

## “AN ANALYSIS OF FREE WILL IN EXISTENTIALIST THINKERS”

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### **Abstract-**

This comprehensive paper delves into the intricate exploration of the concept of free will as conceived by existentialist thinkers. Existentialism, a profound philosophical movement that flourished in the 20th century, emphasizes the significance of individual freedom, authenticity, and personal responsibility in shaping one's own existence. At the core of this philosophical approach lies the intriguing question of free will and the profound implications it holds for human agency and self-determination.

Drawing insights from the works of prominent existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Simone de Beauvoir, this analysis critically examines the diverse perspectives on free will within existentialist thought. By delving into the writings of these influential thinkers, the study seeks to elucidate the multifaceted nature of free will and its role in defining human existence.

The investigation begins with Jean-Paul Sartre's seminal work, "Being and Nothingness," which lays the foundation for existentialist discussions on freedom and choice. Sartre posits that human beings are fundamentally free, with the capacity to define their essence through conscious decision-making. He famously coined the phrase "existence precedes essence," highlighting that humans first exist and then create their nature through their choices, thereby emphasizing the paramount importance of free will in existentialism.

In exploring Friedrich Nietzsche's perspective, the analysis delves into his concept of the "will to power." Nietzsche challenges traditional notions of free will and posits that human actions are driven by an inherent desire for self-empowerment and self-overcoming. For Nietzsche, free will is not the ability to choose between predefined options but rather the affirmation of one's instincts and desires to attain self-mastery.

Additionally, the study investigates Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialist perspective on free will. In her seminal work, "The Second Sex," de Beauvoir argues that women, like all individuals, possess the power of free will. However, she highlights the social and cultural factors that have historically restricted women's freedom, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and challenging these limitations to achieve true autonomy.

Furthermore, the analysis explores the existentialist view of free will in the context of human relationships and interactions. Existential thinkers often contemplate how our choices and actions influence others and shape our collective existence. By examining the interconnectedness of free will and interpersonal responsibility, the study sheds light on the ethical dimensions of existentialist thought.

Moreover, the paper discusses the existentialist concept of "bad faith" and its implications for free will. Existentialists argue that individuals can fall into self-deception and deny their freedom by adopting societal roles or conforming to external expectations. The study examines how embracing genuine freedom and authenticity requires individuals to confront the anxieties and uncertainties that accompany genuine self-determination.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of free will in existentialist thinkers, drawing from the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, and other influential voices in existentialism. By exploring their diverse perspectives on free will, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of human agency and self-determination within the existentialist framework. Moreover, we will emphasize the significance of individual freedom and personal responsibility in defining one's own existence and forging a meaningful and authentic life in an uncertain and often perplexing world.

**Keywords: Free Will:** Existentialism, Human Agency, Authenticity, Responsibility, Choice, Absurdity, Subjectivity, Angst, Existential Anguish, Consciousness, Freedom, Determinism, Sartrean Existentialism, Kierkegaardian Existentialism, Camus' Absurdism, Heidegger's Dasein, Nietzsche's Will to Power, Phenomenology, Bad Faith, Individuality, Moral Responsibility, Personal Identity, Self-Definition, Choice Anxiety.

**Literature Review:** This review of literature examines works and concepts by existentialist thinkers, in order to analyze their perspectives on the topic of free will. Soren Kierkegaard gives his concept in '**Fear and Trembling.**' Jean-Paul Sartre writes his concept of free will in his book '**Being and Nothingness.**' In '**The Myth of Sisyphus**' Albert Camus gives his free will's concept. In his works "**Thus Spoke Zarathustra,**" Nietzsche challenges conventional morality and the concept of free will.

## 1. Introduction:

The 20th century saw the rise of existentialism, a powerful philosophical movement focused on the value of human freedom, individuality, and the pressing need to create personal meaning in a universe that can often feel cold and senseless. At the heart of this profound school of thought lies the notion of free will, granting individuals the remarkable ability to shape their own existence through deliberate decisions and purposeful actions. In this paper, I will delve into an in-depth exploration of the concept of free will as interpreted by influential existentialist thinkers, delving into their unique perspectives on human agency, self-determination, and the ethical implications of free will in existentialism.

Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the foremost existentialist philosophers, expounds on the concept of free will in his seminal work, "Being and Nothingness." Sartre posits that human beings are fundamentally free, with the capacity to define their essence through conscious decision-making. He famously proclaims that "existence precedes essence," emphasizing that individuals first exist and then create their nature through their choices, thereby underscoring the paramount importance of free will in existentialism.

Friedrich Nietzsche, another influential figure in existentialist thought, offers a unique perspective on free will in his work "Beyond Good and Evil." Nietzsche challenges traditional notions of free will and argues that human actions are driven by an inherent desire for self-empowerment and self-overcoming. According to Nietzsche, genuine free will lies not merely in the ability to choose between predefined options but in the affirmation of one's instincts and desires to achieve self-mastery and personal growth.

