

# THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE EXISTENTIALIST MOVEMENT IN THE DISCOVERY OF THE SELF

Justin Arinze Egbe, PhD  
Department of Public Administration and Policy Studies,  
Tansian University Umunya Anambra State  
justin4all2004@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

*After the medieval era of philosophy up to the Enlightenment era culminating with the French revolution of 1789-1799, there was tremendous broadening of philosophy from the narrow and conventional thoughts of Greek philosophers. Serious attention shifted from Church and Christian philosophers too, such as Augustinian, Thomistic and the whole of Scholastic thoughts. What this means is that more countries and people got interested in philosophy which became a platform to expressing how they viewed the world and the human condition. The most dramatic philosophical movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was the Existentialist intellectual movement. The existentialists set out to tackle the human condition of their time by focusing more on human person other than the abstract realities. These existentialist thinkers believed that philosophy should be more of Humanism, and as such, insisted that truth is subjective and not objective. By this, an individual can readily discover his essence and purpose in life since he or she has freedom of choice to choose what is best. Hence, subjectivity, individuality and freedom formed the bases of existential thought. The researcher discovered that philosophy was freed from dogmatism by the existentialist movement. Thus, existentialism made philosophy more concrete to the individual.*

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Life, Discovery, Self, Intellectual Movement

## **1.0 Introduction**

Existentialism is an intellectual movement that began in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century precisely in France. It sprang up after the events of the two world wars and the Nazi's anti-semitism. It can be said to be a response to the horrors of the wars and also a moment of reassessing the freedom, existence, and the human condition. The major proponents of this movement were Jean- Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Soren Kierkegaard etc. Existentialism is a paradigm movement in philosophy. The idea is a direct negation or opposite of the conventional traditional Greek philosophy. The Greek philosophy championed by the thoughts of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle was hinged on three basic theories namely: Epistemology, Ethics, and Metaphysics. Hubert Dreyfus elucidated on these theories thus:

**Theory of knowledge: What can we know?** Plato saw that, by becoming disinterested and objective, one could discover timeless truths about geometry and physics that held for all rational beings. Plato also realized, and happily accepted, the fact that such theoretical knowledge had no place for perception, skill, intuition, emotion, the body, folk wisdom, and tradition. In becoming a theoretical thinker, one leaves all that behind. However, the Hebrews felt they grasped the truth not by detached contemplation but by total commitment, that is, being true to God by keeping His covenant. He was their God, and this was their truth, unique to them, that gave them their identity. The difference from the Greeks is dramatic. For the Greeks, truth is open to all people since they all have universal, rational souls; for the Hebrews, truth is not universal. It is local and historical, revealed at a specific time and place to a particular people and preserved in a particular tradition.<sup>1</sup> These distinctions have divided truth into two, namely, rational and revealed truth. The truth by the Greeks is broad and open to all. The truth by the Jews is what is called Revealed Truth (Theology). Each one of this standing alone cannot give us the complete truth, hence the need for complementarity.

**Ethics: How should we act?:** The aim of Greek ethics was to get beyond personal preferences, prejudices, and desires in order to discover the highest good for all. For Socrates, this took the form of seeking universal rules for right action. For Plato, it was based on finding out what all human beings really needed and how to act in order to get it. According to both philosophers, people are individuated only by the situation they happen to be in, and by their imperfections. All morally perfect people, in the same situation, would act in the same way.

The ultimate authority is God, not reason. The difference this makes can be seen by looking at Plato's Euthyphro. Socrates asks Euthyphro whether an action is pious because the gods love it, or if the gods love it because it is pious. Euthyphro's Greek answer is: the gods approve what is pious. For the Greeks, what is pious or good is determined by rational criteria that are binding on all men, and even on the gods. The Hebrews' answer is just the opposite: an action is good because God approves it or commands it.<sup>2</sup>

**Metaphysics: What is real?:** If theory describes what is real, then the objects of theory such as timeless, abstract, conceptual structures are the most real. The truths of science and mathematics have always been true and always will be. The cosmos simply repeats itself in cycles. History, too, runs in cycles and so repeats the same general pattern. Even in a person's life, there is nothing radically new. The true self was implicit from the start, like the tree in the seed. Thus, we get the idea of human development as self-realization. If you die to the body, which only gets in the way of being rational, you get out of time, change, conflict, and death. Ultimate reality is not temporal and historical, but eternal. As your rational soul merges with the rational structure of reality, you become eternal too. To sum up: The Greek philosophers saw that, if one pursued perfection by doing theory, great things could be obtained. Disinterested theory revealed objective truth, a set of abstract principles that held for all men, at all places, and all times. This is still the goal of every discipline that claims to be scientific. Rational morality promised fulfillment of

<sup>1</sup>Hubert Dreyfus, "The Roots of Existentialism" *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 137.

