

Existentialist Interpretation of the Ontological Argument: A Philosophical Analysis

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Abstract:

Every time period has its own ideology and this is reflected in its philosophic thought having variations in the interpretation in problem solving and it is dependent on society and its culture. Each school of western philosophy indulged in investigating the “primary substance” or “ultimate reality” etc. in order to find roots of philosophy on which whole system resides despite the differences in methods and approaches. God’s existence has been the central point of attraction among philosophers, who either tries to prove the reality of God’s existence or tries to examine the very existence of God on various grounds. From Greek to modern philosophy, there is enormous change in interest from nature to man. The study of man has become a prominent issues and central theme in contemporary philosophical studies and Existentialism become a leading example of it. Existentialism is a philosophy of reaffirming and regaining the lost status of man in the advanced scientific and technological society. It is a philosophical tendency emphasizing on concrete individual existence, freedom, choice and self-transcendence. Existentialist philosophy is a revolt against the predominance of the essentialist element in most of the history of western philosophy, it is also against absurdity of pure thought, absolute reason etc. This paper explores the ontological argument for the existence of God through the lens of existentialist philosophy, offering a critical reinterpretation that challenges traditional metaphysical assumptions. The analysis foregrounds the existentialist emphasis on subjective and individual existence, and the primacy of being (existence) over essence rather than affirming or denying the ontological argument on logical grounds, this approach interrogates its existential relevance and limitations.

Keywords: Existentialism, Ontological Argument, Authenticity, Freedom, Nothingness, Transcendence, Consciousness etc.

Introduction:

In western theology ‘the concept of God’ have characterized in many different ways, Knowledge about Reality is the underlying issues of all philosophy, for some ultimate reality is the source and ground of all, else for others it is the concept of maximally perfect being; some considered as ‘material’, ‘spiritual’, some says it is ‘one’ and for others it is ‘many’, there are still others, who declare it as water, air, fire etc, and corresponding to these various conceptions of Reality. The philosophers of pre-Socratic philosophy could not speak anything definite about the ultimate unity of the universe, yet that there is an eternal, original, unchanging substance which underlies all the changes of the natural world. Greek philosophy thus begins with an inquiry into the “**essence**” of the objective world.

The early Greek philosophers trace the origin of the world of nature to one or more than one physical substances, such physical elements had been considered to be the ‘stuff’ of the world. They did also speak

about how the things and beings of the physical world evolved out of the ‘original stuff’. And so far, the systems they developed could be characterised as Ontological. They also raised the metaphysical problem of change and permanence. But the problem is whether change or permanence is the reality. Thus, while for Heraclitus, Reality is Flux, for Parmenides it is an appearance of reality which is permanent and abiding. This problem was also dwelt upon by later thinkers, Empedocles, Anaxagoras and others. Pre-Socrates thinkers could, however, hardly conceive of a reality lying beyond the world of nature.

The second phase of philosophy starts with Socrates and his followers that was mostly concerned with ethos of human society. Socrates himself attempted a clear-cut definition of justice and that of the Highest good. Socrates was not however a full-fledged system of philosophy; it was essentially an ethical discourse. But he laid the foundation of speculative thought which found expression in the comprehensive systems developed by his successors, Plato and Aristotle. The two great philosophers of antiquity made an articulate treatment of all the fundamental problems of philosophy, viz, “the metaphysical problems concerning reality and the humanistic problems relating to man’s knowledge, conduct and place in the world-order”¹. There is diversity of opinions among Greek philosophers but their speculation is on essence of the world through objective knowledge.

From Existentialism, a new philosophical inquiry was about to begin which is the result of excessive dehumanisation. It rises against the rationalism, idealism and scientific knowledge etc. Despite its claim to be novel and unprecedented, existentialism represents a long tradition in the history of philosophy in the west, extending back at least to Socrates (469-399 BC). The existentialists, however, points to the fact that whatever be the conception of Reality, its focus is on the proper way of acting rather than on an abstract set of theoretical truths. And philosophically speaking, existentialism was caused to rise chiefly due to the divergent and contradictory thought of Greek and modern philosophers since Plato because they give dominance to reason and abstract concepts over feeling and passion of human beings in the field of philosophical thinking.

