academicresearchJournals

Review

The Controversy over the Concept of Existentialism from Kierkegaard to Sartre

[*1]Mohammad Motiee and Ebrahim Sheikhzadeh[2]

[1]Ph.D. in English Literature, English Department, Tehran Markazi Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.
Email: motiee_25@yahoo.ca
[2]Ph.D. in Linguistics, English Department, Tehran Markazi Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.
Email: zabannegar@hotmail.com

The concept of existentialism has been a matter of hot debate and controversy in the philosophy of Kierkegaard and Sartre. The futility, nothingness and absurdity of the human condition worldwide were all justified and led to a kind of solution by different approaches like Christianity, loss of faith, authentic existence and responsibility. Accordingly, the universal human condition was pondered in different ways and the philosophy of thought tried to render an awareness of such condition for human beings. The present study aims at exploring some of these approaches purported by prominent existentialists like Sartre and Kierkegaard and discuss the myriad controversies over the concept of existentialism.

Keywords: Existence, Existentialism, Alienation, Being, Absurdity

Cite This Article As: Motiee M, Sheikhzadeh E (2015). The Controversy over the Concept of Existentialism from Kierkegaard to Sartre. Inter. J. Eng. Lit. Cult. 3(5): 133-136

INTRODUCTION

To elucidate the etymological meaning of existence, one should begin with the philosophy of Existentialism in which this concept is debated threadbare and discussed inside out. In Existentialism, 'existence' is important because the meaning of being is always grasped through human experience for which the existence is the first and basic point. This philosophy continues to remark that Existence is what man foundationally has and everything else is offered to him as a range of choices to choose from and act upon. Problems and quandaries are necessities of human life. Everyman has to face with them in a way freely chosen by him. He himself has to solve the problems and is fully responsible for what he does, even though he is not responsible for his coming into the world. He, in this way, should consider himself as an individual who is condemned to be free and must choose his choices freely in the world.

Under such common definition, an existentialist like Kierkegaard emphasizes at first the exclusion of all 'essence' in the being. As Roubiczek says: "Kierkegaard uses the existentialist approach as a method." (Roubiczek 1966: 109) He further says that in Kierkegaard's philosophy "existence alone is admitted and essence is ignored-that is, all the conditions and limitations inherent in men's nature are neglected" (Roubiczek 1966: 110). Kierkegaard believes that individual men are no mere particulars under the corresponding essence. A man in his plenitude of being is much richer in qualities than the so called 'essence'. Therefore, 'essence' cannot account for 'existence'.

Kierkegaard had no immediate successors during his lifetime but some years later his existentialist philosophy helped Nietzsche to find religious background for his thought. In spite of his similarities to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche presents a different preoccupation with religion. Unlike Kierkegaard's attempt to create a true Christian, Nietzsche's Existentialism leads one to get away from it. Nietzsche believes that, as Roubiczek remarks in his book, Christian faith is "a continuous suicide of reason" (Roubiczek 1966: 44), what Kierkegaard saw it as a key to be a true Christian. Hence, unlike Kierkegaard, Nietzsche was about to get beyond Christianity in his own way. He succeeded to overcome the Christianity, as Macquarrie asserts, by his doctrine of Superman: "man surpassing himself" (Macquarrie 1968: 55). Perhaps the most fundamental assertion of Nietzsche in Existentialism is his frequent statement of "God is dead; we have killed God; God has died". (Macquarrie 1968: 55)

Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche recognizes that instead of God there is nothing and in the end we are confronted by nothingness as the core of our existence. The difference between these two existentialists lies in the fact that Kierkegaard in his nothingness and absurdity comes back to his faith. However, Nietzsche remains in his loss of faith and he proposes his Nihilism. He is worried when he finds that he foresees something terrible because there is nothing left. The recognition of the significance of this process is evident in his *The Will to Power*, where, as Roubiczek remarks, he states the problem in an allegorical way and says:

