

# Existentialism: A Self Maker Philosophy and its Implications on Education

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## ABSTRACT

This paper rationalizes man as a self-maker being because man is a free being who is capable of living his life the way he wants. The concept of determinism is an absurdity to the existentialists since man cannot be separated from exercising his freedom and as well be ready to face the consequence of the action taken. He is a subject and not an object that can be manipulated like a robot. His freedom attests to him as a moral agent who is rational and can choose for himself what to do, how to do it and when to act instead of compromising his nature. Based on this, the paper examines existentialism as a school of thought and a choice making philosophy, rationalizes freedom as well as responsibility and their implications on education. This is qualitative research in education which makes use of language and logical reasoning throughout.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Choice, Freedom, Responsibility and Education.

## Introduction

Existentialism is a freedom-oriented philosophy. It is a modern philosophical belief that man is alone in a meaningless world and that man is free being chooses his actions and determine his nature rather than seen it the other way round. A basic question to philosophy is “what is reality”? This central question is accompanied by the study of other related questions such as who is a man? Where has he come from? These are among other ultimate questions. Existentialism looks elsewhere, relegating question of essence to its background. The existentialists claim that any question like “who is man”? must produce a logical answer to the problem of the purpose of man. Sartre (1943) averred that Existence precedes essence. According to him, it is not possible to search for essence before we can explain its existence. Existentialism is a philosophy that sees the existence of man as vital to any other study or argument about what he does or becomes. The fundamental principle of existentialism is that a man free being and well a self-maker individual. He chooses for himself. Ability to choose and intellectual awareness of the quality of choices made are essential human traits. Life is surrounded by dread, yet the individual could protect himself against intellectual, spiritual and physical set-back. He could be guarded in his commitment. Even if his choices were limited, when he could have no confidence that his choices might be correct, he had an obligation to live out his life, and to extract from it what he considers relevant to him.

Existentialist philosophy upholds that man is alone in a meaningless world and that man determines his nature through the actions he chooses. This is a philosophical movement that portrays man as architect of his own destiny. It is a twentieth – century literature and philosophy, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre Karl Jasper and Albert Camus belonged to this group. Existentialism as a movement has no belief in a transcendental entity like God and that the ultimately responsible for what man is lies in individual’s

freedom. Kierkegaard, a foremost existentialist was a Christian who shares the belief that personal responsibility has nothing to do with any branded belief system. That personal and self-understanding is the only way to free man from the bondage that may arise in the course of living.

Subjective realities of individual existence and individual choice are the preoccupation of the existentialist philosophy. Choice is made as one deems it fit without reliance on external standards or practice. To the existentialists, there is no acceptable basis for moral decision making and also denied unquestioned faith-related emphasis that either could be or indeed were moral standards to which all might beneficially conform. One may be tempted in believing that an acceptance of universal moral standards as the basis for making choice. Nevertheless, existentialist philosophy is never in agreement with the existence of moral standards and maintains the important of individual readiness as the foundation of any choice made by man. Subject can freely make choices that are subjectively valid, there and then which after a critical look by a dispassionate observer might seem questionable. Hence, man is a subject and not an object that can be manipulated by external entity.

Individual must constantly be ready to accept the risk and responsibility of following his or her commitment wherever it leads to. It is sacrosanct which no man can run away from since this consequence of what they have freely decided to embark on. Man is evaluated by the Choices made. Even if he decides not to make any choice, the ability to act in that direction is a choice with its own consequences (Aboluwodi,1998). Therefore, making choice cannot be divulged from the nature of man. The existentialist philosophy emphasized that making choice is part of individual life. One's action whichever way I chose to manipulate speaks volumes to one's existence. Akinpelu (1981) adds that man is a subject and a determinant of what he wants to become. Man is nothing apart from what he makes of himself. Simply put, it can be stressed that this assertion places man as a unique personality within the world and the universe at large. Thus, it is not ordinary or mere being that qualifies a man to be seen as a man. Rather, a man is a man, if he is existing as a conscious being who can be free to decide on his own what to do, how to do it and reason for doing it as well as when to do it. This simply denotes that self-consciousness is an important factor in assessing man.

