UNIT 9: SALIENT FEATURES OF EXISTENTIALISM

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9.1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to -

- explain the movement of existentialism
- discuss the views of six main existentialist thinkers
- explain the basic features of existentialism
- explain the concepts of theism and atheism in existentialism
- explain the meaning of the central statement of existentialism- existence precedes essence

9.2. INTRODUCTION

Philosophy is a human effort to comprehend the problems of the universe. Staring from the traditional to contemporary period, an attempt has been made to solve the problem of being by means of reflection and analysis. The traditional Western Philosophy has been attempted to build a systematic philosophy with the influence of scientific culture. This

rationalistic attitude analyzed the problems of human on the basis of reason which failed to provide a clear explanation of the 'existence' of human. This rationalistic attitude towards human problems is found in Hegelianism. But, at that time, a philosophical movement was grown against all the traditional explanation of the existence of man as a mere concept which is known as existentialism. It is a movement emerged against traditional Western rationalistic philosophy, essentialism, naturalism and idealism. Existentialism is the philosophy which emphasizes individual human existence- his freedom and responsibility. This philosophical movement generally considered a study that pursues meaning in existence and seeks value for the existing individual. Unlike other fields of philosophy, it does not treat the individual as a concept and values individual subjectivity over objectivity. Existentialism thinks that reason tried to give us an idea of man in general, not that of the uniqueness of individual man. According to it, 'man' is not a concept which can be explained on the basis of reason. Man cannot be regarded as a mere object, he is the subject. So, existentialism is concerned with the explanation of subjective human existence that is very much opposed to any kind of existence having by rocks, plants and animals.

9.3. SIX MAIN EXISTENTIALIST PHILOSOPHERS

Existentialism is basically a 20th century philosophical movement whose roots can be traced back to the 19th century, particularly to the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. The other existentialist thinkers are, namely- Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, Gabriel Marcel, and Karl Jaspers. Among them, Danish Philosopher S"ren Kierkegaard is known as the father of existentialism. It is to be noteworthy that existentialism paying attention on individual human lives and the very inevitability of suffering and choice of every individual. At the beginning of the 20th century, after the two world wars, a kind of despair took possession of the human mind which completely destroyed man's faith in future. At this stage, philosophy tried to discover man as an

individual and in doing so, it came to discover the philosophy of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard strongly opposed Hegel's rationalistic explanation of the universe based on complete objectivity. He was mainly concerned with subjective truth and stated that truth mainly lies in subjectivity, not objectivity. German thinker Friedrich Nietzsche is well known for his doctrine of the Will to Power, Superman, Morality of Masters and Morality of Slaves. Karl Jaspers mainly deals with the method of philosophizing where he discusses about the world orientation, matter, life, mind and soul. Moreover, his philosophy is characterized by anguish, despair and preoccupation with death. Philosopher Martin Heidegger discusses about the problem of Being, Dasein, authentic and inauthentic modes of existence. French Philosopher Gabriel Marcel's philosophy is a philosophy of a reflection to restore the unity of living and thinking. He explains the existence of human in terms of situation in the world. Another French existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre emphasized man's absolute freedom and established existentialism as a humanism. Generally, these thinkers have diverse outlook, although they discuss certain general ideas which are coming from the philosophical approach known as existentialism.

9.4. THEISM AND ATHEISM IN EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism can be divided into two basic camps- one is theistic existentialism and other is atheistic existentialism. Actually the division of two camps is based on the diverse beliefs of all existentialists upon the God existence and human existence. Theistic existentialism believes in the existence of God. According to them, at the deepest level of human existence we encounter God. God is often regarded to be the deepest subjective truth. Kierkegaard is regarded to be a most prominent theistic existentialist.

On the other hand, atheistic existentialism rejects the existence of God. According to it, human being is absolutely free and responsible for own action. He can create his own essence and also can define his

existence. There is no God to guide him. Friedrich Nietzsche, one o the atheistic existentialist, has declared that 'God is dead'. Death of God leads to the rejection of a belief in cosmic or physical order and also to a rejection of absolute values themselves. Jean Paul Sartre, another atheistic existentialists, has stated that man is the creator of own values. He is absolutely free and nothing can determine his freedom, except him.

9.5. EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE

The central theme of existentialism is- existence precedes essence. According to them, first of all, man exists, encounter him, surges up the world and define him afterwards. The term 'existence' comes from the Latin word 'existere' which means 'to stand out'. In existentialism, the word 'existence' means a full, vital, self-conscious, responsible and growing life. It means stand beyond oneself. A man exists by being conscious that he exists and he becomes conscious of other things that are consciousness. Man is self-conscious being. All the existentialists agree in one point that existence cannot be conceived, it is to be experienced. It was philosopher Plato who regarded essence as prior to existence. For him, essence precedes existence. But existentialists reject the Platonic dictum 'essence precedes existence' and declare that 'existence precedes essence'. According to them, man is not born with an essence. It is his existence that creates his essence. Therefore, existence is prior to essence. Philosopher Jean Paul Sartre wrote in his book 'Existentialism and Humanism' that man has freedom by which he can create his essence. Man can create his essence by his free choices. Sartre and other existentialists reject Rene Descartes dictum 'cogito ergo sum' (I think therefore I exist). According to them, thinking is not possible before/without existence. Therefore, the very fact of human being is his existence, which always comes first before essence.

