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Research Article

Existentialism and the Search for Meaning in Modern Life: A Critical Analysis of Lived Experience on Contemporary Society

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Abstract

This study evaluates the conceptual framework of existentialist philosophy and contextualises its enduring relevance within contemporary frameworks of living. Amidst an era profoundly altered by disruptive technological evolution, heightened systemic fragmentation, hyper-consumerism, and pervasive personal isolation, the historical inquiry into self-actualisation takes on renewed urgency. This paper explores how pioneering existential theorists—specifically Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir—reconfigured notions of human liberty, ethical ownership, deep-seated anxiety, and personal authenticity. Rather than framing existentialism as a static doctrine or a fatalistic retreat into despair, this analysis establishes it as an active, emancipatory toolkit that compels individuals to consciously architect personal meaning through radical choice and deliberate responsibility. Ultimately, the paper bridge's classical continental philosophy with modern psychological resilience, digital identity management, and professional purpose.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The relentless pursuit of purpose and ontological grounding remains a defining imperative of human consciousness. While ancient and medieval traditions anchored individual identity within comprehensive cosmic orders, divine commands, or immutable social strata, the transition into modernity permanently severed these certainties. The modern landscape, characterised by exponential technological expansion, global hyper-connectivity, rapid urbanisation, and market-driven metrics of human value, has paradoxically deepened psychological alienation. As traditional cultural and institutional narratives lose their cohesive authority, contemporary individuals find themselves structurally disconnected, confronting an inner void often characterized as an existential vacuum.

Existentialism crystallized during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries precisely as an urgent philosophical counter-movement to these destabilising historical shifts. Dissatisfied with the grand, totalizing metaphysical systems of Western rationalism and absolute idealism, existential thinkers shifted academic focus back to immediate, raw, and lived human experiences. They posited that philosophy must emerge not from detached, sterile abstraction, but from the subjective interiority of the individual grappling with everyday realities. The fundamental question mutated from a detached inquiry into "what is being?" to an

active, immediate dilemma: "How should I live genuinely in a universe that offers no built-in blueprint, no universal guarantees, and an overwhelming silence?"

Far from presenting a monolithic dogma, existential philosophy encompasses a rich tapestry of divergent perspectives. It spans the deeply theological anxiety of Søren Kierkegaard, the radical, iconoclastic vitalism of Friedrich Nietzsche, the secular phenomenology of Jean-Paul Sartre, the defiant humanism of Albert Camus, and the nuanced ethical relationality of Simone de Beauvoir. Yet, beneath their substantial theological and methodological disagreements lies an unshakeable thematic unity: an uncompromising insistence on the primacy of individual existence, the reality of absolute freedom, the inevitability of conscious choice, and the profound burden of personal responsibility. Today, these perspectives transcend historical archives, actively revitalizing contemporary discourse across critical psychology, clinical counseling, ethical frameworks, literature, and identity politics.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To systematically unpack the contemporary implications of existentialist thought, this research is structured around four primary scholarly objectives:

1. To analyse and clarify the foundational concepts that form the core of existentialist philosophy, trace their development, and examine their inner consistency.
2. To evaluate the complex relationship between existentialist paradigms and the continuous human search for meaning

in the absence of pre-established metaphysical frameworks.

3. To explicitly map classical existentialist insights onto the unique systemic challenges of contemporary digital society, including hyper-consumerism, online identity fracturing, and institutional fragmentation.
4. To offer a balanced critique of the existentialist model, contrasting its emphasis on individual agency against systemic sociological and socioeconomic constraints.

3. METHODOLOGY

This investigation relies on a qualitative, analytical, and hermeneutic methodological framework. It draws directly upon primary philosophical texts alongside contemporary peer-reviewed commentaries to trace and reconstruct core concepts. Rather than treating existentialism merely as an isolated historical movement, this study utilizes conceptual cross-mapping to apply classical principles to modern socio-psychological phenomena. By analyzing lived experience through an interpretive lens, the study evaluates how abstract notions of freedom and authenticity manifest within modern institutional, educational, and digital spaces.

4. CORE THEMES OF EXISTENTIALIST THOUGHT

4.1. Radical Freedom and Choice

At the heart of the existential perspective lies the staggering realization of unconditional human liberty. Jean-Paul Sartre famously articulated this reality through his foundational axiom that "existence precedes essence." For inanimate objects or manufactured tools, the essence—their design, utility, and overarching purpose—is predetermined by an external creator or blueprint. A knife is crafted specifically to cut. Human beings, conversely, emerge into the world without any predetermined blueprint, inherent nature, or divinely mandated destiny. We exist first, encounter ourselves in the world, and only subsequently define who we are through our actions, trajectories, and ultimate allegiances.

Consequently, Sartre asserted that human beings are "condemned to be free." This striking phrasing underscores that freedom is not an occasional luxury or an optional political right; it is an inescapable existential condition. Even when an individual attempts to avoid choosing, that passivity itself constitutes a deliberate choice to let external circumstances dictate their path. Every action, choice, and moral stance directly constructs our evolving personal identity. Freedom is therefore a double-edged sword: it offers profound liberation and creative autonomy, while simultaneously imposing an inescapable, heavy burden of accountability.

4.2. The Imperative of Authenticity

Because human beings lack a fixed nature, existentialism places immense value on the ideal of authentic living. Authenticity requires a conscious, clear-eyed recognition of

one's radical freedom, followed by the courage to align one's life with self-chosen values rather than external mandates. Existentialists launch a sharp critique against the unthinking conformity that characterizes much of social life. Kierkegaard warned against losing oneself in the anonymous "crowd," while Sartre diagnosed "bad faith" (*mauvaise foi*) as the psychological self-deception where individuals pretend they have no choice, hiding behind social roles, institutional titles, or cultural expectations to evade the anxiety of authorship. Living authentically demands uncompromising honesty regarding one's situation, a deep awareness of one's inherent limitations, and an active embrace of one's creative possibilities.