### ***Existentialism as a School of Thought***

Existentialism is a system of thought portrayed by an ideologically varied assembly of great thinkers. For example, Soren Kierkegaard a Danish philosopher and Jean-Paul Sartre of France are considered the corner-stones of existentialism. However, the former was a theist and the later an atheist. Others, like Martin Buber have been less orthodox. In a similar vein, Martin Heidegger interpreted the meaning of life out of his analysis of death. Karl Jasper could promise self –realization only through involvement with one's own self-made world. Sartre asserted

Individual's freedom on a denial of existence of God whereas Kierkegaard affirmed freedom on the existence of God.

Friedrich Nietzsche of Germany expressed some of the ideas of existentialism. He thought that instead of giving in to their environment, people should struggle to overcome it, influence, control their own destiny and fashion their own existence. The individual is to stand and face life rather than sit in the laps of existence or meeting life passively. When Nietzsche said God is dead. One can say what he meant was that the initial qualities man attributed to God such as the platonic forms, cosmic order, platonic forms, divine will, absolutes that history have shown to be mere projection of human mind. Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead" was accepted by some existentialists among whom are Albert Camus and Sartre. This is based on the belief that the concept of God is no more fashionable since man can decide what to do devoid of any external force such as God. While Kierkegaard, being a Christian existentialist conceives the ultimate existentialist question as man's union with God. Philosophers and theologians like Martin Buber Paul Tillich and Gabriel Marcel appear to be in tandem atheistic existentialism. One can say that just as theistic existentialists can freely choose not to share any belief in God so also theistic existentialists can freely share their belief in God mindless of criticism, have faith the existence of God.

Faith, observation, or experience motivates the belief in God and this come to being as a result of personal choice and conviction. Another brand of existentialist is the agnostic existentialist. These philosophers appear to be radical in their belief in God. This is made Manifest in the assertion that they are not interested in making any claim to know whether or not there is a “greater picture”, rather, what the individual chooses to act upon, according to them is the greatest truth. It is believed that issue relating to transcendental whether there is or not is of little value to man.

The collapse of traditional and familiar social and moral values as observed in post war era in Europe which brought about pains and sufferings necessitated the belief that life was absurd, that all was not well with the world and that God was no longer in his heaven and this according to Stephen (2001), remarked as the end of ideology. Desolate life marked with difficulties and hopelessness was experienced by a post-war European. All these calamities were what ordinarily he would not want to experience in his existence. Hence, the questions – “Is life worth living”? “Why go on living?” “Why not commit suicide and end it all?” were imminent (Allen, 1953).

Soren Kierkegaard emphasized the emptiness and solitary of human existence, that man has no real connections with anything in this world. In order to bring about a leap of faith that would bring the person into a defining relationship to Christ, Kierkegaard struggled to bring on board the individual feeling of anxiety and sorrow. Kierkegaard defined existentialism as ‘an attempt at philosophizing from the standpoint of the actor rather than that of the spectator’. Allen continues by seeing Kierkegaard as religious prophet attempting to awaken in his contemporaries the knowledge of Christianity despite despair in the world. To be a good Christian according to Kierkegaard is not by observing of certain rites or rituals, believing a set of doctrine or belonging to a sect rather it is a process of adopting a certain principle unique to oneself. It is by immersing oneself deeper in existence and not by reading books or by world historical surveys (Regin,1958). To, communicate or think existentially for Kierkegaard is therefore to come to grips with human situation as one in which we are actually involved. The existential thinker is thus the actual, living, striving person, whose thought is embedded in his life, is indeed part of the process of living what happens to him is never merely something to be investigated, it is something with which he is considered (Robert, 1947).

Friedrich Nietzsche continued by saying that there is lost in the ability to believe in transcendental basis for value and beliefs due the development of science and critical thinking in western history. This history has shown all what was previously thought of as absolutes, the cosmic order, platonic forms, divine will have been reduced to a mere construction of human mind without any supreme or ultimate authority. During the entire course of history, this transformation has been taught about by morality. We apply the term “moral” to those laws to which human conduct and attitudes have been subjected in order that man may thereby for the first time become what he is and should be. The contemporary world claims to acknowledge Christian morality and when one’s faith waivers, he still regards “morality” as self-evident. As modernism become godless, does it still stand and by whose laws does it live? This can be perfected by embracing a new challenge, which will arouse what is genuinely and distinctively human and disavowing the moral law and freedom, both of which have been vital realities within human experience. Therefore, reducing freedom to human creation and substituting nature for duty.