> 'have you not heard of the madman,' he writes, 'who on a bright morning lit a lantern and ran into the market-place, crying incessantly: "I am searching for God?"...as it happened, many were standing there who did not believe in God, and so he aroused great laughter…The madman leapt into their very midst…"where is the God", he exclaimed, "Well, I will tell you. We have killed him-you and I. We, all of us, are his murderers. But how did we do this creed? How did we manage to drink the ocean dry? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What were we about when we unchained this earth from its sun?... can we still talk about 'above' and 'below'? Are we not wandering, lost, through an infinity of nothingness?...Is night not approaching and more and more night?...God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! What possible comfort is therefore for us? (Roubiczek 1966: 40)

By proposing the philosophy about human beings' position among all other things, Heidegger tends to help people reassess their position in the world properly before acting in it. In his philosophical works of *Sein Und Zeit, Being and Nothingness* and *Being and Time*, Heidegger insists on man's effort to have an authentic existence in the temporal life. He believes that every individual has two kinds of possibilities among others in his being: the possibility of authentic and of inauthentic existence. The authentic existence, according to him, may be realized only when we thoroughly understand what we are. To do so, the human reality can be grasped by the fact that each human being is, uniquely, himself and no one else. Each of us has his own possibilities to fill; therefore our effort can be led toward an authentic existence by our real potentiality in the world. A man who is in an inauthentic existence is in a fallen state within which he is always ignorant of his own relationship with the world.

Many times, throughout his works, Heidegger emphasizes that man is, above all, a temporal being and based on the characteristic of his being, he must progress alone towards his unique destiny, his death. In his *Being and Time* and *What is Metaphysics* Heidegger highlights the fact that each individual sooner or later will not exist and as a human being he must die his own death. This recognition, he believes, brings the sense of Nothing and in order to get rid of this sense, everyone must make his relationship with the world properly by an attempt to have an authentic existence.

Like Heidegger's Existentialism, Sartre's philosophy concerns with the concept of Nothingness. For Sartre, the nothingness lies at the heart of human beings. This nothingness within an individual is the great emptiness which he aims to fill it by his own actions, his thought and his perceptions. For him, the awareness of this Nothingness leads one to find his unrealized potential for filling it. This is the most important difference between human beings and all objects in the world. According to Sartre, the most tangible feature which separates the human beings from all other beings in the world is the feature of consciousness, the ability to consider the world and the ability to find themselves different from other things. By such distinction, he introduces his concepts of 'Being-for-itself' and 'Being-in-itself'.

Man, a conscious being, is distinguished as a 'Being-for-itself' from unconscious objects, which are known as 'Being-in-itself'. Being-in-itself is the fixed being for things since they are static. Being-for-itself is the fluid being cherished for the human being and the human being must strive for it. The human being makes decisions and chooses; hence, his existence is radically different from things. At birth the human being is nothing and he can, unlike things, work out his destiny. It is human freedom that sets apart the human being from things. As a fact for him, nothing can restrict freedom. As many existentialists, Sartre believes that by the power of freedom, the human being can alter the society from within himself. Also, the human being can overcome obstacles by acts of conscious decision.

In his works, Sartre portrayed how the individual must

decide between the enigmas confronting him: What is true; what is right and what is wrong; what to accept and what to reject; what to be and what not to be; and, even, whether to be, or not to be. His own answer was that there are no objective values or authorities to rely upon. The greatness of Sartre lies more in the type of being he chooses to be. With him the existentialism is more than a mere philosophical movement. Even though the human being feels lost in an alien and hostile world, he believed that the human being must act.

In some respects Sartre remains close to Nietzsche. In a godless universe, man himself has to take the place of god. "Man, being condemned to be free, carries the weight of the whole world on the shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being". (*Being and Nothingness* 677) By his atheistic philosophy, Sartre tends to reveal that man has no stable nature, he possesses no constant tendencies. There are no fixed and constant norms to which the individual could look for the guidance of his conduct. Hence, liberty is the only stable norm for man and it is essential for him to maintain this only norm. It would turn to evil if one suppresses the liberty in oneself. Freedom for Sartre is rather a freedom from any commitment. It fact Sartre establishes in this way the principle of having no final commitments at all. As Bertrand Russell says: "In Sartre, the existentialist view of human freedom is taken to the limit. Man continuously chooses his identity". (Russell 1959: 396)

Sartre's conception of freedom is a consequence of Kierkegaard's definition of 'existence' of man as an isolated individual. It is Sartre's counter attack against all forms of necessity as found in metaphysics and science. In a word, the existentialist philosophy of Sartre leads to anguish of Being and it is this anguish which directly leads to the notion of the Absurd. In a universe devoid of God, man must know that his existence is the first and basic fact; one has no essence that comes before his existence. This non-existence of an essence is the central source of the freedom that the human being faces in each and every moment. A man has liberty in view of his situation, in decisions which he makes and sets himself to solve his problems and live in the world. Thrown into the world, the human being is condemned to be free and must take this freedom of being as well as the responsibility and guilt of his actions. He must not slip away from his responsibilities. As a rule, he must take decisions and assume responsibilities.

