

Between Being and Nothingness: The Evolution of Existentialist Thought

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comprehensive survey of existentialist philosophy, tracing its evolution from Hegel's dialectical movement of "Being" to "Becoming" to Heidegger's ontological exploration of *Dasein* as temporal existence. It further examines the phenomenological emphasis on subjective experience as articulated by Husserl and its existential extensions in the works of Sartre, Camus, Tillich, and Heller. Central concepts such as "being-in-itself" (*l'être-en-soi*) and "being-for-itself" (*l'être-pour-soi*) are analyzed to demonstrate how existentialism foregrounds individual freedom, responsibility, and the struggle with absurdity. The paper also explores Christian existentialists such as Paul Tillich alongside atheistic thinkers like Sartre and Camus, highlighting their differing responses to alienation, the absurd, and transcendence. Drawing from philosophical writings as well as literary expressions in the works of Camus, Sartre, and Hemingway, the chapter positions existentialism as both a philosophy of human predicament and a mode of literary imagination.

Keywords: Existentialism, Hegel, Heidegger, Dasein, Phenomenology, Sartre, Camus, Tillich, Freedom, Alienation, Absurdity, Authenticity, Being-in-itself, Being-for-itself

1. Introduction

The preoccupation of the conscious mind with the absurdity of existence is as old as existence itself. From the point in time one exists and becomes conscious of one's existence, one begins to sense 'Anxiety'. The individual becomes conscious of his or her existence as a being only in the face of non-being or dissolution or death which results in anxiety. Paul Tillich in *The Courage to Be* talks about different types of 'Anxiety' and expands the idea of 'Anxiety' describing it as "...the painful feeling of not being able to deal with the threat of a special situation", and further "...of not being able to preserve one's own being which underlies every fear..." (38). He posits that:

Anxiety is the state in which a being is aware of its possible non-being...Anxiety is finitude experienced as one's own finitude. This is the natural anxiety of man as man. (35)

This leads one to contemplate over the enigma of the 'being' and its reason to exist; in other words the significance or contrarily the insignificance of its existence.

Hegelian Philosophy: from 'Being' to 'Becoming'

If one were to linguistically analyze, the word 'being', 'be' + 'ing' suggests temporality, change, transformation, movement – any or all of these. In *Being and Nothingness* Jean-Paul Sartre discusses

Hegel's analysis of 'being' and the incessant and timeless process of 'becoming' which Hegel presents in his work *The Science of Logic*.

Sartre writes that for Hegel, 'being' is not merely an entity; it is first of all awareness and it is seriality or continuity: one thing following another. Whatever is defined about 'being' further determines it. Sartre draws parallels between Le Senne and Hegel saying that:

The true concrete for Hegel is the Existent with its essence; it is the Totality produced by the synthetic integration of all the abstract moments. (45)

Sartre further uses Hegel's own phrase "empty immediacy", and shows how for Hegel, "Being is Nothing." He quotes Hegel:

"this pure Being," writes Hegel in *Logic* (of the *Encyclopaedia*), is "pure abstraction and consequently absolute negation, which taken in its immediate moment is also non-being..." (45)

Sartre concludes that, "Pure being and pure nothingness are then the same thing" (45). 'Being' is not a static entity but a continual, fluid discovering process which urges one to determine further, to recognize and uncover what lies behind the 'being'. Therefore it can be inferred that it is the same as 'non-being' as it 'becomes' only through one's perception of it and at the same time it is opposed to 'non-being' as it is only the discovering process that determines its being. Thus, according to Hegelian philosophy 'being' is fluid because it is always 'becoming'. It is the passing of one aspect after another. The notions of contingency, temporality and transience which is so much a part of the philosophy of the Absurd is clearly traceable in Hegelian thought.

