

Existentialism and Present Educational Scenario

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ABSTRACT: This contemporary world is characterized by uncertainty and problematic future; which can be considered as a time when alienation and anxiety will be fostered through crisis; produced as the result of the demise of various modernistic meta-narratives. Existentialism provides five qualitative indicators which include: that through education one should come to know and identify oneself; that one should become aware of one's freedom including the meaning of one's personal freedom; that one should live life purposefully, meaning that one should be passionately committed to these; and that one should have a critical attitude to both the meaning of one's life and one's identity. If these five indicators are present, it is argued that learners participating in such programmes will be able to live well in this era of uncertainty. For conducting this study, philosophical and historical methods were employed. The primary and secondary sources related to educational philosophy of existentialism were evaluated after detailed analysis. The general philosophical tools used for the study are induction, deduction, dialectical analysis and synthesis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Existentialism is a term applied to the work of a number of philosophers since the 19th Century who, despite having large differences in their philosophies,^{[1][2]} generally focused on the condition of human existence, an individual's emotions, actions, responsibilities and thoughts or the meaning and purpose of life^{[3][4]}. Existential philosophers often focused more on what they believe is subjective, such as beliefs and religion, or human states, feelings, and emotions, such as freedom, pain, guilt and regret as opposed to analyzing objective knowledge, literature and science.

The early 19th century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard is regarded as the father of existentialism^{[5][6]}. He maintained that the individual is solely responsible for giving his or her own life meaning and for living life, passionately and sincerely^{[7][8]} in spite of many existential obstacles and distractions including despair, angst, absurdity, alienation, and boredom^[9]. Subsequent existentialist philosophers retain the emphasis on the individual but differ in varying degrees, on how one achieves what constitutes a fulfilling life, what obstacles must be overcome and what external and internal factors are involved, including the potential consequences of the existence^{[10][11]} or non existence of God.^{[12][13]} Many existentialists have also regarded traditional systematic or academic philosophy in both style and content as too abstract and remote from

concrete human experience^{[14][15]}. Existentialism became fashionable in the Post-World war years as a way to reassert the importance of human individuality and freedom ^[16].

Existentialism is sometimes referred to as a continental philosophy referring to the continental part of Europe, as opposed to that practiced in Britain at that time, which was called analytical philosophy and which mostly dealt with analyzing language ^[17].

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- ✓ To study the philosophy of existentialism.
- ✓ To determine the relevance of existentialism in present educational scenario.

3. METHODOLOGY

Philosophical and historical methods have been used and apart from that both primary as well as secondary sources related to existentialism has been employed for the collection of data. Accordingly the data has been collected, scrutinized and critically analyzed for interpretation and for drawing conclusions.

4. PHILOSOPHY OF EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialist thinkers focus on the question of concrete human existence and the conditions of this existence rather than hypothesizing a human essence stressing that the human essence is determined through life choices. However, even

though the concrete individual existence must have priority in existentialism, certain conditions are commonly held to be "endemic" to human existence.

What these conditions are, is better understood in light of the meaning of the word "existence," which comes from the Latin "existere," meaning "to stand out" (according to the OED, "existere" translates as "come into being"; the other definition presented here allows for a slanted view and false implications as seen in the following passage.) Man exists in a state of distance from the world that he nonetheless remains in the midst of. This distance is what enables man to project meaning into the disinterested world of in-itself. This projected meaning remains fragile, constantly facing breakdown for any reason — from a tragedy to a particularly insightful moment. In such a breakdown, we are put face to face with the naked meaninglessness of the world, and the results can be devastating.

5. EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE

A central proposition of existentialism is that existence precedes essence, which means that the actual life of the individual is what constitutes, what could be called his or her "essence" instead of there being a predetermined essence that defines what it is to be a human. Thus, the human being — through their own consciousness — creates their own values and determines a meaning to their life. "Although it was Sartre who explicitly coined the phrase, similar notions can be found in the thought of many existentialist philosophers, from Mulla Sadra, to Kierkegaard, to Heidegger" [18].

It is often claimed in this context that a person defines him or herself, which is often perceived as stating that they can "wish" to be something — anything, a bird, for instance — and then be it. According to most existentialist philosophers, however, this would constitute an inauthentic existence. Instead, the phrase should be taken to say that the person is (1) defined only insofar as he or she acts and (2) that he or she is responsible for his or her actions. For example, someone who acts cruelly towards other people is, by that act, defined as a cruel person. Furthermore, by this action of cruelty such persons are themselves responsible for their new identity (a cruel person). This is as opposed to their genes, or 'human nature', bearing the blame.

As Sartre puts it in his Existentialism is a Humanism "Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world — and defines himself afterwards." Of course, the more positive, therapeutic

aspect of this is also implied: A person can choose to act in a different way, and to be a good person instead of a cruel person. Here it is also clear that since man can choose to be either cruel or good, he is, in fact, neither of these things essentially [19].

This postmodern era characterized by uncertainty and problematic future can be considered as a time when alienation and anxiety are being fostered through crisis which are produced as the result of the demise of various modernistic meta-narratives [20]. A multitude of global pressures have led individuals to question the legitimacy of more 'local' frameworks that have once been relied upon to provide identities, meanings, values and purposes. They not only find themselves becoming alienated to these traditionally familiar 'givens', but they also experience alienation towards the newly developed alternatives which appear in constant states of negotiation and flux.

Becoming alienated can often manifest itself through feelings of anxiety or angst. Having one's 'world' dismantled and reconstructed in a perpetual 'unfinished' state by so many global 'others', produces so many possibilities that individuals must remain uncertain as to how the new world order is to emerge — or even if any kind of order is to emerge at all. It is no coincidence then that there is a growing interest in Existentialism [21], because this philosophical school of thought shares these themes of anxiety, alienation, uncertainty, possibilities and crises, and offers a positive way through them. The recognized father of modern Existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard, claimed that life for the individual is a risk-filled existence, and it is on this premise that much of Existentialism is founded.