<sup>2</sup>Hubert Dreyfus, "The Roots of Existentialism" *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 138.

one's universal human needs, lucidity in one's actions, and the assurance that one's actions would be intelligible to any other rational being anywhere at any time.<sup>3</sup>

This work shall therefore discuss Existentialism, and in doing that, shall focus on the historical development of the Movement, existentialist thinkers. Also, this work will attempt to discuss the epistemological issues of existentialism and its philosophical implications.

## 2.0 What is Existentialism?

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emphasizes individual existence, freedom of choice, and personal responsibility. It challenges people to reflect carefully and realistically on their life and to make choices that are meaningful and authentic. Existentialism is not so much a set of beliefs or doctrines, but rather a way of looking at the world and human existence. Existentialists believe that life has no inherent meaning or purpose and that each individual must create meaning and purpose in his own life. They also recognize the ultimate freedom and responsibility of the individual and the importance of making choices that are based on reason and ethics. Existentialism is not just a philosophical movement; it is also a form of therapy, helping individuals to confront their anxieties and fears and to accept the realities of life. It is a philosophy that encourages individuals to take control of their lives and to live fully and authentically.<sup>4</sup>

## 3.0 HISTORICAL MOVEMENT OF EXISTENTIALISM

### 3.1 Blaise Pascal

Blaise Pascal (1623–62) was the next generation of thinkers after Rene Descartes. In his deep religious experience, he was convinced that the Hebrew/Christian God had nothing in common with the eternal, intelligible presence, described by the philosophers. He was a living God to whom individuals could pray, and who paradoxically both reveals and conceals Himself in history. Pascal wrote: “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers”<sup>5</sup> This insight led to many other insights, which made Pascal a proto-existential thinker.

#### 3.1.0 Pascal Blaise on 'Self'

Pascal saw that human beings had no essence to self-realize, but rather defined themselves through their cultural practices. “Custom is our nature,”<sup>6</sup> he wrote. Since Pascal's time, people in the West have understood themselves as subjects over against objects, computers, and, most recently, resources that should get the most out of their possibilities. They then tend to become what they interpret themselves to be, but this just shows that human beings are none of these particular cultural interpretations of their essence. Precisely because they can be shaped by any of these understandings of human being, it becomes clear that they have no essence, but that they are open possibilities of

<sup>3</sup>Hubert Dreyfus, “The Roots of Existentialism” *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 139.

<sup>4</sup>SomDutt, “Existentialism: A Comprehensive Guide A Closer Look at Existentialism and its Meaning” (Dec 17, 2022), np, retrieved on June 27, 2023, <https://medium.com/philosophy-simplified/existentialism-a-comprehensiveguidefe17cdd37b8f#:~:text=The%20Four%20Pillars%20of%20Existentialism,responsibility%2C%20meaning%2C%20and%20authenticity.>

<sup>5</sup>Pascal Blaise, *Pensees*, Trans. W.F. Trotter (Newyork: Dutton, 1966), 309.

<sup>6</sup>Pascal Blaise, *Pensees*, Trans. W.F. Trotter (Newyork: Dutton, 1958), 89.

self-definition. Although the self has no nature, according to Pascal, it does have a structure.<sup>7</sup>

Plato already understood the self as combining two contradictory sets of factors: body and soul. Pascal, however, realized, that, according to Christianity, both sets of factors are essential and the self is, thus, not just an unstable combination, but something much more upsetting, an unstable synthesis of two incompatible sets of factors. As Pascal puts it: “What a chimera then is man! What a novelty! What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy! Judge of all things, imbecile worm of the earth; depositary of truth, a sink of uncertainty and error; the pride and refuse of the universe!”<sup>8</sup> According to Pascal, a person's highest achievement was not to deny or overcome this contradiction by getting rid of half the self but to relate to one's self in such a way as to be fully alive to the tension. He noted that “we do not display greatness by going to one extreme, but in touching both extremes at once, and filling all the intervening space”.<sup>9</sup> So he held that we must take a stand on ourselves in our way of life that expressed both our greatness and our misery, avoiding both pride and despair, as Jesus did in humbly accepting that he was both God and Man. But Pascal had little to say about how normal human beings should do this.

### 3.2 Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)

Søren Kierkegaard two hundred years later, the first person to call himself an existential thinker, took up the insights of Pascal to combat the influence of Hegel, the last philosopher to attempt to synthesize our Greek and Judeo-Christian heritage. Kierkegaard argued that Hegel did not succeed. As usual, the detached reflection and the truth, universality, and eternity it allegedly revealed covered up the Christian message. So, instead of trying to understand the Judeo-Christian revelation in Greek terms, Kierkegaard highlighted the opposition. He showed that any attempt to rationalize the Christian experience resulted in claims that, to the Greeks, would have sounded absurd.