Heidegger's Dasein: a Temporal 'Being'

While Hegel talks about 'being' as 'awareness', Heidegger brings up the concept of *Dasein*, a German word which, when literally translated, means 'being there'. Sartre glides from Hegelian to Heideggerian philosophy and the various concepts of *Dasein* according to Heidegger which amount to the same thing:

Dasein is "outside of itself, in the world"; it is "a being of distances"; it is care: it is "its own possibilities," etc. all this amounts to saying that *Dasein* "is not" in itself, that is "is not" in the immediate proximity to itself, and that it "surpasses" the world in as much as it posits itself as not being in itself and as not being the world.' (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 52)

What Heidegger meant by the concept of *Dasein*, was not an objective presence but an embodied awareness, a conscious being, existing and acting in this world and interacting with its animate and inanimate entities.

Dasein is thrown into a world with lots of possibilities and its inevitable mortality. In fact *Dasein* suddenly finds itself in the middle of birth and death, two incomprehensible phenomena which are beyond it. *Dasein* thus has no choice but to consider these possibilities, accept its own limitations in the face of incomprehensibilities and consciously assume the responsibility of its existence. *Dasein's* thrown projection in this world combined with the truth of its temporality, leads it to experience 'Angst', in other

words, the absurdity of its existence. Its presence and existence are accidental in this world. Thus it can be concluded that Heideggerian philosophy is definitely a forerunner to the Absurd school of thought that supposes a purely chance presence of the individual in this world. *Dasein* has not engineered or initiated its coming into this world.

Phenomenology: a Subjective World with an Individual Perspective

Heideggerian philosophy also states that a 'being' can be understood only through other beings. One recognises or acknowledges a 'being' in relation to its significance to his existence which in a way, goes back to the Hegelian philosophy that 'being' is a relative truth, which is exactly what phenomenology posits. In *Existential-Phenomenological Readings on Faulkner* William J Sowder writes, "...perceptual consciousness is inexhaustible. It is a consciousness of endless perspectives" (4). Thus phenomenology's stand is that consciousness is always intentional, i.e. it is directed towards something and it is this intentionality that imparts meaning to things and makes them phenomena. Physical objects or noumena¹ lack intentionality altogether. Phenomenology aims at discovering appearances, and appearances over here implies anything that one is aware and conscious of. Thus it can be stated that phenomenology is the study of the way the consciousness perceives objects.

It can also be inferred that phenomenology denies the objective point of view and is a precursor to the philosophy of existentialism. There is no single universe that is common to all. Each exists in a subjective universe. Phenomenology is an effort to study, understand and analyse this subjective universe by means of a careful description of experience whereby an attempt is made to describe phenomena without reducing it to the status of an object or noumena. Sowder refers to Merleau-Ponty who he says posits that, "Objects taken in their true identity...are taken not through the intellect but in the configuration of a sensory field revealed by the body" (4). The environment is not something which is outside the individual; knower and known are inextricably intertwined in phenomenology. Thus an important theme which phenomenology follows is the refusal of the subject-object dichotomy. It is a philosophy that has its basis in experience, not speculation or hypothesis. And in positing this, phenomenology comes really close to existentialism which scorns universal truth and encourages individual perspective. It lays stress on individual existence and consequently on subjectivity, individual freedom and choice.

A philosophical method "invented or at least named by...Husserl" phenomenology, was turned to "existential" concerns by Sartre who saw it as "a device for self-examination" (Solomon 60) and was most strongly reflected in Sartre's phenomenological novel *Nausea*.

Existentialism: a Subjective Journey through Choices

Existentialism as expression is the character of the philosophy, art and literature of the period of the World Wars and all-pervading anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness. (Tillich 126)

¹ Coined by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* in which he distinguished between objects as phenomena, which are objects as shaped and grasped by human sensibility and understanding, and objects as *things-in-themselves* or noumena.