6. EXISTENTIALISM AND EDUCATION

Existentialism is idea that thoughts, beliefs, and values are created by the individual. Within this philosophy, it is believed that people are born into this world with no predetermined nature and are free to be independent. People then create their values and reflect them in the choices they make. The idea is based on self creation and has been used in developing philosophies of education. The nature of knowledge depends on the individual experiences of the person. People will form their own opinions and thoughts based on their prior knowledge of a situation.

The existentialistic thought should be valuable in a number of ways. It identifies a number of implications for education, and these are understood to be fundamentally important for the educational enterprise of producing the educated person. Neglect

of incorporating these implications into educational ideologies, policies and curricula may therefore be expected to reduce significantly their relevance and usefulness. This school of thought should, in other words, be able to enrich educational projects, because it offers values that are also intrinsic to education itself. The enterprise of education is understood to have some universal aims, many of which pertain to an ideal of the educated person. The existential thought developed here enhances this further in many ways. It promotes the idea of the development of a critical attitudinal disposition and therefore it opposes indoctrination. It provides for a curriculum that is relevant to the lived experiences of the learners, and is not simply 'interesting' to engage with in a monastic or detached type of setting. The framework supports decision-making processes that embrace complexity, responsibility and 'care' for others. It also promotes effective thinking, centre the individual, is philosophical, incorporates all the variety of 'ways of knowing', and improves the effectiveness of educative learning through a perspective that considers understanding to be hermeneutic. The existentialism develops the notion of 'authenticity' that is argued to offer more value for the educated person than does the more traditional notion of 'autonomy'.

The existential education provides a potentially valuable grounding for education reforms. Educational aims are argued, to draw upon understandings of human nature and the meaning and purpose of human life. This framework of spirituality has particular significance in this regard, and should be most helpful in grounding various educational projects. It allows the aims of education that drive reforms to be embedded in more rigorous approaches to fundamental issues affecting life of all individuals. The existential education should also be valuable for reforms in this present era in both Western and Eastern world, in which many people are being exposed to the threat of the insignificance of their individual existence in an apparently meaningless universe. This framework is formulated to address the Angst that is especially produced by such an experience.

The methods of educating through existentialism should begin with a change in the attitude about education. Children should be seen as individuals and be allowed to play an important role in the shaping of their education. They should develop the appropriate skills to practice effective communication skills. These skills would allow the students to share their experiences with their classmates. The key to creating a method for

educating lies between the teacher and the learner. The teacher and the learner should work as one and share roles to accomplish learning. The curriculum for existentialism really does not have a specific set of rules or guidelines that need to be followed. The student should be able to make a choice about what they believe is important for them to learn. The focus should be on the learner and not each individual subject area. The teacher must decide what needs to be taught that will be the most beneficial to the students. This choice is very crucial and depends on the success of learning.

The role of the teacher is to have strong beliefs and be committed to their profession on their own. If the children wish to share in these beliefs, the decision is up to them. They must first be aware of the complete meaning of the belief before they accept it as their own. The teacher should present the basic ideas, but ultimate leave the decision up to the student. It is important for the teacher to remember that each child is different and they must be allowed to display their individuality. The focus of research is to make an impact on a child's life through their individuality. Experiments have been conducted to determine if the teacher's intentions and beliefs have an effect on the child's learning. There were several philosophers who were advocates of existentialism. Soren Kierkegaard expressed his thoughts on individualism against the science world. He believed that the Christian belief was being neglected due to scientific beliefs. Another philosopher was Martin Buber, who studied Kierkegaard. He believed that an individual could relate to the outside world. He also believed that the teacher and the student should be considered equal with regard to humanity. Martin Heidegger was greatly influenced by the developer of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl. He took these studies and built upon it developing hermeneutics (lived experience). He did not specifically write for educational purposes, but his personal thoughts can be applied. Jean-Paul Sartre is the leading existentialist philosopher, who was aspired to be a teacher. He studied the lonely individual in the absurd world. He viewed human existence as meaningless and his philosophy lacked social theory.

Education should also be influenced positively by using the framework's evaluative applicability. This framework qualitative standards are able to provide evaluative criteria relevant to educational programmes, policies, curricula and ideologies. Such evaluation is important to ensure that educational reforms provide significant and valuable meanings for individual learners. If there is no provision for the individual existence then it is

quite possible that individual learners may refuse to participate effectively in such programmes and curricula because they fail to offer any personal advancement.

The findings of this framework offer individual learners opportunity to live more purposefully in complex and rapidly changing conditions. This attribute obviously has implications for learners beyond schools. It also has applicability for adults who especially are experiencing personal existential crisis in their lives. The educational implications drawn from existentialism enables an individual's to understand how their lives can be made more meaningful. Having such a life-changing potential, the importance of existentialism as an essential aspect of education is in making life more worth living.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has endeavored to clarify Existentialism and how it incorporates conditions of uncertainty to positively promote living well. The 'objective reality' of uncertainties cannot be changed. Therefore, there arises the need to be put an emphasis upon subjectivity, how individuals relate to, and give meaning to entities. This study provides five qualitative indicators which include: that following existential philosophy, one should come to know and choose oneself; one should become aware of one's freedom to make meaning - including the meaning of one's personal identity; that one should live life purposefully by making one's own meaning and purposes; one should be passionately committed to these; and that one should have a critical attitude to both the meaning for one's life and one's identity. If these five indicators are present, it is argued that learners participating in such programmes will be able to live well in this era of uncertainty.

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