#### 3.2.0 Kierkegaard on Subjectivity of Truth and Self

According to Kierkegaard, truth is subjectivity, the individual is higher than the universal, and eternity is only possible in time. Kierkegaard elaborated Pascal's anti-Greek definition of the self as a contradiction that has to take a stand on itself in its way of life. Kierkegaard affirms that the self is a synthesis between two sets of opposed factors, not just a combination. That is, that each set is essential and requires the other. Here is Kierkegaard's dense definition of the self: Despair is a sickness of the spirit, of the self, and so can have three forms: being unconscious of the despair of having a self (inauthentic despair), desperately not wanting to be oneself, and despairingly wanting to be oneself. The human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. Such a relation which relates to itself must either have established itself or been established by

<sup>7</sup>Hubert Dreyfus, “The Roots of Existentialism” *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed.

Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 140.

<sup>8</sup>Pascal Blaise, *Pensees*, Trans. W.F. Trotter (Newyork: Dutton, 1958), 43.

<sup>9</sup>Pascal Blaise, *Pensees*, Trans. W.F. Trotter (Newyork: Dutton, 1958), 98, #353

something else. The self is such a derived, constituted relation, a relation that relates to itself, and in relating to itself relates to another. The self cannot by itself arrive at or remain in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only in relating to itself by relating to that which has established the whole relation.<sup>10</sup>

### 3.2.1 Ways of Futilely Attempting to be a Self

Like all existential thinkers, Kierkegaard holds that the only test of what is the right way to live is to throw yourself into many ways of life until one discovers which way gets one out of despair. In his earlier works such as *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard describes various ways of life and how they break down. In "Sickness unto Death", he lays out his conclusions summarized thus:

**Spiritlessness:** One has a sense that the self is a contradiction that has to be faced, but one lives in what Pascal called distraction. His example was one could debate, on the basis of principles, how the world should be run, without running the risk of testing these principles in action. This form of distraction is now consummated in talk shows, and especially chat rooms and news groups on the internet.<sup>11</sup> Our world now is more talk and less action. People make promises that they would not fulfil. There are many beautiful ideas in mind that are not executed. All these are called distraction by Pascal, while Kierkegaard calls them despair.

**Spirit/Passion:** If a human being refuses to face the incompatible essential aspects of the self, he or she is not yet a self. To be a self, one must relate oneself to oneself in one's actions by taking a stand on both sets of factors. One must manifest that something about the self is essential by making something in one's life absolute. His Christian view is that the self does not have the truth in it. As a contradiction it does not have in itself the resources to live a stable and meaningful life. And, according to Kierkegaard, everyone who has not managed to perform the impossible task of getting his or her self together in a stable, meaningful life is in despair.<sup>12</sup>

**Self-equilibrium:** The self is in the state of balance of equilibrium only when the self in relating to itself relates to something else.

### 3.3 The Teleological Suspension of the Ethical

Kierkegaard claims that, unless the self relates itself to "something else" with a total commitment, it is in despair, but that, if it has an absolute commitment, it will be able to get the two sets of factors together in such a way that they reinforce each other, and so be in bliss. But the idea that making an unconditional commitment is the highest thing a human being can do raises a serious problem. Abraham had an unconditional commitment to some absolute we can call God, and his absolute commitment to that absolute required that he kills his son, Isaac. His anguish is not simply that he loves his son; it's that, if he kills Isaac, he would be putting himself as an individual with his own relation to the absolute above the ethical. But ethical principles are universal, that is, they are binding on everyone everywhere and they require that no one makes an expectation of him or herself. Still, according to Kierkegaard, the fact that Jews and Christians consider

<sup>10</sup>Soren Kierkegaard, *Journals*, ed and Trans. A. Dru, (London: Oxford University Press, 1989), 43.

<sup>11</sup>Hubert Dreyfus, *On the Internet: Thinking in Action*, ed. R. Kearney and S. Critchley (London: Routledge, 2002)

<sup>12</sup>Hubert Dreyfus, "The Roots of Existentialism" *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 142.

Abraham the father of the faith shows that the Judeo-Christian tradition has, from the start, implicitly held that the individual is higher than the universal.<sup>13</sup> In any case, a shared morality is essential for us to recognize and resist our selfish impulses while taking on our social responsibilities, and explaining our actions to others and ourselves.

