does not lead to despair but to a profound appreciation for life itself. His works, including "The Stranger" and "The Myth of Sisyphus," explore the themes of absurdity, rebellion, and the search for meaning. (1991)

Conclusion:

In the concluding reflections of our exploration into existentialist philosophy, particularly through the lenses of Kierkegaard, Camus, and Sartre, we find ourselves standing at the precipice of the ultimate human inquiry: the meaning of life. This investigation, rooted in the profound depths of existential thought, brings us face to face with the multifaceted nature of human existence and its inherent quest for purpose and significance. The human perspective, as illuminated by our existential forebears, offers a radical departure from traditional metaphysical inquiries about life's meaning. Instead of seeking an external or predefined essence, existentialism places the onus on the individual,

advocating for a personal construction of meaning in a world that is fundamentally devoid of it. This view does not diminish the quest for meaning; rather, it elevates it to a matter of personal responsibility and freedom. Kierkegaard's emphasis on individual faith and the leap towards the "absurd" signifies a personal confrontation with the void, suggesting that meaning is not discovered but created through a subjective relationship with the infinite. Camus, on the other hand, presents the absurdity of life as a starting point, not a conclusion, advocating for a rebellion against meaninglessness through the sheer affirmation of living and the continuous search for joy amidst despair. Sartre's notion of "existence precedes essence" further democratizes the quest for meaning, asserting that our lives are blank canvases upon which we are free to impose our own values and purposes. From this perspective, the meaning of life is not a static or universal truth waiting to be uncovered but a dynamic and ongoing project of self-definition and world-making. The existentialists challenge us to embrace the freedom and responsibility that come with this endeavor, urging us to live authentically and courageously in the face of life's inherent absurdity and uncertainty. In conclusion, the existentialist dialogue offers a profound and nuanced perspective on the meaning of life, not by providing definitive answers but by empowering us to ask better questions and to assume the role of authors of our own lives. It reminds us that the search for meaning is inseparable from the act of living itself, and that our capacity to imbue our existence with purpose, in spite of the absurd, is perhaps the most authentic affirmation of our humanity.

References:

1. Kierkegaard, Søren. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton University Press, 1992. This work by Kierkegaard explores the concept of subjectivity as truth and the importance of individual existence.
2. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. Washington Square Press, 1992.

The logo for IRJHIS (International Research Journal of Humanities and Interdisciplinary Studies) features the acronym 'IRJHIS' in a bold, purple, sans-serif font. The text is centered within a white banner that has a ribbon-like, folded appearance at its ends. The banner is set against a background of a large, faint watermark seal. The seal is circular and contains a globe in the center, surrounded by the journal's full name in a circular arrangement. The colors of the seal are light blue and green.