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UNDERSTANDING EXISTENTIALIST PHILOSOPHY
MENGENAL FILSAFAT EKSISTENSIALISME

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Abstract
Existentialism places concrete human existence, freedom, choice, and responsibility at the center of philosophical inquiry. This article examines the historical emergence and conceptual diversity of existentialist thought, with particular attention to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Berdyaev, Jaspers, and Sartre. It also draws on later interpretations of existentialism to clarify the relationship between individual freedom, ethical responsibility, embodiment, and socio-historical conditions. The study employs a qualitative-conceptual method through critical reading and comparative interpretation of Fuad Hassan's introduction to existentialism, Frederick Copleston's history of modern philosophy, and selected chapters in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*. The discussion shows that existentialism did not emerge as a unified school founded at a single moment. Its historical roots lie partly in nineteenth-century criticism of speculative idealism, especially Kierkegaard's insistence that abstract systems cannot replace the existing individual, and in Nietzsche's critique of inherited religious and moral values. In the twentieth century, phenomenological analysis and Sartre's account of freedom gave these questions new formulations. Despite their differences, existentialist thinkers share a concern with the irreducibility of human existence and the task of assuming responsibility for one's becoming. The article argues, however, that freedom should not be detached from facticity, embodiment, social relations, and structures of oppression.
Keywords: existentialism; human existence; freedom; responsibility;

Introduction

Existentialism is a tradition of thought that makes the concrete human being a philosophical problem. Its primary concern is not only the question of the universal essence of the human being, but also how humans exist, choose, experience anxiety, build relationships, and give meaning to their lives. Existentialism therefore shifts the center of attention from the human being as an object of definition to the human being as a subject who lives out existence in particular situations (Hassan, 2018).

Discussions of existentialism are often simplified into the doctrine that humans are wholly free to determine themselves. This simplification overlooks fundamental differences among its thinkers. Kierkegaard understands existence through subjectivity and the religious relation; Nietzsche examines the crisis of values and the possibility of creating values; Berdyaev emphasizes spiritual freedom; Jaspers describes limit situations and communication; and Sartre links freedom with choice and responsibility. This diversity makes existentialism better

understood as a family of thought than as a uniform system of doctrine (Crowell, 2012).

This article aims to explain the historical emergence of existentialism, compare the ideas of several leading figures, and develop a critical synthesis of human freedom and responsibility. The study employs a qualitative-conceptual method: sources are read critically, key ideas are identified, and these are then compared in terms of existence, subjectivity, freedom, values, and social relations. Hassan (2018) is used as the primary introduction to the existentialist tradition; Copleston (1963/1994a, 1974/1994b) as a historical reconstruction; and Crowell (2012) and the chapters within it to broaden and test the interpretation.

Results and Discussion

The Emergence of Existentialism and Its Intellectual Context

The emergence of existentialism cannot be traced to a single event or to the founding of a single school. Its roots formed in the struggles of nineteenth-century European philosophy, when the systematic optimism of post-Kantian idealism was confronted with criticism of its ability to explain concrete human existence. Copleston (1963/1994a) shows that Kierkegaard confronted the dominance of Hegelian idealism directly. He acknowledged the strength of Hegel's system but judged that the attempt to capture all of reality in a network of universal concepts risks neglecting the individual who truly exists. Existence, in Kierkegaard's sense, concerns free choice, personal commitment, and the process of becoming an individual, rather than merely a position within a system of thought (Copleston, 1963/1994a, pp. 335–340).

The critique of idealism was not the only path through which existentialism took shape. Nietzsche challenged the moral and metaphysical foundations that supported European culture. His pronouncement on the death of God is not merely a declaration of atheism but a diagnosis of the collapse of transcendent guarantees for value and truth. This crisis opens the possibility of nihilism, yet at the same time demands a reassessment of values and an affirmation of life (Hatab, 2012; Schacht, 2012). Kierkegaard and Nietzsche thus do not form one and the same doctrine: the former emphasizes the individual's relation to God, whereas the latter tests the consequences of the collapse of traditional religious and moral foundations.