### 3.4 Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Like Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky shares Pascal's insight that, to be a self is to be composed of contradictory components and to have to take a stand on those factors in the way one lives. For Dostoyevsky, as for Kierkegaard, there is no moral or religious way to argue which stand is right; the right stand is the one that the roots of existentialism work. If your stand on the self leads you to despair and suicide, then that is not the right way to live. If it gives you joy, then you have found the right way to relate yourself to yourself.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.5 Nietzsche (1844-1900)

Nietzsche reacted against the Enlightenment promise that reason, disinterested objectivity, and scientific truth would save our culture from dogmatism, superstition, and fanaticism. All the existential thinkers share the view that what Nietzsche called “the Socratic will to truth” has not fulfilled its promise but, rather, has undermined the possibility of a good life. What they differ on is what the good life we are missing is and how to resist the result of the Enlightenment's making detached rationality the highest good. As seen, Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky think that existentially Christianized Christianity (purified of Plato) is the source of resistance. But Nietzsche is more radical. He sees Christianity as part of the problem. He held that it was no accident that, thanks to Augustine, Christianity merged with Platonism. He would see existentially Christianized Christianity as a last desperate attempt to find ultimate meaning and purpose where there is none. So, Nietzsche argued that, to save the West, he had to destroy Platonism's belief in the supersensuous and, in destroying it, free us from the debilitating effects of both Philosophy and Judeo-Christianity. In fact, our culture was already beginning to recover from its centuries of addiction to meaning. Nietzsche's account of this “greatest of all events” and whether we should despair over it or be joyful, is focused in his famous pronouncement at the center of 'The Gay Science' that God is Dead. “Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him”.<sup>15</sup>

Nietzsche thinks that philosophers and scientists have killed God by finding out the truth about Him. God and the God's-eye point of view do not make sense: Philosophers demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing something, are supposed to be lacking. There is, thus, no objective truth, yet science is devoted to exposing self-deception.

Nietzsche, like current constructivists, sees scientists, in their devotion to the truth, as bound to realize that all their discoveries are interpretations, thereby undermining

<sup>13</sup>Hubert Dreyfus, “The Roots of Existentialism” *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 143.

<sup>14</sup>Hubert Dreyfus, “The Roots of Existentialism” *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 150-151.

<sup>15</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Trans. W. Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181.

scientists' claim to describe reality as it is in itself. Then, one can still admire science for its honesty and use its results for prediction and control. But science, done as if from God's point of view, will have undermined itself. Nietzsche contends that Christianity too has undermined itself since our whole Enlightenment is built on the Platonic/Christian God, Nietzsche sees that this growing honesty and suspicion has not only killed God but will eventually bring down the West.

### 3.5.0 The Free Spirit

Nietzsche, on the contrary, thinks that human beings can recover from their meaning addiction. So, for him, unlike for Dostoyevsky, the death of God is good news. For Nietzsche, just because everything was built into the Platonic/ Judeo-Christian God, His death gives us a total freedom never before experienced by any culture and has now opened new horizons: create new polytheistic gods, new suns, new values, and even create new selves.<sup>16</sup>

He vehemently believes that Christians are weak, so they have to deny death and meaninglessness and must believe in some version of eternal meaning. Nietzsche, on the contrary, holds that convictions are necessary, but one should not hang onto them but outgrow them. He concludes: "Convictions are the roots of existentialism prisons. Freedom from convictions of any kind, the capacity for an unconstrained view, pertains to strength".<sup>17</sup>

Nietzsche agrees with other existentialist thinkers on the followings:

- 1 There is no human nature. Pascal said: "Custom is our nature." Nietzsche adds: "Man alone among all the animals has no eternal horizons and perspectives"<sup>18</sup>
- 2 Therefore, human nature and the world can radically change. History is more important than a fixed eternity outside of time.
- 3 Commitment is more important than ethical principles. The individual is higher than the universal.
- 4 The involved point of view reveals a reality more basic than that revealed by detached reason and theory. Truth is subjectivity.
- 5 Belief in God as a super-being is no longer possible or necessary for us, but that opens up the possibility of other ways of understanding and relating to the divine.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.6 Jaspers

Picking up from Kierkegaard, Jaspers argues that existence cannot be grasped rationally. Existence is inaccessible to one who asks about it in terms of the purely objective intellect. It is to be grasped, then, "beyond the bounds of objective knowability in a leap that exceeds the capacity of rational insight. Philosophizing begins and ends at a point to which that leap takes me".<sup>20</sup> In his later work, he developed the basic positions of existence-philosophy, in which existence is already determined through the fact that it is that which is "never objectified." It is the "source of my thoughts and actions",<sup>21</sup> which is why one can see his work as the birth certificate of systematic existence philosophy.

<sup>16</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Trans. W. Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 143, 231, 266.

<sup>17</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Trans. W. Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 184.

<sup>18</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Trans. W. Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 192.

<sup>19</sup>Hubert Dreyfus, "The Roots of Existentialism" *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 159.