4.3 The Constructive Role of Anxiety

In contrast to modern psychiatric frameworks that often treat anxiety exclusively as a pathology to be medically managed or erased, existential thinkers view anxiety (or dread) as a fundamental, revealing feature of human consciousness. Kierkegaard beautifully defined anxiety as "the dizziness of freedom," a psychological state that arises when an individual stands at the edge of possibility and realizes they possess total authorship over their next move, with no safety net to guarantee the outcome. Anxiety is the direct confrontation with the ultimate openness of the future, our fundamental mortality, and the terrifying weight of responsibility. When processed constructively, this existential anxiety acts as a powerful wake-up call, shattering comfortable illusions of complacency and shaking us out of unreflective habits to inspire purposeful, authentic action.

5. EXISTENTIALISM AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

A defining feature of existentialism is its rejection of the traditional notion that meaning is an objective asset waiting to be discovered, inherited, or granted by nature, society, or tradition. Instead, meaning is understood as a subjective creation, forged entirely through active, deliberate engagement with life. Albert Camus dedicated much of his work to exploring this reality, focusing on what he termed "the Absurd." The Absurd is born out of a profound tension: the deep, undeniable human desire for inherent order, purpose, and clarity colliding directly with the cold, unyielding silence of an indifferent universe.

Faced with this foundational absurdity, Camus strongly rejected the escape hatches of physical suicide or intellectual surrender—which he viewed as a flight into false certainties. Instead, he championed a courageous, rebellious acceptance of life's profound ambiguity. Meaning is not found by discovering an ultimate answer, but through the very act of living defiantly, with passion, conscious awareness, and creative rebellion. Existential meaning does not require absolute certainty. It thrives on ongoing commitment, artistic expression, deep relationships, ethical engagement, and continual self-becoming. For individuals who feel profoundly disconnected from

traditional religious or institutional frameworks, this philosophy provides a vital pathway to reclaiming self-directed purpose.

6. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE IN MODERN LIFE

The socio-cultural dynamics of the twenty-first century have amplified, rather than diminished, the urgency of existential critique. Modern life presents a highly specific set of psychological and structural challenges. Digital landscapes and social media networks encourage individuals to continuously curate sanitized, idealized personas, replaced by a hyper-fixation on external validation. At the same time, a consumer-driven culture routinely equates human worth with material accumulation, career status, and efficiency metrics. Beneath this glossy surface of hyper-connectivity and material convenience lies a quiet epidemic of loneliness, chronic anxiety, and a deep-seated sense of purposelessness.

Existentialism offers robust, practical tools for navigating this modern landscape. First, it restores an unshakeable sense of personal agency. In an age where people often blame their unhappiness entirely on biological determinism, historical conditioning, or algorithmically driven environments, existentialism reminds us of our enduring capacity to choose our attitudes and responses. Second, it serves as a powerful antidote to digital conformity, urging individuals to step away from curated online echo chambers and pursue authentic, internally validated paths.

In professional environments, an existential perspective encourages individuals to view work not merely as a survival mechanism or a climb up a corporate ladder, but as a deliberate expression of personal values. In education, it shifts the focus away from rote memorization and passive compliance toward cultivating deep self-reflection, intellectual independence, and critical inquiry. Furthermore, within contemporary mental health practices, existential psychotherapy helps clients look beyond symptom management to confront core questions of identity, construct resilience, and actively author a life of self-directed meaning.

7. CRITICAL EVALUATION AND LIMITATIONS

While existentialism provides an empowering framework for personal liberation, it is essential to acknowledge its scholarly and practical limitations. The most prominent critique, often raised by sociologists and materialist philosophers, argues that classical existentialism places an unrealistic emphasis on individual agency while largely overlooking the profound impact of systemic social, economic, cultural, and political constraints. A blank slate of choice is a luxury that is unequally distributed; individuals trapped in systemic poverty, institutional discrimination, or geopolitical crises face severe structural limitations that cannot be wished away simply through sheer force of will or psychological shifts.

Additionally, critics contend that existentialism's intense focus on absurdity, anxiety, and the isolation of the individual can easily slip into a paralyzing pessimism or an radical self-absorption that weakens social solidarity. However, these criticisms often overlook the deeper complexities of the tradition. Simone de Beauvoir actively addressed these gaps in her landmark work, demonstrating that individual freedom is fundamentally intertwined with the freedom of others; my own autonomy cannot be fully realized unless I actively work to dismantle the oppression of those around me. Existentialism does not ignore harsh social realities; rather, it provides a fierce defense of personal agency within those realities, reminding us that we are never completely powerless to resist, reinterpret, and reshape our circumstances.

8. CONCLUSION

Existentialism stands as one of the most resilient and profoundly practical philosophical frameworks for understanding the human condition. By keeping the analytical spotlight squarely on freedom, responsibility, authenticity, and meaning, it speaks directly to the core challenges of modern life. In a world increasingly defined by systemic uncertainty, rapid institutional fragmentation, and a confusing sea of competing values, existential philosophy offers a timely, powerful reminder: a meaningful life is not something we passively inherit, stumble upon, or purchase. It is an active creation, intentionally built through honest self-reflection, deliberate choices, and a courageous commitment to responsible action. Its enduring value lies in its refusal to offer easy answers, instead empowering each individual to look reality in the face and boldly author their own existence.

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Garima Sharma is a researcher affiliated with Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India. Her academic interests include philosophy, social thought, and contemporary issues. She is committed to interdisciplinary research and contributes to scholarly discussions through critical analysis, academic writing, and innovative perspectives on society and human experience.