In the twentieth century, the problem of existence developed through phenomenology and debates over consciousness, freedom, and the human situation. Copleston (1974/1994b) places Sartre within the development of modern French philosophy and discusses his analysis of consciousness, being-in-itself, being-for-itself, and freedom. This development broadened existentialism from a critique of abstract systems into an analysis of how humans relate to the world and to others. Even so, not every thinker who is later read in an

existentialist manner should be regarded as a member of a homogeneous movement. Crowell (2012) stresses the plural character of this tradition and cautions that the classification of several thinkers, Nietzsche included, remains disputed.

Existence, Subjectivity, and the Individual: Kierkegaard

For Kierkegaard, existence cannot be understood solely through objective knowledge about human beings. Individuals must live through the problems of their own lives and make decisions that involve them wholly. Subjective truth does not mean that every personal opinion is automatically true; rather, existential truth demands appropriation: a person must make the matter part of his or her way of life. Kierkegaard's philosophy is therefore personal and rejects the stance of the neutral observer who believes that life has been mastered through a conceptual system (Copleston, 1963/1994a; Hassan, 2018).

Kierkegaard's critique of the crowd concerns the risk of losing individual responsibility in collective anonymity. Individuals may hand over their judgment and actions to common habit, majority opinion, or social authority. In such a condition, a person is present biologically as an individual but does not truly take responsibility for his or her existence. Hannay (2012) shows that the idea of the single individual is also tied to indirect communication: existential communication is not satisfied by conveying propositions but must open the possibility for the recipient to live through the matter and take a stance of his or her own.

Hassan (2018) explains Kierkegaard's stages of existence through the aesthetic, ethical, and religious levels. The aesthetic level is marked by an orientation toward pleasure and momentary experience; the ethical level presupposes commitment to duty and the continuity of choice; and the religious level places the individual in a personal relationship with God. The transition between stages is not an automatic development but a decision that involves anxiety. Copleston (1963/1994a) reads anxiety as the awareness of the possibility of freedom: humans are drawn to, and at the same time dread, an as yet undetermined possibility. The leap of faith shows that the religious relation cannot be reduced to a necessary rational conclusion.

The Critique of Values and Self-Creation: Nietzsche

Nietzsche treats the crisis of values as a fundamental problem of modern humanity. When the transcendent foundation that guaranteed values loses its authority, humans face nihilism: values once held to be absolute no longer possess unquestioned legitimacy. Nihilism, however, is not the end point of Nietzsche's thought. The crisis can become an opportunity to reassess inherited values and to develop an affirmation of life. The death of God should therefore be read as a cultural and philosophical diagnosis rather than merely a statement about personal belief (Schacht, 2012).

Hatab (2012) emphasizes that Nietzsche's thought about the self does not begin from a stable subject that is fully transparent to itself. The self is formed through the dynamics of drives, interpretation, and creative activity. This view challenges the assumption that humans possess a fixed identity that is simply waiting to be discovered. Becoming oneself means working through inner tensions and arranging one's life creatively. Even so, Nietzsche cannot easily be classed as an existentialist in the strict historical sense. It is more accurate to call him an important precursor of several existential themes, particularly nihilism, the creation of values, and the critique of the supposedly fixed subject (Crowell, 2012; Hatab, 2012).

Spiritual Freedom and Creativity: Berdyaev

Berdyaev places personal freedom at the basis of existence and rejects views that reduce humans to objects within social, political, or metaphysical systems. Objectification causes humans to be understood solely through the functions, categories, or positions ascribed to them. For Berdyaev, freedom means not only the ability to choose among available alternatives but also the creative power to transcend the conditions that limit human beings. Freedom has a spiritual dimension because it relates to the wholeness of the person and the possibility of bringing something new into being (Hassan, 2018).

Berdyaev's emphasis extends the discussion of existentialism from individual decision toward a critique of orders that objectify humans. Spiritual freedom, however, also raises a question: to what extent can spiritual language explain the material and institutional conditions that limit action? This question matters so that freedom is not understood merely as an inner experience detached from social relations. It should be noted that *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism* (Crowell, 2012) offers no dedicated chapter on Berdyaev; the account of this thinker therefore rests primarily on Hassan (2018).

Limit Situations and Communication: Jaspers

Jaspers understands existence through concrete situations that reveal human finitude. Limit situations such as death, suffering, struggle, and guilt cannot be removed merely through technical progress or objective knowledge. Such situations shake human security and force people to confront their own limits. Death, for instance, is not merely a biological event that will one day occur, but the awareness that human existence is finite and not wholly within one's control (Hassan, 2018).