<sup>20</sup>Jaspers K, *Von der Wahrheit [On Truth]* (Munich: Piper, 1970), 6.

<sup>21</sup>

Jaspers, who, with this work, was appointed full professor of philosophy in Heidelberg in 1921 against the express opposition of Heinrich Rickert, fell back on the concept of “existence” as the basis for determining anew the essence of human being, namely as an essence that comports itself toward itself and thereby toward transcendence.

In the first place, the view that Jaspers maintains here is the view that existence cannot be rationally grasped has nothing to do, as is frequently maintained, with a defensiveness against the sciences. To the contrary; Jaspers expressly stresses that there cannot be an objective cognition as world-orientation without science. Jaspers merely believes that the knowledge that is supplied by the respective sciences must be joined together into a unified world picture by philosophy, proceeding from human existence. According to Jaspers, the methodic irrationalism of existential elucidation is thus not supposed to lead to the rejection of understanding and science. Existence philosophy is, according to Jaspers, the way of thought by means of which man seeks to become himself; it makes use of expert knowledge while at the same time going beyond it.<sup>22</sup>

The path to being is found through existence, which is defined in the first place as a non-epistemic self-relation, and also through its reference to the transcendent, which Jaspers also calls “the Encompassing of all encompassing”.<sup>23</sup> Existence is what relates to itself, and thus to its transcendence. Kierkegaard already saw things in a similar way, when he defined the “self” as a relation “which relates itself to itself, and in relating to itself relates to something else”.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Jaspers rejects this thesis: “the more conception of God, the more self” by Kierkegaard, since with it the concept of existence receives a quasi-religious signature, which did not seem acceptable to Jaspers, at least not in this form.

Existence is for Jaspers thus determined in three ways: first through its non-epistemic self-reference; second through its reference to the transcendent; and third through its communicative reference to the other. Thus, for Jaspers, then, the authentic self is indeed the last point of refuge in a world that is meaningless from the ground up. As he will say immediately after the catastrophic experiences of the Second World War, however, the individual is only then him or herself “when the other is also himself. Freedom is only in the degree to which all are free. But the individual is powerless.”<sup>25</sup>

### 3.7 Martin Heidegger: The Concept Of 'Being'

Heidegger's philosophy of 'Being' is an ontology that seems to focus on self-philosophical consciousness of man. According to him, the question of being has been neglected and forgotten. He continues to argue that this very question greatly contributed to the works of Plato and Aristotle. This assertion cannot be taken to mean that no other philosopher has questioned the meaning of being since the contribution of the two philosophers, rather, this assertion has been interpreted to mean that most philosophers have concentrated on exploring the nature of beings and not the 'being' itself. He therefore comes up with three presuppositions that he believes have contributed to such prejudice and to which he refutes.

<sup>22</sup>Udo Tietz, “German Existence-Philosophy” *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 163.

<sup>23</sup>Jaspers K, *Von der Wahrheit [On Truth]* (Munich: Piper, 1970), 70.

<sup>24</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Trans. W. Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 43.

<sup>25</sup>Udo Tietz, “German Existence-Philosophy” *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 163.

First, the proposition that 'Being' is the 'most universal concept'. He asserts that "an understanding of Being is contained within our every apprehension of beings." In his argument, he brings to fore the philosophical arguments by other philosophers such as Aristotle and Hegel, hence coming up with the conclusion that the concept of Being is not a universal concept, but rather vague and obscure. This argument attempts to bring out the ontological distinction between Being and beings. The philosophical approach by Thomists and Hegel seem to incline towards the idea that Being and beings should not be unified. This therefore creates an implication that if the two concepts cannot be treated as one, then it would be difficult to define the universality of 'Being'. Heidegger best approaches this contentious issue by asserting that it is difficult to come up with a precise definition of 'Being'.

Secondly, according to him, "The concept of Being cannot be understood as a being, and Being cannot be depicted as predicating beings to it." The implication created is that the question of being goes beyond logic. This means that it must surpass the normal way of analyzing things. It is not in doubt that most western philosophers have concentrated entirely on beings as opposed to Being. This makes it difficult to rely on their formulations hence making it vital to adopt a different approach. It is also important to note that Heidegger does not render their formulations useless but rather as unreliable.

Thirdly, he debates on the notion that Being is the self-evident concept. The copula is used regularly in the day-to-day language in an attempt to discuss beings. It is therefore arguable that most philosophers seem to comprehend the concept of 'being' but nevertheless dismiss it as 'unintelligible'. From this, it can be inferred that an appeal to the concept of self-evident should be dismissed as a 'doubtful process' as it is solely based on one's analytical features. Based on the above 'dogmas' laid down by Heidegger, it is apparent that the question of Being has not been adequately addressed by philosophers and as Heidegger puts it, 'the meaning of Being is still veiled in darkness.'<sup>26</sup> What then is 'Being'? From the above argument, it is important to first formulate the question in order to come up with an appropriate answer. This simply means that it would be difficult to rely on any Supreme Being to comprehend the source of Being. The answer should be sought elsewhere.