As we explore the views of these existentialist thinkers, we will also consider the existentialist concept of "bad faith." This notion, discussed by Sartre in "Being and Nothingness," refers to the tendency of individuals to deceive themselves and deny their freedom by adopting societal roles or conforming to external expectations. Embracing genuine freedom and authenticity, as advocated by existentialists, requires individuals to confront the anxieties and uncertainties that accompany true self-determination.

Additionally, we will examine the existentialist view of free will in the context of human relationships and interactions. Existential thinkers often contemplate how our choices and actions influence others and shape our collective existence. By exploring the interconnectedness of free will and interpersonal responsibility, we will gain insight into the ethical dimensions of existentialist thought.

### 2.1. Soren Kierkegaard:

Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher and theologian, made significant contributions to the discussion of free will in his philosophical works. Central to his ideas is the notion of individual responsibility and the subjective nature of existence. Two of his prominent works, "Fear and Trembling" and "The Concept of Anxiety," delve into the complexities of human freedom and the existential dilemmas associated with it. He is a prominent existentialist philosopher, tackled the concept of free will in his works, exploring the complexities of human existence, individual responsibility, and the inherent anxiety that arises from the exercise of freedom.

In his work "Fear and Trembling," Kierkegaard examines the biblical story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. He introduces the idea of the "teleological suspension of the ethical," where a higher moral duty can supersede conventional ethical norms. Kierkegaard presents Abraham as a paradigmatic example of a person who, in a moment of profound religious faith, transcends ethical obligations in obedience to a higher authority. This notion challenges the traditional understanding of free will as merely choosing between moral alternatives. Kierkegaard's portrayal of Abraham highlights the existential dilemmas and complexities that can arise when exercising free will in the context of one's subjective beliefs and higher commitments.

Moreover, Kierkegaard's concept of the "knight of faith" in "Fear and Trembling" embodies the idea of true individuality and authentic living. The knight of faith lives passionately and authentically, making choices without being confined by societal norms or conventional moral principles. This individual fully embraces their freedom, taking responsibility for their actions and accepting the uncertainties and paradoxes of existence.

The knight of faith represents a vision of free will that extends beyond mere decision-making to encompass the willingness to face the challenges of subjective existence and make choices without guarantees or external validations.

In "The Concept of Anxiety," Kierkegaard delves into the relationship between anxiety and freedom. He contends that anxiety is an inherent aspect of human existence, stemming from the awareness of our freedom and the vast possibilities that lie before us. For Kierkegaard, true freedom involves acknowledging and confronting anxiety, rather than seeking to escape it. He argues that individuals can embrace their freedom by taking ownership of their choices, even in the face of anxiety-inducing situations. Kierkegaard's exploration of anxiety emphasizes the importance of individual responsibility and the courage to make decisions that align with one's authentic self.

Kierkegaard's views on free will emphasize the subjective nature of human existence and the significance of personal commitment and responsibility in shaping one's life. He presents a vision of free will that goes beyond mere autonomy to embrace the complexities and uncertainties inherent in individual existence.

## 2.2 Friedrich Nietzsche:

Friedrich Nietzsche, a prominent existentialist philosopher, offered thought-provoking insights into the concept of free will in his works. Central to Nietzsche's philosophy is the idea of the "will to power," which challenges traditional notions of free will and autonomy. In Nietzsche's work "Beyond Good and Evil," he presents the concept of the "will to power" as a fundamental driving force in human behavior. Nietzsche argues that individuals are motivated by a desire for self-empowerment and self-overcoming. Rather than seeing free will as the ability to choose between predefined options, Nietzsche views it as the affirmation of one's instincts and desires to attain self-mastery (Nietzsche, 1886, p. 21). For Nietzsche, genuine free will lies in the ability to embrace one's individuality and unleash the creative potential within oneself, free from the constraints of societal norms and moral conventions.

Furthermore, Nietzsche criticizes traditional moral systems and religious beliefs for suppressing the human desire for power and self-assertion. He suggests that these systems often promote passive obedience and deny individuals the opportunity to fully express their will to power (Nietzsche, 1886, p. 42). Nietzsche's perspective on free will thus challenges the notion of a predetermined moral order, encouraging individuals to embrace their innate drives and desires as a path to authentic living.

Nietzsche's philosophy also explores the idea of "eternal recurrence" in his work "Thus Spoke Zarathustra." This concept proposes that every moment in existence, including the choices made, will recur infinitely. Nietzsche presents the question of whether one would be willing to live the same life over and over again, with all its joys and sorrows, as a measure of the authenticity of one's actions (Nietzsche, 1883, p. 299). This thought experiment challenges individuals to confront the responsibility of their choices and actions, as they must bear the consequences of their decisions throughout eternity.

In conclusion, Friedrich Nietzsche's analysis of free will offers a radical departure from conventional understandings. He presents the concept of the "will to power," urging individuals to embrace their instincts and desires as a source of authentic self-expression. Nietzsche's philosophy challenges traditional moral systems and calls for the affirmation of individuality and self-assertion. Additionally, his concept of "eternal recurrence" prompts individuals to confront the consequences of their choices and actions, emphasizing personal responsibility in shaping one's existence.