To Nietzsche, man must will something more towards its realization and receive guidance from its direction to support what Kierkegaard advised. “Do not wish to be a philosopher in contrast to being a man ..... do not think as a thinker, think as a living real being, think in existence” (Stumpt,1994). One must recognize that one is facing different existential problems in which personal choice is the only solution. Nietzsche who in a sense held an opposite view to Kierkegaard carried on an unremitting warfare against Christianity which he saw as a form of decadence. He advocated a rejection of religion especially for man to be himself and as well be responsible for his actions and inactions. He upheld that God must die if man is to live. This appears to be a terrifying prospect for most men, for they realize that if there is no God, they must then create their own moral value for themselves. Very few men are courageous enough to assume this total responsibility. People prefer to be objects ready for manipulation

by other men. It is only a few choice souls, the supermen, who are prepared to live a life full of freedom without telling them how to live their lives.

The superman is a free since he allows his own will to flow from what he values. This second position makes Nietzsche a famous existentialist. Our decisions and what we wish either to do not to do determine our value. The is to say that freedom is the hallmark of a superman, whatever he does or want can never be separated from his volition. His authenticity is unquestionable. The weak, envious, crippled, miserable, and resentful only formulated into Judeo-Christian ethics in an attempt to cajole the strong in becoming weak like themselves the slave morality of altruism and self-denial. Superman rejected and ignored all these and it is through him triumphant will to power came into being. The existentialists give a pride of place to Nietzsche's influence and with Sartre and Camus, the place of God is unnecessary. They maintained that religion is a way of evading man the full consequences of his freedom, this it does by alienating man from his true self. As Sartre puts it, the existence of God contradicts the freedom of man. Both cannot coexist. On the other hand, Heidegger, Camus and Sartre also implicitly adopt Nietzsche's idea of superman, the man who is constantly prepared to accept the burden of his freedom as against what entails in our churches these days where the rich dominate the affairs and makes the poor sees himself as not relevant in the society. Religion should be something coming out of individual and not to be imposed on anybody.

Jean-Paul Sartre is one of the famous philosophers in France, he has gone down in history as a great philosopher who was passionately concerned with the concrete existential situation of the human being. For Sartre, existence precedes essence. He studies being in view of a deeper understanding of the human being. In fact he went to the extreme of regarding the human being as the only being that really exists. That human being has his essence in his profound aspiration to authenticate his individuality on a rational necessity that human being himself can justify. Sartre's existentialism is equally humanism in the sense that there is a desired commitment to society, in that commitment there is responsibility. There is this rational individuality in spite of the numerous historical contingencies that inevitably besiege the human being in the world.

We are made to understand how French resistance fighters were being tortured and interrogated by Nazi collaborators in play 'men without shadows' (Mort San Sepulture) when they were captured. Even under torture, Sartre asked his characters to choose whether to talk, scream or remain silent when the location of their masters was being asked. Instead of the captives to disclose the location of group leaders, one of them determined to throw himself through the window to his death. To Sartre, it is undeniable that problem will always come to one's life. He only claimed that one's freedom is exercised by one's response to such situation. We can allow the prevailing state of affairs to consume us by confirming to the status quo and reducing ourselves to an object to be manipulated. We can also decide to be the subject who will transcend authentically towards a new horizon of possibility.

### ***Existentialism and Choice Making***

Existentialist theory gives prominence to choose as a concept. Macintyre succinctly expressed this idea in his words that it would only be the possibility of choice that could be central fact of human nature if we are to consider any thesis that could constitute the doctrine of existence (Macintyre,1967). Choices that we make in our existence are the hallmark that can justified man to think existentially as postulated by Kierkegaard and this situation is constantly experienced by Human being. Therefore, the thinking of man ought to deal with what his experience presents. Choice and awareness are the key element in the existentialist's theory. Human beings perceive their naked existence, thereafter they proceed to choose. Griese(1981) maintained that man chooses his own nature or essence and also the essence of their universe. Existentialist choice is based on a number of assumptions. These assumptions are, firstly the person alone makes a choice, he is not coerced to seek advice in order for him to make up his mind. He does not have to seek the opinion of any interest group if he does, the choice is no longer his. Secondly

the person truly believes in his choice, if he does not believe in the choice, then it is fake, inauthentic and insincere.