### 3.8 Heidegger's Ontology in *Being and Time*

Heidegger writes, "The 'essence' of Dasein lies in its existence." This formula was the inspiration for Jean-Paul Sartre's better-known thesis that "existence precedes essence." Again, what can it mean to say that our "essence" lies in our existence? One may assume that by the latter device Heidegger means to indicate that the sense in which Dasein has an essence is rather different from the sense in which non-human things have essences, or perhaps even that Dasein does not really have an essence at all. As far as Heidegger is concerned, the "essence" of this entity lies in its to-be [Zu-sein]. It's being-what-it-is (essentia) must, so far as we can speak of it at all, be conceived in terms of its being (existentia). The phrase "to-be" expresses the idea that we have our being to be, as we may have tasks to do or miles to walk. Our essence, our "what-we-are" (or better, "who-we-are"), is determined by how we live, and how we live is structured by how we are

<sup>26</sup>Ivy Panda, *The Concept of Being by Heidegger Essay* (December 11, 2019), np, retrieved on June 26, 2023 <https://ivypanada.com/essays/the-concept-of-being-by-heidegger/>

called upon to live. Called upon by whom or what? By ourselves. Heidegger makes this statement to infer from it that Dasein is not an entity “present-at-hand.” Concretely speaking, what can it mean to say that how we live determines who we are, our “essence”?<sup>27</sup> It means at least that no essence, nature, or concept that logically precedes the concrete life we lead determines who we are.

### 3.9 Jean-Paul Sartre

#### 3.9.0 Being and Nothingness

*Being and Nothingness* (1943) remains the defining treatise of the existentialist “movement”, along with works from de Beauvoir from this period like “The Ethics of Ambiguity”. Sartre provides a series of arguments for the necessary freedom of “human reality” which he developed from the idea of Heidegger. He brought an ontological distinction between what he calls being-for-itself (pour soi) and being-in-itself (en-soi), roughly between that which negates and transcends consciousness and the “pure plenitude” of objects. That kind of metaphysical position might seem to “beg the question” by assuming what it purports to establish, that is, radical human freedom. However, Sartre argues that realism and idealism cannot sufficiently account for a wide range of phenomena associated with negation. He also draws on the direct evidence of phenomenological experience, that is, the experience of anguish. But the argument for his metaphysical picture and human freedom is, on balance, an inference to the best explanation.<sup>28</sup>

Sartre's account of negation and nothingness (the latter of which is the ostensible ground of the former) is nevertheless philosophically interesting. Sartre does not say much about the genesis of consciousness or 'the for-itself', other than that it is contingent and arises from “the effort of an in-itself to found itself”.<sup>29</sup> He describes the appearance of 'the for-itself' as the absolute event, which occurs through being's attempt “to remove contingency from its being”. Accordingly, 'the for-itself' is radically and inescapably distinct from 'the in-itself'. In particular, it functions primarily through negation, whether in relation to objects, values, meaning, or social facts. According to Sartre this negation is not about any reflective judgement or cognition, but an ontological relation to the world. This ontological interpretation of negation minimises the subjectivist interpretations of his philosophy. The most vivid example he provides to illustrate this pre-reflective negation is the apprehension of Pierre's absence from a café. Sartre describes Pierre's absence as pervading the whole café. The café is cast in the metaphorical “shade” of Pierre not being there at the time he had been expected. This experience depends on human expectations, of course. But Sartre argues that if, by contrast, we imagine or reflect that someone else is not present (say the Duke of Wellington, an elephant, etc.), these abstract negative facts are not existentially given in the same manner as our pre-reflective encounter with Pierre's absence. They are not given as an “objective fact”, as a “component of the real”.

<sup>27</sup>William Blattner, “Heidegger: The Existential Analytic of Dasein” *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism* ed. Steven Crowell (Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 166-167.

<sup>28</sup>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Jean-Paul Sartre” (USA: Stanford University, Mar 26, 2022), np. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sartre/>

<sup>29</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 84.