9.6. SALIENT FEATURES OF EXISTENTIALISM

The salient features of existentialism are as follows-

Existentialism emphasizes human existence in terms of man's vital experience in intimate relation with his body, the world and the society. It gives importance on individual uniqueness and primacy of existence. According to the existentialist, existence of the individual is the highest truth.

Existentialism rejects essentialism. The domain of essence started in philosophy from the time of Plato has been oriented by way of conceptualism where human existence was regarded as concept. Existentialism interested in giving explanation of the predominance of existence over essence. It rejects the primacy of essence and accepts the primacy of existence for giving meaning to human existence.

Existentialism gives importance on the subjectivity of man. According to the existentialist, individuals' life is a totality of experiences, such as feeling, thinking, willing, which are subjective. They reject the naturalists' explanation of man as natural phenomena. Domain of naturalism, idealism and materialism reduce man to objects or to mere thought idea. But human experience can neither be reduced to thought nor to matter.

Existentialism lays stress on human freedom and responsibility. According to existentialism, man is free to do his choices and decisions. Individual's free choice and decision gives a meaning and value to his life. He makes himself what he chooses to be. S"ren Kierkegaard, in this regard, believes that freedom lies at the root of every decision.

According to existentialism, individual's moral impulse is based on distinctive ethical affirmation. The existential affirmation of individual has its value only in authenticity. In Kierkegaard's philosophy, authentic person is called 'the single individual'. There are two modes of existence -authentic existence and inauthentic existence. Authentic existence is regarded as the highest level of subjectivity.

Existentialism does not aim at system - building philosophy like Hegel. It gives importance on analysis of living experience of an individual with depth. It analyses dread, anguish, despair, hope, love etc.

By emphasizing the individual's concrete living experience in depth, existentialism tends towards pessimism. But the existentialist's pessimism is active, not passive. It challenges the obstacles of life and make active endeavors to overcome by which the individual can define his existence.

Existentialism strongly opposed the scientific philosophy and culture. With tremendous progress in science and technology, rapid industrialization and urbanization have taken place. This has given rise to crowded towns in which individual are lost. Today, it is not the individual who chooses his end; rather all decisions are made by computer or statistical laws and data. Thus, the existentialists thought that science has made the value of man negligible.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 1. What is the subject matter of existentialism?

Q. 2. Do the existentialists believe in rationalistic explanation of human existence?

Q. 3. Write the name of one atheist existentialist philosopher.

Q. 4. At which century the movement of existentialism begun?

Q. 5. Mention the name of the philosopher who is associated with the concept of 'will to power'.

Q. 6. 'Essence precedes existence'- who is the supporter of this dictum?

9.7. CONCLUSION

Existentialism is known as both a branch of philosophy and also a movement in the history of philosophy, which mainly concerned with the individual person existing in the world as well as all the problems he has faced in the path of life. According to existentialism, philosophy is a realization of one's existence or the problems and possibilities through which an individual has to cross in life. So, it rejects all the rationalistic

explanation regarding human existence. Human existence is not a matter of explanation on the basis of reason. Rather it is a matter of realization. Therefore, existentialism emphasizes human existence in terms of subjectivity, not objectivity. Moreover, it also describes human existence in terms of freedom and responsibility. It is through freedom by which an individual defines what he is. According to the existentialists, existence is always prior and important than the essence.



9.8 LET US SUM UP

- The existence of human being is a matter of realization. It is not a concept or idea as described by Plato. Therefore the existentialists reject the traditional analysis of human existence.
- Existentialism is movement raised in 20th century against essentialism, naturalism, rationalism and scientific culture. It mainly focuses on the study of meaning of life which is found only in subjectivity.
- Existentialism emphasizes human existence on the basis of subjectivity. It completely rejects the objective or rational analysis of human existence.
- According to existentialism, existence precedes essence. Existence is more important than essence. First of all, man exists in this world. Afterwards, he can define his essence.
- Existentialism is found in two distinct ways- one is theistic existentialism and another is atheistic existentialism. Kierkegaard, the father of existentialism, is known as a theist existentialist. On the other side, Sartre and Nietzsche are known as atheist existentialists.
- Though there are some distinctions among all the existentialists, but they agree in many regards. They all reject objective truth. They believe that truth lies in subjectivity. Similarly, the very fact of human existence can be understood in subjectivity.