There is no significance in this world and an individual cannot find any purpose in life; his existence is only a contingent fact. His existence does not emerge from necessity. If an individual is entrapped in a false claim like having an illusion of a meaning in his existence, he encounters the absurdity, the futility of life. Choice is one thing the human being must make. The trouble is that most often one refuses to choose. Hence, he cannot realize his freedom and the futility of his existence.

Therefore, the human being's role in the world is not predetermined or fixed; that is why every person is compelled to make a choice.

Anguish and despair constitute the fulcrum of Sartre's philosophy around which all fundamental problems of man revolve. His idea of metaphysics relies upon a discord between the outer world and man's yearning for meaning. This discord intensifies when an individual finds that man and the universe are not with one another. The universe is what it is but man is what he wants to be which leaves him a certain degree of freedom of will. Sartre in his stories and novels portrays the hopelessness of mankind in a world in which nothing justifies the individual's existence.

Man finds his discrepancy with the universe into which his freedom brings him only a feeling of anguish. In fact, anguish in Sartre's metaphysics is a primal condition of any man who is aware of such discord, and it is highly strengthened by his realization that the universe is nothingness. Man is thrust meaninglessly into a meaningless universe and his response is only a 'nausea' that brings a sense of futility and despair.

Sartre's metaphysics fosters all feelings of negation, despair and anguish; however, his existentialist philosophy does not terminate in his metaphysics. Sartre's awareness of man's condition is a clue which leads to an ethical position in that man can lift himself by realization of his own freedom. Instead of expecting to encounter to any meaning in the universe, man can 'create' himself. He can wrest a new humanism out of despair, as Sartre asserts: "man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism" (Sartre 1970: 28)

Man's realization of isolation in the universe can turn into a sort of self-reliance and into the heroism without illusions. Man is perfectly free to make himself through his actions. It is only in the light of creating himself in freedom that man can accord with the anguish arising from the nothingness and futility of the universe.

CONCLUSION

From Kierkegaard to Sartre, as it was mentioned, man's 'being', was analysed in the philosophy of Being in different approaches. Then, the futility, nothingness and absurdity of human condition in the world were justified and led to a kind of solution by different approaches like Christianity, loss of faith, authentic existence and responsibility. In an extreme concern, the human condition in the world was pondered in different ways and the philosophy of thought tried to render an awareness of such condition for human beings. Following this philosophy, some views, ideas and the notions of thought came out to argue about the futility of human condition. Among all relevant views, the notion of the Absurd is regarded to have its root in the idea of meaningless life of

human beings in the world.

As we found in existentialism, sometimes one's conflict with such existential questions results in a kind of solution to justify the futility of man's condition. However, Absurdity is a divorce between man and the world. It does not lie in the path of a final solution. An individual with the absurd view is divorced from the world. When there is no way to communicate with the irrational world, and when there is no possibility to dig out any meaning for it, standing aside, the absurd individual merely looks at it with astonishment.

REFERENCES

Blocker, H. Gene. The Metaphysics of Absurdity. Ohio University, University Press of America, Inc., 1979.

Levy, Albert. Philosophy and the Modern World. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1959.

Macquarrie, John. Existentialism. England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1980.

Marcel, G. The Philosophy of Existentialism. New York: Citadel Press, 1968.

Roubiczek, Paul. Existentialism, For and Against. Cambridge: The University Press, 1966.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. Existentialism and Humanism. London: Methuen & Co. LTD, 1970.

Taylor, C. Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Warnock, Mary. Existentialism. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.

Woods, Richard ed. Understanding Mysticism. O.P. Published by Image Books, 1980.