He later developed the basic ontological position in regard to free action. His point is not, of course, to say we are free to do or achieve anything (freedom as power), or even to claim that we are free to “project” anything at all. 'The for-itself' is always in a factual situation. Nonetheless, he asserts that the combination of the motives and ends we aspire to in relation to that facticity depend on an act of negation in relation to the given. As he puts it: “Action necessarily implies as its condition the recognition of a “desideratum”; that is, of an objective lack or again of a *negativité*”.<sup>30</sup> Even suffering in-itself is not a sufficient motive to determine particular acts. Rather, it is the apprehension of the revolution as possible and as desired which gives to the worker's suffering its value as motive.<sup>31</sup> A factual state, even poverty, does not determine consciousness to apprehend it as a lack. No factual state, whatever it may be, can cause consciousness to respond to it in any one way. Rather, we make a choice usually pre-reflective about the significance of that factual state for us, and the ends and motives that we adopt in relation to it. We are “condemned” to freedom of this ontological sort, with resulting anguish and responsibility for our individual situation, as well as for more collective situations of racism, oppression, and colonialism.

In *Being and Nothingness*, he provides various examples that are designed to make this quite radical philosophy of freedom plausible, including the hiker who gives in to their fatigue and collapses to the ground.<sup>32</sup> Sartre says that a necessary condition for the hiker to give in to their fatigue, short of fainting is that their fatigue goes from being experienced as simply part of the background to their activity, with their direct conscious attention focusing on something elseto being the direct focus of their attention and thus becoming a motive for direct recognition of one's exhaustion and the potential action of collapsing to the ground. Sartre believes that freedom and choice are part of our nature. At any point in time, we are making free choices, even your refusal to make a decision is in itself a decision.

### 3.9.1 Existence Precedes Essence

This slogan is opposed to the traditional view that Essence precedes Existence, according to which we are seen as having a given nature that determines what we are and what our ultimate purpose or value is. We are understood by analogy to artifacts which are made with a preexisting idea or concept of what they will be and what they will be good for. The Traditional View which Sartre argues against is that our essence precedes our existence makes us a predetermined being whose essence has been fashioned and designed. In this case, an individual has no freedom to choose what he or she wants.

## 4.0 EPISTEMOLOGICAL ISSUES OF EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism introduced a really different way of knowing the truth and search for knowledge. The traditional philosophy based its search for knowledge on universality of truth, that is, whatever is truth to one person should be truth to all and in consonant with

<sup>30</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 433.

<sup>31</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 437.

<sup>32</sup>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Jean-Paul Sartre”(USA: Stanford University, Mar 26, 2022), np. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sartre/>

the universal truth. This belief in the objective truth prevailed until the arrival of the existentialists in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century which changed how to gain knowledge and what our knowledge means in itself, to an individual and to the world as we relate. Hence, the emergence of existentialism came with some issues in epistemology.

**4.1 Nihilism:** The emergence of existentialism as an intellectual movement was influenced by the rise of nihilism in late nineteenth century Europe as the pre-modern religious worldview was replaced with one that was increasingly secular and scientific. This historical transition resulted in the loss of a transcendent moral framework and contributed to the rise of modernity's signature experiences: anxiety, alienation, boredom, and meaninglessness. Nihilism is a view point that asserts that the ultimate traditional beliefs and values are unfounded.

**4.2 Engagement against Detachment:** Against a philosophical tradition that privileges the standpoint of theoretical detachment and objectivity, existentialism generally begins in medias res, amidst our own situated, first-person experience. The human condition is revealed through an examination of the ways we concretely engage with the world in our everyday lives and struggle to make sense of and give meaning to our existence.<sup>33</sup>

**4.3 Subjectivity of Truth:** The existentialists were unanimous in their affirmation that truth is subjective as against objectivity. They clearly attacked Hegel who talked about the 'Absolute Whole'. For Hegel, every single individual is part of the whole and that it is only in the whole that an individual can truly discover his essence and meaning. However, the existentialists believe that it is through an individual's concrete actions and existence that his or her essence and meaning in life is achieved. Therefore, what is truth to me might not be truth to another.

**4.4 Existence Precedes Essence:** Existentialists forward a novel conception of the self not as a substance or thing with some pre-given nature (or “essence”) but as a situated activity or way of being whereby we are always in the process of making or creating who we are as our life unfolds. This means our essence is not given in advance; we are contingently thrown into existence and are burdened with the task of creating ourselves through our choices and actions.

**4.5 Freedom:** Existentialists agree that what distinguishes our existence from that of other beings is that we are self-conscious and exist for ourselves, which means we are free and responsible for who we are and what we do. This does not mean we are wholly undetermined but, rather, that we are always beyond or more than ourselves because of our capacity to interpret and give meaning to whatever limits or determines us.