Existentialism which rose and peaked as a philosophical aftermath of the World Wars lays a lot of stress on distinctive individual identity. It rejects imitation and believes that the human has no particular essence which precedes or determines its existence and therefore a human's values cannot be prescribed or handed down. He is totally free to act in any which way he wants. At the core of the human lies 'nothing'. In discussing Sartre and the concept of 'nothing', Hazel E. Barnes in *Existential Ethics* points out that, "The consciousness which sets man apart from the rest of Being is defined as the process causing Nothingness to emerge like a hole at the heart of Being" (11) and further, "He is that part of Being which is able to stand back, and by a sort of psychic withdrawal, assume a point of view on the rest of Being" (11). Barnes shows how Sartre has stressed this psychic distance in man as the source of his freedom. We find Barnes echoing this in *The Literature of Possibility*, when she says how for Sartre "...the essence of man is to have no fixed essence but to be constantly in the process of freely making his own nature" (31). Sartre maintains that the 'essence' of the human is actually a lack of essence and herein lies the source of his freedom. Who one is, is determined by the choices one makes. One is continuously involved in creating oneself through the choices one makes. By choosing, one elevates oneself from object status and prevents oneself from remaining a thing in a dehumanised world. True self is a subjective discovery and it is revealed in every reaction or stand taken by the individual in a particular circumstance. However, along with the realization of freedom and the possibility of 'choice' is also intertwined the dread of dissolution for man exists in the face of inevitable death.

The sense of freedom fills man with dread and anxiety for it has its roots in the recognition of death - his 'Being-towards-death'.ⁱ Actual death confronts the human entity with the possibility of not-being-there or nothingness, in other words his not existing at all. Thus, his 'being' automatically includes nothingness, the possibility of his non-being: "...Non-being is omnipresent and produces anxiety even where an immediate threat of death is absent" (Tillich 45). Man carries this possibility, this awareness of death with him as long as he lives. The unpredictability of existence drives man to the edge where he finds himself face-to-face with the ambiguity and paradox of the human condition and realizes that he is neatly walled in by chance, contingency and above all death and the only way out for him is 'choice'. Thus, his existence in the face of death and his limited tenure on this earth are what make his choices meaningful and prompt him towards making authentic choices. Man keeps defining and redefining himself by the choices he makes and this is a painstaking process for him, as he has to learn to live with uncompromising and unyielding freedom, total isolation and the dread of taking complete responsibility for his thoughts and deeds, and all this, in a universe governed by irrationality and pure contingency.

The human thus has to reconcile with two startling truths: the first is that his coming into this world is a pure accident; secondly, his existence is and will always be uncertain in the face of death.

From the Philosophy of Existentialism to the Conclusion that Life is Absurd

This probability of the dissolution of the self into nothingness is organic to man. If one were to go by the idea, which Sartre put forth in *Being and Nothingness*, then man is the manifestation of 'nothingness' with a possibility of being a lot of things. Sartre uses the metaphor of a canvas to describe 'nothingness' on which man creates his 'being'. He also differentiates between the 'Being-in-itself' (*l'être-en-soi*) and the 'Being-for-itself' (*l'être-pour-soi*) (25). According to Sartre:

Being-in-itself has no within which is opposed to a without...the in-itself has nothing secret; it is solid (massif). (28)

To understand a rock (Being-in-itself), he says, you have to become the rock, which is not possible. Generally, one tries to understand the rock by understanding what it is *not* or that one is *not it*. Man always tries to understand the *en soi* in relation to himself and what he is *not* or can never become. Thus man tries to understand himself not in respect to or not in the light of what he *is* but in the light of what he *is not*. This absence of all that he is *not* brings in hopelessness, which is compounded by the hopelessness he experiences when he realizes that he can never be one with the *en soi* that is the rock. Thus he becomes aware of his ‘nothingness’ and conscious of some kind of lack.

Thus it can be inferred that man encounters and experiences ‘nothingness’ due to the following reasons:

1. Alienation - This alienation is not only that of man from the *en soi* but also implies the paradoxical alienation of man from his authentic self.
2. Death - The possibility of dissolution and non-being which man carries all along; man’s ultimate seal of finitude, which is death.
3. Despair – which is compounded with helplessness at the inability to be the *en soi*; in other words a sense of lack or absence or not being able to be one with ‘the Other’.
4. Unfulfilled expectations – a void or a negation results when there is an incongruity between what one expects and what happens.
5. Time – The realization of time fleeting and one’s sheer helplessness in the face of its destructive force and one’s inability to stop or control it.