Awareness of limit situations can open the possibility of existential reflection. Humans no longer regard themselves as a center that masters every circumstance, but recognize their need for relationships and transcendence. Communication becomes important because existence does not develop in absolute isolation. Existential communication is not a mere exchange of

information but an encounter between subjects who recognize one another's freedom and finitude. Jaspers thus differs from the picture of freedom as individual sovereignty without relations: becoming oneself also presupposes openness to others (Hassan, 2018).

Freedom and Responsibility: Sartre

Sartre formulated the thesis that existence precedes essence: humans do not arrive with a finished personal essence but form themselves through choices and actions. This thesis rejects the idea that human identity is wholly determined by a fixed nature or an external design. Freedom is not an additional attribute but a condition that accompanies human being. Freedom does not mean, however, that humans create all the conditions of their lives out of nothing. One is always in a situation that has already been formed, yet must still take a stance toward it (Copleston, 1974/1994b).

Flynn (2012) helps clarify that Sartrean freedom must be read through the tension between facticity and transcendence. Facticity encompasses the body, the past, social conditions, and circumstances one did not choose; transcendence refers to the capacity to go beyond circumstances through projects and action. Freedom always unfolds within a situation, not outside history. The formulation of absolute freedom therefore needs to be read critically so that it does not conceal the real inequalities that affect a person's capacity to act.

Freedom also gives rise to responsibility. A person's choices not only form the self but also affirm an image of the human being and of the values deemed worthy. Attempts to evade responsibility by blaming character, the past, or circumstances can amount to bad faith, that is, a denial of one's involvement in one's choices. Even so, responsibility should not be interpreted as erasing the influence of social structures. Sartre himself later developed an interest in praxis and history, while Flynn's (2012) reading shows how freedom must be understood in relation to the social-political world.

Beauvoir's reading deepens this ethical dimension. Arp (2012) affirms that human beings are at once freedom and embodied beings situated in particular material conditions. Ontological freedom does not automatically guarantee ethical freedom; authentic action demands recognition of the freedom of others. Oppression restricts the future and the possibilities of action of those who are oppressed. Freedom thus cannot be understood merely as an individual's capacity to choose, but also as a commitment not to close off the possibility of others becoming subjects.

Critical Synthesis: Similarities, Differences, and Relevance

A comparison of these thinkers shows that existentialism has no single doctrinal center. Kierkegaard emphasizes the individual and religious commitment; Nietzsche challenges the foundations of value and encourages self-creation;

Berdyaev connects freedom with spiritual creativity; Jaspers describes limit situations and communication; and Sartre places choice and responsibility in a world without transcendent guarantees of value. These differences do not abolish common ground: humans cannot be reduced to objects or fixed essences, and their existence demands active engagement.

This common ground needs to be examined through two tensions. The first is freedom and facticity. Emphasis on choice can provide critical force against determinism but risks neglecting material conditions, the body, history, and institutions. The second is individuality and social relations. Kierkegaard's critique of the crowd safeguards personal responsibility but must not turn into a rejection of solidarity. Conversely, recognition of social structures must not erase the individual's capacity to take a stance. Beauvoir and Sartre, as read politically by Flynn (2012), help connect personal freedom with social conditions.

Bernasconi (2012), through his reading of Fanon and Sartre, shows that racism is inadequately understood if viewed merely as individual prejudice. Racism also operates as a system that shapes the experience, identity, and life chances of racialized groups. This perspective broadens existential analysis: the human situation is not a neutral backdrop, for social structures can limit a person's possibilities to act and to be recognized as a subject. The analysis of existence therefore needs to connect personal experience with colonial history, power relations, and the institutions that produce inequality.

The contemporary relevance of existentialism lies in its capacity to read the pressure of conformity, the formation of identity, the crisis of meaning, and responsibility in shared life. In a society that pushes individuals to conform to uniform measures of success, Kierkegaard reminds us of the importance of taking a personal stance. Nietzsche encourages critical examination of inherited values. Jaspers shows that finitude can open the way to reflection, while Sartre and Beauvoir affirm that freedom always carries ethical and social consequences. Existentialism is relevant not because it supplies final answers but because it sharpens the question of how humans live and take responsibility in situations that are not wholly of their own choosing.