Existentialism, a philosophical tendency emphasizing on the concrete individual existence, freedom, choice, and self-transcendence, authenticity, etc, it signifies a recognition of a certain precedence or primacy of existence in reference to essences, not in things in general, but only in man. The history of existentialism may be traced back to the renaissance humanism of the 15th and 16th centuries, with its defiance of dogmatic authority, its affirmation of the human, its love of freedom, it passionately advocates and defends the Enlightenment vision of an emancipated humanity and a world free domination. Above all, existentialism shares with the Enlightenment of an uncompromising respect for the individual, and unquenchable thirst for freedom. Existentialism views all things from a certain point of view- that of the subject or subjectivity. It is, in fact, begins “as a voice raised in protest against the absurdity of pure thought, a logic which is not the logic of thinking but the immanent movement of being.

H.H. Titus holds that, “existentialism represents an attitude or outlook that emphasizes human existence- that is, the distinctive qualities of individual person- rather than man in the abstract or nature and the world in general”.²

According to *J. P. Sartre*, “Existentialism is a philosophy of reaffirming and regaining the lost status of man in the advanced scientific and technological society. Therefore, this is a theory of individual meaning which asks each man to ponder over the reason for his existence”.³

The most controversial problem in the history of philosophy and religion is the existence of God, but meanwhile it is also true that the history of philosophy aims to give connected account of the different attempts which have been made to solve the problem of existence, or to render intelligible to us our world of experience with reference to the problem of the existence of God, **Swami Vivekananda** raised a very pertinent questions: “if the notion of God has a necessity about it, why is it that people of all religions and sects always try to prove God’s existence? Why must we take recourse to rational demonstration of the existence of God? In fact, at times **Vivekananda** does not feel inclined to make any efforts for the demonstration of God’s existence for the simple reason that an outright rejection of God is simply impossible. The universe is an expression or product of God’s essence: everything is God’s thought, the logos, and the phenomenal world – proceeds from him. But the manifestation is not separate from God; it is living garment, not something cast off by him. God and his creation are one; he is in his creation and his creation is in him. They are one and the same in the sense that he reveals himself in his creatures; the invisible and incomprehensible one makes himself visible. The universe appears to man as a divided, manifold, and plural universe, as a theophany; but in his own nature it is one single undivided whole, a whole in which all opposites are reconciled.

It is to be noted here that for theistic or religious thinkers God’s existence is self-evident and requires no proof. On the contrary, atheist have little concern whether God exists or not. But generally, man is obliged by the nature to seek logical confirmation of his beliefs. This compels philosophers to find some rational justifications for the existence of God, who is the basis of religious faith in man. In philosophical terminology, the question related with the existence of God involve disciplines of epistemology, ontology and axiology.

The discourse of the present study includes Ontological argument and the Existentialist perspective in this regard. Here, the point of attention is that both Ontological argument and the Existentialism deals with the study of Ontology. If we have a look on the etymological meaning of the word ‘ontology’, we find that in metaphysics, ontology is the philosophical study of being as well as related concepts such as existence, becoming and reality. This definition automatically proves above mentioned assertion that the ontological argument and the philosophy of existentialism both are concerned with the Ontology.

The difference between religious philosophers and existentialist thinkers is that religious thinkers are concern with the existence of God, the transcendent being, while existentialist philosopher’s chief concern is the very existence of man, the human being.

The central theme of existentialism is “*existence precedes essence*”. The distinction between existence and essence is one of the oldest in philosophy and has very wide applicability and usefulness. This expresses a philosophical attitude directly opposed to one of the profound, natural and influential intellectual dispositions and styles of interpretation in the history of western philosophy. Platonism is the classical example of this philosophical style. To say that anything ‘exists’ is simply to point to the fact ‘**that it is**’. Existence is characterized by concreteness and particularity and also by a sheer givenness. According to them, first of all, man exists, encounter himself, surges up the world and define him afterwards. All the existentialists agree in one point that existence cannot be conceived, it is to be experienced. It was Plato who regarded essence as prior to existence. For him, essence precedes existence. But existentialists reject the platonic dictum “*essence precedes existence*” and declare that “*existence precedes essence*”. According to them, man is not born with an essence. It is his existence that creates his essence. Therefore, existence is prior to essence. This view of existence and essence is contrary to the theological view of the human condition in which the essence of the man is formed in the mind of God

before man's existence. Sartre reverses this theological idea for his atheistic existentialism, maintaining that man first exists, and then has complete responsibility for defining who he is.

As Sartre says, *"We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and defines himself afterwards. If man, as the existentialism sees him, is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself."*⁴

Existentialism is opposed to essentialism and such other doctrines of philosophy which believe the priority of essence over existence. The history of western philosophy is the living record of the fact that since Plato to Hegel, philosophy in Europe was predominant with the ontological principle of essence or abstraction or universal ego. Existentialism opposed all absolute doctrine which regard man as the manifestation of an absolute or of an infinite substance. It is thus opposed to any form of objectivism or scientism since all these stress cause realities of external fact.