However, authenticity, like freedom, is not absolute, it is contextual. And whether a choice is made, there must be awareness of alternatives. Quick decision may disregard possibilities and when a person seriously seeks out possibilities and then decisively acts upon the most feasible alternative, the person becomes an actor, not a spectator. Whenever there are no alternatives, choice is reduced to nothing. The existentialist however, claims that there is always a realm of possibilities and alternatives. Also, no contingent factor can prevent a person from making a choice. Man is free, not determined. In Stephen's words as rightly cited by Sartre that nothing is determined that man is free and that freedom is his essence.

As for the existentialists' answers to metaphysical questions, they see the universe as unchangeable given, an impersonal and indifferent environment in which human must survive. On human nature, Sartre says Men fashion their essence through their everyday choice. Ability to choose and intellectual awareness are essential human traits. At this juncture, one would uphold Sartre's position that man first discovered his existence and thereby designed his essence. Simply put, no man was born with any characteristic. He got to this world before he began to acquire all the characteristics, he has by the choices he makes. Man is therefore what he makes of himself. Perhaps, this could be the reason Kierkegaard says life was surrounded by dread, yet the individual could protect himself against intellectual, spiritual and physical paralysis. He could be guarded in his commitments. Even if his choices were limited, even if he could have no confidence that his choice might be correct, he had an obligation to live out his life and to extract from it what he could. His connections with, and obligations to his fellow human being were important facts of his existence, but not necessarily the overriding facts. Griese submitted that what has predominance was his need to survive in an unpredictable, harsh and not very controllable world.

The significance of man's existence is demonstrated by the notion that man does not have a fixed nature. The existentialist believed that we must be able to differentiate human existence and existence of objects. Man's nature is dynamic. Objects have no life in them hence they could be said to have fixed nature and end. This fixed nature, as the nature of object seems to be, exposes them to manipulation. Therefore, they lack authenticity which is the major factor that defines man as a living being.

In existentialist theory of knowledge, it is assumed that knowledge of any situation is individual responsibility and it is initiative. This initiative knowledge can be found in human feelings and consciousness based on the experience of the situations around him. Concerning the existentialist axiological position, it is perhaps here we find that most obvious connection between metaphysics and axiology. Individual choice, which is the heart of existentialist metaphysics, is also the source of its values.

The importance of both choice and valuing to existentialist is made clear by Stumpf, when he says "for existentialism is principally a value theory, a philosophy according to what everything must pass through the funnel choice. Since choice is fundamentally an exercise in valuing, the entirety of philosophical content in existentialism may be described as axiological" For existentialist, the source of values is inconsequential, for there must be a personal endorsement of some values. Values are translated from the objective to the subjective realm by an act of personal choice that under no circumstance can be avoided. People are free to choose their moral code, by the very nature of their existence they can never refuse to choose some moral codes (Iroegbu,1995). This is because individual strives towards living an authentic life, and acceptance of these moral codes is an act of choice making.

### ***Existentialist's Notion of Freedom and Responsibility***

It is pertinent to start by explaining human freedom that appear to be fatalistic as put forward by Sartre that no limits to one's freedom can be found except freedom itself; or in other words no one is free not to be free. Therefore, one is destined to be a free being. The implication of this is that freedom is the essence of man existence and this freedom is absolute. Nevertheless, as free as man is, he should be prepared of

being fully responsible for his choices and actions. He chooses his action in his concrete existence. This existential freedom defines his essence. His being reflects having and doing. Being, having and doing are categories of human reality. In it knowing is a modality of having. One possesses by knowing. One knows in order to do. And one does in view of being. These aspects are in the context of his full unlimited freedom. That is knowledge contributes to individual existence.

