

EXISTENTIALISM

KRISHNA DEKA
T.D.C. 3rd Yr, Major

Existentialism is an important trend of Contemporary Western Philosophy. This philosophy is often described as a reaction against traditional ways of thinking. It gives utmost importance to man as an individual person and emphasises human freedom and responsibility. Existentialism, as the name suggests is that type of philosophy that emphasises human existence rather than man in the abstract, or nature and world as a whole. Within existentialism, we may include Philosophers, Theologians, Writers, Artists, Protestants, Roman Catholics and Jews, Theists and Atheists.

The problems raised by existentialism have existed at all times. But the traditional philosophers have either avoided such problems or over simplified them through idealistic or spiritualistic interpretations. It is only the contemporary philosophers under the banner of 'Existentialism' who have tried to raise anew the problems regarding human situation which have been there always. Existentialism, in our times, developed and progressed under Søren Kierkegaard, the famous Danish Philosopher. Some famous existentialist Philosophers are Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Heidegger, Marcel and Jaspers.

There are differences of opinion among these philosophers. But they all unanimously assert the existential standpoint that 'Existence precedes essence'.

Existentialism is described as a revolt against some features of traditional philosophy: modern society, the rationalism of the Greek, or Classical, or tradition in philosophy, especially the speculative world views of men like Plato and Hegel. It opposes the concepts like 'nature' and 'reason' so strongly emphasised during the 19th century 'Enlightenment'. This philosophy also opposes the impersonal nature of modern industrial or technological age. It criticises scientism and positivism and all the mass movements of our times.

As a philosophy, existentialism is concerned with describing and diagnosing the human predicament. Paul Tillich in "Existentialist Aspect of Modern Art" says, "Existentialism as a universal element.....is the attempt of man to describe his existence and its conflict.....Wherever man's predicament is described either theologically or philosophically, either

poetically or artistically, there we have existential element." The existential emphasis on describing human situation and man's prospects in this world is found in Judaism, in early Christianity and in the philosophy of Socrates. But in 19th century, some 'lonely prophets' like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky and few others voiced their protests and concern about the condition of man.

Existentialism asserts the uniqueness and the primacy of human existence, it says that one should be able to understand the inner, immediate experience of self awareness. Man desires to 'exist' and to be recognised as an individual. If man is able to fulfil this desire, only then will he realise his true potential and have a sense of meaning, fulfilment and significance in life.

Existentialism distinguishes between 'essence' and 'existence'. Existence is to be understood as a state of being actual, that which occurs within space and time; it also refers to something which is given here and now. Man is said to exist, or to live, in this sense. The existential thinkers give more importance to the verb, 'to exist' than to the verb 'to live'. By existence, they mean a full, vital, self-conscious, responsible and growing life.

Essence is that distinguishes a thing from other objects. It is that which makes a thing what it is or that which things called by the same name, have in common. According to Helmut Kuhn in "Encounter With Nothingness",—"We distinguish the between at *what* a thing is' and *that* it is. 'What a thing is' we call its essence, 'that it is', its existence'. According to Plato, the concept of man has more reality than the percept, or individual man. The Platonic view asserts that the 'participation in the idea or form, or essence, for example, in the concept 'man-ness' than the individual being' is that which makes a person, any person, what he is. As we get hold of idea or essence of a thing, we can quite easily understand about it apart from its existence. Existentialism rejects this Platonic conception and says that existence cannot be conceptualised. Existence cannot be adequately described through propositions. Existentialists insist on the *primacy* of the state of existence rather than on the primacy of the *supra-temporal* and *supra-empirical* essence. According to existential thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and others, the phrase "*Existence precedes essence*" is the central thesis of Existentialism.

Existentialism lays emphasis on man's subjective experience. There is no knowledge apart from the knowing subject. This philosophy lays stress on man's inner life with its moods and anxieties. Existentialism opposes impersonality and all forms of objectivity expressed in modern science, western society, as well as by their philosophical and psychological representatives, that gives secondary importance to man. It emphasises on introspection and

raises again and again all problems relating to man's individuality and personality. It rebels against attempts by modern society to suppress the uniqueness of his subjective experience. Truth is within us and is revealed in the subjective experience of living.

Another important point of emphasis to be noted in Existentialism is about man's freedom and responsibility. All existential thinkers lay emphasis on individual man's choices and decisions. They assert the significance of personal existence and decisions in a world that appears to eliminate meaning and significance. Freedom is a reality to be experienced; it is not something that can be proved and argued about. Man is immensely free. Only he has to realise the strength and worth of his freedom and work upon it accordingly. We actualise our freedom as we work upon the demands of our inner nature and succeed in expressing our genuine or authentic self. Freedom is facing choices, making decisions, and accepting responsibilities for them.

Existentialism says that man has to accept the facts of human weakness, insecurity and limitations, along with feelings of anxiety, despair, dread, guilt, loneliness, and also with human finitude and death. Anxiety arises as man is faced with a sense of meaninglessness of his life. Anguish and melancholy gives rise to existential despair and prepares man to face this 'crisis'. This preparation makes man to take a 'leap into the authentic existence'. This mentality may come either through a faith in God as asserted by the theologians or through 'resolve' and an act of will, according to some others.

Existentialism is thus an assertion regarding significance of the individual self in the midst of all frustration and impersonality of modern civilisation. □

References :

1. Titus, Harold. H, *Living Issues In Philosophy*.
2. Bhadra, M.K, *A Critical Survey of Phenomenology and Existentialism*.
3. Datta, D.M, *Chief Currents of Contemporary Philosophy*.