This stark encounter with ‘nothingness’ in one or another form leads one to conclude that life is meaningless, one’s coming into this world a matter of chance and one exists in temporality as F H Heinemann puts in *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*, “...it is not the universe that is absurd, but man, who projects his absurdity into the world” (168).

Theism and Existentialism

Existentialists like Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers and Paul Tillich have also pondered over the logic of existence but one vital and key difference between the theistic and atheistic schools of Existentialism is that where the atheistic existentialists reject outright any inherent meaning in life, the theistic thinkers insist that life is without a meaning man can understand.

Kierkegaard was the first among the line of revolutionary thinkers to defy Platonic philosophy, which advocated universal good and considered it both ethical and moral and the person who abided by it, as the one to have attained perfection in existence. Instead, Kierkegaard insisted on individual good and the need for every individual to find his own unique vocation. In his book *Contemporary Philosophy*, while discussing Kierkegaard under the section “Theistic Existentialism”, S J Frederick Copleston says that Kierkegaard believed that man could transcend the universal and attain this individuality through, ‘the affirmation in faith, of his relationship to God’ and “become(s) the individual in the highest possible degree” (151). But unlike atheistic existentialists Kierkegaard does not believe in the finitude of man but

says that man is the fusion of the finite and the infinite and it is only because man is full of despair that he fails to see this infinite aspect and the inherent divinity of the 'being'. Kierkegaard relied on divinity for authentic choice, which came to be termed the 'Leap of Faith', which implied believing in something without evidence.

At the same time Copleston admits that although he discusses Kierkegaard under "Theistic Existentialism", Kierkegaard cannot be called a Christian Existentialist in the true sense for he was against Hegel's stand on Christianity as "the absolute religion" (154). Instead, he believed that the individual had to take this 'leap' from the state of a non-believer to that of a believer to counter the futility of existence and the accompanying feeling of dread and anxiety and thereby give meaning to his existence. This 'leap' involved discarding the world of illusions and placing unconditional faith in God. It likewise included "the reduction of Christianity to a polite and moralistic humanism with theism thrown in" which was represented by "The Danish State Church" (155).

Likewise Karl Jaspers, who in Copleston's opinion deliberated on the life and thoughts of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche for he regarded them as the "diverse possibilities of human existence" (156) too suggested the 'leap' when faced with a 'boundary situation', in other words, a situation where one apparently reaches a dead end. Jaspers was a firm believer in the immense potential and the ability of the individual to transcend. The 'leap' according to him was the gateway for the individual to perceive his own limitless freedom and experience Existenz² in the real sense. The other alternative was to sink in despair.

Yet another existentialist Gabriel Marcel makes a distinction between the "problematical world", which is "subjected to scientific analysis and description" and the world of "ontological mystery" (168) where, as Copleston puts it according to Marcel:

I transcend the narrowness of egoism and the subject-object relation...and on the plane of inter-subjectivity, I "discover" God as the personal transcendent Absolute, and I become conscious of the orientation of my personality towards the absolute thou, God. (170)

Paul Tillich, another of the Christian existentialists, a Protestant Theologian and a Stoic, advocates true courage in order to counter the absurdity and nothingness of existence. He encourages the individual to draw strength and power from his own 'being' to counter 'non-being' and all those forces that negate the 'being'. He draws attention to the power of the 'being' in his famous existential statement, "Courage is the self-affirmation of being in spite of the fact of non-being" (Tillich 178). He believes in the transcendental human and his ability to be all that he could become and looks upon God as the ground of 'being' instead of some detached super power. By 'Courage', Tillich means the universal reason at the centre of the 'being', which enables him to judge rationally in a universe governed by irrationality. This

² Existenz: the ...being which is essentially the potentiality of its own being. This is what Jaspers called Existenz. Existenz in the sense of Existenz is always possible existence...Existenz is something 'individual' and 'personal'(Copleston 160).

same ‘Courage’ helps man exist in the face of death and non-being and this in reality is the “God above God” (182 - 190) – the divine centre within each individual and not any external source of power.