**4.6 Authenticity:** Existentialists are critical of our ingrained tendency to conform to the norms and expectations of the public world because it prevents us from being authentic or true to ourselves. An authentic life is one that is willing to break with tradition and social convention and courageously affirm the freedom and contingency of our condition. It is generally understood to refer to a life lived with a sense of urgency and commitment based

<sup>33</sup>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Existentialism”(USA: Sandford University, Jan 6, 2023), np. Retrieved from <https://edubirdie.com/examples/existentialism-period-and-itsinfluence/#:~:text=Existentialism%20influenced%20people%20in%20a,and%20living%20an%2>

on the meaning-giving projects that matter to each of us as individuals.

**4.7 Ethics:** Although they reject the idea of moral absolutes and universalizing judgments about right conduct, existentialism should not be dismissed for promoting moral nihilism. For the existentialist, a moral or praiseworthy life is possible. It is one where we acknowledge and own up to our freedom, take full responsibility for our choices, and act in such a way as to help others realize their freedom.<sup>34</sup>

## 5.0 PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism influenced people in a positive manner right after the Great Depression and World War II due to its way of thinking that individuals have their own freedom to choose one's moral belief and to act upon those beliefs and living an authentic life. Existentialism essentially means one's search for true self and personal meaning in life. This could be seen every day as people learn what they want and like and who and what kind of person they want to be when they grow up. It also means to not just accept other people's belief if it is imposed on you when you didn't want it. Existentialism means everyone has the freedom to choose and to accept the consequences of those choices. All of these things could still be seen today in our modern-day society as people grow up, go to college and figure out who they are.<sup>35</sup>

Philosophy was freed from dogmatism by the existentialist movement. If truth were to be based only on objective universal truth, this could lead to dogmatism where we are all confined and constrained to accept only what is in the universal. But existentialism made philosophy more concrete to the individual.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

Taking a very general look at existentialism, one would see that the movement has contributed positively to how philosophy is done. The existentialist philosophy has influenced almost every aspect of human life which has made it a living philosophy that is still being explored by many because of its direct concrete impact on an individual person. The goal of existentialism is to stress the individual freedom of a person. It maintained that an individual is superior to the universal and that authentic living is achieved when a person is not confined to the universal norms. Existentialists however, do not relegate the place of responsibility, that is, even though we are free to choose whatever we want, we must take responsibility of our actions and choices.

Existentialism is generally seen as a departure from traditional philosophy, but a cursory look would reveal that in many ways existentialism represents a return to the roots of philosophy, a return to the ancient's concern on living well and the wellbeing of the soul, albeit, some existentialists do not believe in the existence of soul but their thoughts have talked about the wellbeing of those things like self that affects the wellbeing of the soul.

<sup>34</sup>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Existentialism"(USA: Sandford University, Jan 6, 2023), np. Retrieved from <https://edubirdie.com/examples/existentialism-period-and-its-influence/#:~:text=Existentialism%20influenced%20people%20in%20a,and%20living%20an%20authentic%20life.>

<sup>35</sup>EduBirdie, "Existentialism Period and its Influence" np. Retrieved on June 27, 2023, from <https://edubirdie.com/examples/existentialism-period-and-its-influence/#:~:text=Existentialism%20influenced%20people%20in%20a,and%20living%20an%20authentic%20life.>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blaise, Pascal. *Pensees*. Trans. W.F. Trotter. New York: Dutton, 1966.
- Blaise, Pascal. *Pensees*. Trans. W.F. Trotter. New York: Dutton, 1958.
- Blattner, William. “Heidegger: The Existential Analytic of Dasein” *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*. ed. Steven Crowell. Edinburg: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Dreyfus, Hubert. “The Roots of Existentialism” *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*. ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Wrathall, Mark (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006.
- Dreyfus, Hubert. *On the Internet: Thinking in Action*. ed. R. Kearney and S. Critchley. London: Roulledge, 2002.
- Dutt, Som. “Existentialism: A Comprehensive Guide: A Closer Look at Existentialism and its Meaning”, Dec 17, 2022, np, retrieved on June 27, 2023,
- EduBirdie. “Existentialism Period and its Influence” np, Retrieved on June 27, 2023, from <https://edubirdie.com/examples/existentialism-period-and-its->
- Ivy, Panda. *The Concept of Being by Heidegger Essay*. December 11, 2019, np, retrieved on June 26, 2023 <https://ivypanada.com/essays/the-concept-of-being->
- Jaspers, K. *Von der Wahrheit [On Truth]*. Munich: Piper, 1970.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. *Journals*. ed and Trans. A. Dru. London: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Nietzsche, Fredriech. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. W. Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Trans. Hazel Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library, 1956.
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Existentialism” USA: Sandford University, Jan 6, 2023, Retrieved from <https://edubirdie.com/examples/existentialism-period-and-its>
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. “Jean-Paul Sartre”. USA: Stanford University, Mar 26, 2022. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sartre/>
- Tietz, Udo. “German Existence-Philosophy” *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*. ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006.
- Wrathall. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006.