Freedom, Anxiety, and Uncertainty

Anxiety shows that freedom is not always a pleasant experience. In Kierkegaard, anxiety arises when individuals become aware of the possibility of acting without full certainty about the outcome. In Sartre, awareness of freedom can likewise generate unease because no external ground is available that can wholly take over the decision. Although the two use different philosophical frameworks, anxiety in both marks human involvement in possibility. The difference lies in their ultimate orientation: Kierkegaard places the leap of faith and the relationship with God as the horizon of existence, whereas Sartre affirms human responsibility in a world without transcendent guarantees of value. This

comparison shows that anxiety is not merely a psychological symptom but a philosophical experience in which humans confront the openness of the future and the consequences of their choices.

Subjectivity and the Limits of Objectivism

The emphasis on subjectivity needs to be distinguished from a rejection of objective knowledge. The existentialist critique is aimed chiefly at the assumption that objective explanation can exhaust the whole meaning of human existence. Knowledge of social conditions, the body, history, and behavior remains important, but it cannot replace the first-person experience of choosing, suffering, hoping, or taking responsibility. Here lies the difference between explaining humans as objects and understanding humans as subjects who live through their world. Crowell (2012) reminds us that existentialism need not fall into simple subjectivism. Personal experience always unfolds in a world shared with others, so that reflection on subjectivity can in fact open questions of relationship, recognition, and responsibility.

The Individual and the Social World

The problem of the individual and society reveals one of the internal tensions of the existential tradition. Kierkegaard criticized the crowd because individuals can lose responsibility when they hand their judgment over to public opinion. This critique, however, need not be read as a rejection of shared life. On the contrary, the analyses of Sartre and Beauvoir show that human freedom always confronts the freedom of others, while oppression can prevent a person from pursuing his or her life projects. Individuality is thus not isolation but the capacity to take a stance within a network of concrete relations. Recognition of others becomes an important ethical measure: a freedom that privileges only the self can turn into domination, while a solidarity that eliminates personal choice can turn into conformity.

Critical Notes on the Diversity of Existentialism

The diversity of existentialism also raises a methodological problem. Gathering Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Berdyaev, Jaspers, and Sartre under a single label can help reveal recurring themes, but it risks obscuring the theological, ontological, and political differences among them. Kierkegaard and Berdyaev retain religious transcendence in their understanding of the human being, whereas Nietzsche and Sartre develop far more radical critiques of traditional metaphysical guarantees. Jaspers takes a different path by linking existence, communication, and transcendence. The term existentialism should therefore be used as an open comparative category rather than as the name of a doctrinal consensus. This distinction also explains why Nietzsche's status as an existentialist in the historical sense remains disputed (Crowell, 2012; Schacht, 2012).

From Personal Experience to Structural Critique

Extending existentialism into the social-political realm is important because personal experience never unfolds in a vacuum. Unemployment, poverty, colonialism, racism, and gender discrimination are not merely external circumstances that can be overcome through individual changes of attitude. Such conditions shape the distribution of opportunity, recognition, and the capacity to act. Bernasconi's (2012) reading of Fanon and Sartre shows that racism operates as a system that structures experience and social position. This analysis corrects the tendency to read freedom in the abstract: a person may retain the capacity to choose, but the choices available and the consequences that accompany them are not distributed equally. Existential discussions of responsibility therefore need to be complemented by a critique of institutions and power relations.

Conclusion

Existentialism grew out of a series of critiques of metaphysical systems that neglected concrete human existence. From Kierkegaard to Sartre, the problems of the individual, subjectivity, freedom, choice, and responsibility have continually been reformulated in different intellectual contexts. Nietzsche deepened the crisis of values, Berdyaev emphasized spiritual creativity, and Jaspers showed the significance of limit situations and communication. These differences confirm that existentialism is not a single doctrine.

Critically, existential freedom must be understood together with facticity, embodiment, social relations, and historical structures. Freedom detached from concrete conditions risks becoming an abstraction, while structural explanations that ignore individual action can erase responsibility. The principal contribution of existentialism, therefore, is to maintain the productive tension between the human capacity to shape oneself and the ethical obligation to recognize the freedom and life possibilities of others.

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