Man is a creative being who is not governed by mechanical laws of nature and evolution. The total freedom of man proves his creativity as he tries to control his existence. My freedom is my whole being my entire existence. Make yourself and choose your values take prominence in existentialist philosophy. Consequently, life is empty except the content you choose to give to it. Value is the creation of individual being. There is nothing morally imperative either from above or from below. All is from within my free choice. In the exercise of his unlimited freedom man makes his own image. Although, the choice may involve anguish for one cannot shift the responsibility to others.

Most social theorists, however, view freedom in the self-regarding sense, that is, we have freedom in so far as we do not have any constraint that is imposed on us either by the state or by individuals in the state. That is, one is free to the extent that there are no limitations to what one can do. Here freedom means the absence of restraint. A man is free in so far as he is not restrained from doing what he wants to do or what he would choose to do if he knew that he could. That we can see man as a chooser who is expected to choose in every situation, he finds himself. The idea of choice itself implies a kind of freedom.

J.S. Mill “on liberty” says that freedom or liberty can be regarded in such a way that we have freedom in so far that it does not do any harm to others and one’s freedom does not give license to engage in any acts that are detrimental to the society (Mill,1986). However, Mill conceives freedom in a negative way, negative freedom is basically concerned as a form of freedom that is individualistic oriented. We are free in so far as no constraint whatever is imposed on us. In this sense, we have a right to exercise certain basic freedom, for example freedom of speech, freedom of association etc. in so far, the set of freedom does not infringe upon the freedom of others.

The idea of positive freedom, on the other hand, means being free to do some things. It is concerned with or refers to autonomy or self-mastery. It is concerned with question of what or who is in total control can determine any action to be taken. In this case, it is related to the idea of what obstacles are placed on the individual, which make the realization of his or her freedom impossible. In most cases; the obstacles are imposed through the social arrangement, which can be removed.

Freedom in support of the above analysis could also be regarded as a social principle where man is seen as a chooser who has alternatives open to him, to choose from; who is autonomous with self-regulatory capacity. Being autonomous suggests that a person accepts or makes rules for himself. Hence an autonomous person is expected to be authentic. The essence of man is to project himself beyond himself, always in a process of becoming. With a lot of emphasis on the will on consciousness, the existentialists do not focus on negative aspect of freedom which can be seen as “freedom from” that implies rebellion against fellow men or constituted authorities that normally imposes restraints or constraints in order not to harm fellow citizens. This kind of freedom is not acceptable because there is no room for negativity in freedom. Freedom implies responsibility.

Responsibility in its ordinary usage means or is equated with such qualifiers as punctuality, efficiency, trustworthiness, obedience and answerability. The Lexicon Webster Dictionary gives the following denotative definitions of the term “Responsibility”. From this, we can say responsibility is synonymous with liability, accountability as well as having a moral connotation; Graham Haydon as quoted by Bamisaye (1985) identifies other senses in which we can use the term responsibility. They are among others, responsibility in terms of capacity, role and causality. A man is held responsible as a moral agent provided, he has psychological control over his behaviour. The possession of which is commonly held to be a precondition of the appropriateness of moral praise or blame. From the above definition, the

following types of responsibility can be deduced; role responsibility, causal responsibility, ‘responsibility to and responsibility for.

Role responsibility establishes liability on a person whose function is either to effect or prevent the occurrence of certain activities. Sentences like Governor is the chief accounting officer of the state, means that the Governor is to see to the day-to-day administration of the state or the provost is to see to effective and efficient management of the College of Education. The role responsibility implies accountability of a prior contractual agreement as to the definite functions to be performed by a particular person usually expressed in hierarchy of functions.

Causal responsibility is used to express the causal effect relationship in the cosmic order of the universe as well as inactions of man. For example, the evaporation and percolation of water is responsible for early rainfall. Heavy down pour of rainstorm was responsible for the destruction of Ogunpa River Side Hotel. Those two sentences present responsibility as causality to account for the occurrence of the actions. Responsibility can also be used to imply duty. A parent is responsible for giving his children a healthy up bring. Any good government is responsible for providing basic amenities that ensure minimum comfort of the citizenry.