Existential perspective on God's existence:

Having a close observation of existential philosophy, we find that both 'theistic' and 'atheistic' existentialists have interpreted the existence of God in different manners. No doubt they all are not interested in proving the existence of God, but even then, they have their own perspectives regarding the notion and existence of God. Theistic existentialists consider God to be '**source of one's being**', the '**ground of all being**' or '**one's ultimate concern**'. They have faith in God and say that we encounter God at the deepest level of human existence. They often regarded God to be the '**deepest subjective truth**', which means it cannot be forced upon us outwardly rather it imitates itself inwardly. It cannot be known objectively because it is known by subjective experience. In this reference they give the example of God's knowledge. Kierkegaard opines that God cannot be known by any objective proofs, arguments or objective procedure for they give us only uncertainty. He says that reason is unable to provide us certain knowledge about God, as the knowledge of God is possible only by feelings, emotions and faith. He clearly announced that God's existence is a matter of faith, not of reason. If we have a firm faith in God and our feelings towards God are real, only then we have a realization of God (truth). For this realization no external proofs are required because truth (God) is subjectivity.

This is the understanding of existentialism that Sartre stood for, systematically developed, strengthened, amplified and popularized to the point that his name almost became synonymous with existentialism. Sartre says, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself and that this is the first principle of existentialism" [Sartre, 1969:15]. This statement is made on the strength that God does not exist, at least for Sartre. Therefore, man is abandoned: thrown into existence and abandoned in the world.

The second implication of the abandonment of man in the world as a result of the nonexistence of God is that there is no ultimate reason why anything has happened or why things are the way they are and not some other way. This means that the individual in effect has been thrown into existence without any real reason for being rather he is abandoned in the world to create his own future.

The third implication of our abandonment and the nonexistence of God is that there is no determinism. This means that man is free. In fact, according to Sartre, man is freedom. He is condemned to be free. He identifies freedom with the very being of man. Freedom is the being for consciousness and consciousness is the being –for-itself, which is the human being.

We will begin with theistic existentialist's views regarding the concept of God; theistic existentialists consider God to be "source of one's ultimate concern". They believe in the existence of God and says that

we encounter God at the deepest level of human existence. They often regarded “God to be the deepest subjective truth”. The famous theistic existentialist thinker, Soren Kierkegaard accepts that “the existence of God is an indubitable fact. As God is infinite, there is an impossible fact. And there is an impassable gulf between God and man, who is finite. Bridging this gulf is not possible with rational systems, best only with a leap of faith not with a theory of knowledge, but with an act of commitment or choice. Such a leap is a self-commitment to the “objective uncertainty”, “a leap into the unknown”. He further states, “faith as the leap which links the objective uncertainty and subjective certainty. Such a leap is a venture, a challenge, which man has to struggle to achieve. Faith is both a gift and a choice, a gift as man is given the capacity to make the choice, a choice as it has to be appropriated by oneself”. Here, it is to be noted that if “man is given the capacity to make choice”, then the question is who has given capacity to man to make choice? It is God or Divine existence”?

In contrast to theistic existentialism, atheistic existentialism that maintains that the rejection of God's existence proves at least one being is there (in the universe) whose existence precedes essence, and this being is man or human actuality. The famous dictum of existentialism, “Existence precedes Essence”, which is given by Sartre is the soul of existentialist thinking. Sartre distinguishes between unconscious object and conscious being. He believes that human being is self-conscious which means he is conscious about existence while unconscious (material) objects only exist, which means they are not conscious about their existence.

Conclusion:

According to Sartre, “existence precedes essence” is to assert that there is no such predetermined essence which defined that how an individual creates and lives. Sartre, says, “man first exists than he defines himself”. So human existence is not determined by any preceding essence. He rejects the existence of God. If God is created man, then man's essence is already present in God's mind. If man is a created being, he cannot be free. So, there is no God. Concept of freedom is prominent in the philosophy of Sartre and other existentialist thinkers. Freedom plays a very important role in human life because by exercising freedom man gains power to choose in all alternatives available in his life. Sartre boldly declares that “man is condemned to be free”, he is condemned to take his own decisions, to choose from the alternatives. The presence of God is explicitly rejected by Sartre as the foundation of ethico-religious philosophy. He has accepted two types of being: one is “Being for itself” (pour soi) and “Being in itself” (en-soi). According to Sartre previous means individual or human being, while later is related to material objects. In other words, it can be said that a free and conscious man is “being for itself” while contrary to this those things (objects) which are not conscious are called “things in itself”, because it is unable to choose for itself.

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