Atheism and Existentialist Thinkers

Sartre, the most noted of existentialists strongly maintained that there is no absolute, fixed, external nature that corresponds to human consciousness. His famous position on man who is ‘condemned to be free’ implies that the existentialists did not believe in any absolute ultimate omnipresent power like God. They also challenged and reversed the Platonic philosophy, which supposed a God-centric universe and stated that the world and ‘Creation’ is actually a replica of the idea in the mind of the ‘Creator’. William Barrett reiterates the one long conflict in western philosophy between existentialism and essentialism in *Irrational Man*:

Plato’s is the classical and indeed archetypal expression of a philosophy which we may now call *essentialism*, which holds that essence is prior in reality to existence. *Existentialism*, by contrast, is the philosophy that holds existence to be prior to essence. (Barrett 104)

Existentialists claimed that it was not essence or in other words the idea, which came earlier, but existence. Man exists and then determines his essence through conscious and informed acts of will and no two individuals can have the same essence. Barrett discusses Sartre and many other atheists, who thought on existentialist lines, and who believed that the essence of the human is lack of essence which is the source of individual freedom. Man has the liberty to choose his essence and define himself. His decisions are what determine his self. He is continuously involved in the process of creating himself through his choices.

Thus it can be inferred that the atheistic existentialists comply with one aspect of the ‘Leap of Faith’, which Kierkegaard proposed (though he never used the term himself but he implied it in so many words), as discarding the world of make-believe, but they maintain that the ones who place their complete faith in God are not courageous enough and do not seek the truth to the end. The atheists refuse to fall back on the support system called God. Thus atheistic existentialism supposes a world where Gods have no role to play and Dostoyevsky and Camus even go to the extent of suggesting that only in a Godless universe can one’s actions be truly meaningful as nothing can be predicted, predefined or predetermined.

However Camus was strongly against the existentialists’ preoccupation with and treatment of the emotion of ‘Angst’ as supreme or something that cannot be transcended. He regarded it as just another experience like happiness or misery and this is where he radically differed from Sartre who insisted upon a single unified way of understanding as the real way of existing. He felt that Sartre’s stand eliminated and omitted too many elements of human experience and there could not be any one prevailing mood, which dominated the entire life. Roquentin’s nausea, he sees, as a “genuine but typically intellectual illness, the sign that mind and life are working at cross purposes,” which he calls “...intellectual narcissism” (Bree 138).

Camus too believed in one's chance occurrence in a given universe, in other words a readymade setting in the form of the concrete physical world but laid a lot of emphasis on common sense or a range of alternatives instead of philosophy to live life.

Unlike Sartre, Camus did not believe in the absolute freedom of the individual. Freedom is finite because existence is finite and the individual can choose only from a certain range of possibilities. His choice depends on how he relates to what has been dealt to him. Camus attached a lot of significance to the human body and the physical joys of living which according to him constitute the truth of life. His absurd hero Mersault personifies the strange happiness one experiences by just being in the world. Camus' philosophy is elevating because he maintains that to face the absurdity of existence requires the spirit of true heroism like Sisyphus. Sisyphus is truly tragic and at the same time heroic because he is aware of his plight. It is the recognition of his torment and its irreversibility that turns his misery into victory.

Conclusion

Existentialist thought emerges as neither a singular doctrine nor a fixed system but a dynamic field that negotiates the tensions between freedom and determinism, faith and atheism, subjectivity and universality. From Hegel's ontology of becoming to Heidegger's temporality of *Dasein* and Sartre's radical assertion that "existence precedes essence," the existentialist tradition reflects a continuous questioning of what it means to be. Christian existentialists such as Tillich underscore the human search for ultimate concern, while atheistic thinkers like Sartre and Camus highlight the burden of freedom and the absurd. Together, these philosophical currents and their literary articulations illuminate existentialism as a human-centered discourse that privileges choice, authenticity, and responsibility in the face of uncertainty. Ultimately, existentialism endures not because it resolves the human predicament but because it sustains the inquiry into being itself.

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