The Evolution Of Existential Philosophy

Existentialism, particularly but not exclusively in its atheistic variety, focuses on the human as a creator, one reinvents values, purposes and ultimately, a self. Existential ideologies are as pervasive as pain; (they are) a (universal) medium to embrace our transience yet those that urge us to embark on a (futile) journey of self-discovery. As Maurice Friedman remarks - “It’s not always being named existentialism, but the thing that represents that spirit is very palpably there. It’s had a very permanent impact that’s growing, and people are growing through it.”

Evolution and existential philosophy have been intricately intertwined throughout history and their compatibility has transpired in the evolution of humans. We can safely assume that the early cavemen, even in their wildest dreams, would not have imagined that thousands of years later, their predecessors would build skyscrapers or set out for a Mars expedition. For instance, Columbus embarking on a voyage into uncharted territory is figuratively and quite literally an ideal example of human progression. However, how must one begin a journey without a destination in mind? In that sense, without an ulterior motive fuelling it, how must a society survive, much less thrive? Discovering this ‘true’ meaning of our existence through the trials and errors of life, gives us a chance to reinvent our perspective on the subjective notion of human nature and collectively, a society.

Society tends to capitalize on our innate tendencies to act upon what the society deems right and wrong. However, this dichotomy, in the existential perspective, ceases to exist. One merely pretends to comprehend the inexplicable gravity of such circumstances. Humans, invariably, are caught in a web of either being unwilling to break free from the responsibilities that bind them to societies or delve into the endless fantasies of liberation. However, Sartre observes that, 'Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.' In the hilarious The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams, whilst plummeting towards the planet Magrathea, a sperm whale wonders: “Why am I here? What is my purpose in life?” The appealing but doomed creature has just been 'thrown into' that world, which happens to be several miles above the planet's surface; the creature exists as a whale because it had inexplicably been transformed from a nuclear missile, directed at the heroes' spaceship, into a briefly airborne cetacean when the occupants of said spaceship activated their Infinite Improbability Drive. Evolution, too, is an improbability generator, although its outcomes are considerably more finite. In strikingly similar ways, we are, like Martin Heidegger framed it, “thrown into the world” without prior consultation. After being called into existence by that particular improbability generator called natural selection, we have no more purpose in life than Adams's naive and ill-fated whale, whose blubber was soon to bespatter the Magrathean landscape. Nevertheless, existentialists believe that the key to life’s meaning is not in being alive itself but in the value one attaches to it. As Jean-Paul Sartre puts it: l’existence précède l’essence—existence precedes essence.

Philosophical schools of thought associated with essence of existence began to vaguely surface in the 19th century. The first wave thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Friedrich Nietzsche, wrestled with the questions of morality in a world without a deity to dictate what is right and wrong. The intellectual pursuit was further solidified in the 20th century, following the Holocaust and World War II. Thinkers contemporary with Jean-Paul Sartre like

Albert Camus and Simone De Beauvoir began to understand that the notion of morality had undergone adverse changes in the view of a catastrophe. They tussled with the meaning of existence after tens of millions of deaths and incalculable human suffering seemed to undermine notions that we value life or believe in a common good.

All one shall ever amount to has a direct correlation and correspondence to the different life decisions that one takes in the light of a cross road. To exercise free will or not is a dilemma as bewildering as the question ‘To be, or not to be’. Sartre introduced the term ‘bad faith’ (mauvaise foi) to delineate behaviour of people who thought themselves to behave as free individuals, but instead are just fooling themselves and are very much part of the social sphere and are not defining themselves freely, but are defining who they are based on their role in society. In ‘Being and Nothingness’, he gives a classic example is of the waiter, who can wait on tables in different ways. Either he does this freely, he acts because he wants to act the way he does and this happens to be seen by others as actions of a waiter – the waiting makes him a waiter. Or, he acts as he thinks is required of him as he is a waiter – even if he freely chooses to be a waiter – his actions are therefore not free but based on what he thinks is expected of him – he is therefore in mauvaise foi. According to Sartre, existential thoughts that assuage the ‘apparent’ plight of human civilization are instrumental in promoting the exercise of free will independent of societal expectations.

In conclusion, I believe that one has yet to comprehend the fact that the boundaries that limit us are invariably human borne concepts. We find it gruelling to accept our inability to fathom the incongruity of the unknown. We should, like Camus suggests - “I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself.” - open ourselves to the myriad possibilities that the world awaiting us encompasses.