It is pertinent at this juncture to talk about two other types of responsibility. “Responsibility to” and “responsibility for”. ‘Responsibility to’ means that man is in the world to obey “the established order”, where he does not have control over the events in the world: In the “responsible for” man strives for the primacy of human claims over the totality of the objective and impersonal world around him. Man becomes active, creative, master of author, and orderer in scheme of things. Accepting responsibility for the consequences of deciding, setting goals, executing and totality-making both for himself and for others in a universalizable principal manner.

All these types of responsibility are founded in the ideal world of rational thought man as a conscious being and stands constantly before a future taking or making choices and being responsible for choices so taken.

Having analyzed the two concepts of freedom and responsibility, one would see that our freedom is to act in harmony with an inner conscience and desire. It also means we have to be responsible for any action so taken? There are instances in which one can talk of determinism that one action naturally leads to another which normally prevents an individual to accept responsibility for an action under causative responsibility – a natural disaster like drought may lead to poor agricultural output that could bring about famine or food shortage, even though it may be argued that man is supposed to have preserved water for irrigation. Existentialists would say that man has no rational justification for not being responsible for his actions but can an individual be responsible for the actions he does not have much information about, or some natural occurrences that are beyond human control? One would at this juncture maintain that it would be erroneous to hold somebody responsible for an action which he has no control over.

### ***Tenets of Existentialist Philosophy of Education***

Existentialists made a blanket rejection of metaphysics and speculative thinking about the world and realities. It is their believe that all that we feel, see and touch that we can be sure of their existence. It is a waste of time to speculate about man’s essence when a man faces many problems in his existence. Thus, the existentialist education confines their perception of man from each and individual angle.

Political, social, cultural and economic factors that seem to debar man from becoming what he wants to be in society are known to the existentialist but according to them, man has control over such obstacles. Man confronts these obstacles as realities of life and takes appropriate steps to overcome them. Man may either decide to run away from them by refusing to live in the context of them or decide to go along with the oppressive conditions. In any situation there is always a choice to make, in the extreme it may be an ultimate or fundamental choice of life or death. A man has choice whether to continue to prolong his life or to end it. The choice is always his. But if existentialists emphasize the element of free choice as the

most fundamental of their principles, they attach to it a condition that one cannot avoid. This condition is responsibility for whatever consequences follow his choice.

Experience is the most important source of knowledge to the existentialist. It is a knowledge in which the person is emotionally and passionately involved. It is the person who is directly involved in any situation that can give an account of his experience. Existentialist's philosophy states that education is not to cajole, indoctrinate and force any idea on the learner or to integrate him into the society. This integration should be done by the individual when he creates his own world for himself. Education only motivates to decide. Existentialists favour Socratic method of teaching, teaching through dialogue because it brings new ideas to birth. This is because it commits one more personally to learning what he wants to learn. Role playing and drama is also encouraged since in it the learner imagines himself into the role he is playing and so has what is called vicarious experience of the situation. For the existentialists, the best teacher is oneself he only perceives others such as teachers and parents as agents that helps him to teach himself.

The teacher according to them is a second best, a necessity, who has to bring himself as close as possible to the level of his learners so as to assist each one to learn as he tries to learn by himself. The teacher should allow freedom and sense of responsibility to dominate his class. Learner should be capable of making his own decisions and courageous enough to act on them and accept full responsibility for such decisions. The motivator must give room for freedom of opinion and rational discussions in his classroom despite the awareness that his views based on his experience will supersede that of the learner. The teacher according to existentialists must be personally involved in the life of each pupil sharing his/her joys, sorrows, hopes and aspirations.

## **Conclusion**

We have been able to establish existentialism as a self-maker philosophy. This is because; it is a philosophy that is occupied with the freedom and responsibility of individual in the universe. From this, one may infer the existentialist's messages on education as these affect the teachers, pupils and other stakeholders in education. The paper submits that existentialist teacher has some roles to play in the classroom, in the sense that he should allow his pupils to exercise their freedom during teaching and learning provided this does not lead to waywardness and abuse of the freedom given to them. Secondly, as the pupils will have a lot to learn from teacher's message. The teacher has to love them or at least respect them as individual persons who are capable of making rational decision. He should make clear to the student the implications of alternative choices that lie ahead. This is because, what a person knows is believed to be what he chooses to know and must be prepared to accept the consequence of the choice made.

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