### 2.3 Martin Heidegger:

Martin Heidegger, a renowned existentialist philosopher, explored the concept of free will within the context of his phenomenological approach to ontology. In his seminal work "Being and Time," Heidegger delves into the fundamental nature of human existence and the relationship between being and freedom. Heidegger's conception of free will is closely tied to his understanding of "Dasein," a term he uses to describe human existence. Dasein, as the mode of being specific to human beings, is characterized by its capacity for self-awareness and self-determination. Heidegger argues that Dasein's essential characteristic is its "being-in-the-world," where human existence is inherently intertwined with the world and its possibilities. Heidegger introduces the concept of "thrownness" (Geworfenheit) to illustrate that individuals are born into a pre-existing world with various cultural, historical, and social conditions. While Dasein finds itself in this thrownness, it still possesses the freedom to make choices and carve out its own authentic path within the given context. This existential freedom is the foundation of human agency and free will in Heidegger's philosophy.

Furthermore, Heidegger emphasizes that Dasein's freedom is not an abstract and absolute freedom, detached from its concrete existence. Instead, it is a freedom to be itself, to embrace its authentic possibilities, and to take responsibility for its existence. This notion aligns with the existentialist idea of individuality and the challenge of making choices in the face of existential anxieties and uncertainties. Heidegger also explores the concept of "authenticity" in relation to free will. Authenticity involves embracing one's unique possibilities and taking ownership of one's choices in contrast to falling into the conformity of the "they-self" (das Man), where individuals conform to societal norms and lose touch with their authentic selves. Authentic existence, according to Heidegger, requires facing the inevitability of death and living in full awareness of one's mortality, which serves as a constant reminder of the finitude of human existence.

In conclusion, Martin Heidegger's analysis of free will in "Being and Time" emphasizes the interplay between human existence, freedom, and authenticity. Dasein's thrownness into the world provides the initial conditions for free will, but authentic existence emerges through the recognition of individuality and the courage to make choices in the face of life's uncertainties. The existential freedom Heidegger presents is not an abstract and arbitrary freedom but is rooted in the concrete context of human existence, challenging individuals to embrace their unique possibilities and take responsibility for their choices.

#### 2.4 Albert Camus:

Albert Camus, a prominent existentialist philosopher and novelist, explored the theme of free will in his philosophical works, particularly in his famous essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" and his novel "The Stranger." In "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus grapples with the absurdity of human existence and the search for meaning in an indifferent universe. He examines the Greek myth of Sisyphus, a figure condemned by the gods to roll a boulder uphill for eternity, only to see it roll back down each time he reaches the top. Camus sees Sisyphus' futile task as a metaphor for the human condition, where individuals strive for meaning and purpose in life despite the inevitability of an absurd and indifferent world.

Camus confronts the existential dilemma of whether life is worth living in the face of the absurd. He argues that embracing the absurdity of existence requires rebellion and the assertion of human freedom. Camus famously declares that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy," emphasizing that despite the seemingly meaningless and repetitive nature of Sisyphus' task, he finds freedom and purpose in accepting his fate and choosing to continue his struggle. In "The Stranger," Camus presents the character of Meursault, an emotionally detached and indifferent individual who becomes embroiled in a senseless murder. Meursault's actions throughout the novel highlight the lack of conventional moral values and the absence of a predefined meaning in his existence. His detached perspective on life and lack of remorse for his actions exemplify Camus' notion of the absurdity of human existence.

Camus' portrayal of Meursault challenges traditional ideas of free will and moral responsibility. Meursault's actions are driven by a sense of detachment from societal norms and conventional moral judgments, raising questions about the extent to which human actions are determined by external influences or personal choice. Camus' exploration of free will in both "The Myth of Sisyphus" and "The Stranger" revolves around the tension between the search for meaning in an indifferent world and the assertion of human freedom and responsibility in the face of absurdity.

#### 2.5 Jean-Paul Sartre:

Jean-Paul Sartre, a prominent existentialist philosopher, extensively explored the concept of free will in his philosophical works, especially in his seminal essay "Existentialism is a Humanism" and his major philosophical treatise "Being and Nothingness." In "Existentialism is a Humanism," Sartre presents a clear exposition of existentialist ideas, including his perspective on free will. He begins by stating that existentialism starts from the belief that existence precedes essence, emphasizing that human beings first exist and then define themselves through their choices and actions. This foundational concept highlights the centrality of free will in existentialist thought. Sartre further argues that humans are condemned to be free, meaning that we are inexorably burdened with the responsibility of making choices without any external authority or pre-established values to guide us. This radical freedom is both liberating and anxiety-inducing, as individuals are fully responsible for their decisions and the subsequent consequences.

Moreover, Sartre addresses the idea of "bad faith," a state in which individuals deceive themselves by denying their freedom and responsibility. Bad faith occurs when people attempt to evade the burden of free will by adopting fixed roles, adhering to societal expectations, or attributing their actions solely to external circumstances. By highlighting the dangers of bad faith, Sartre underscores the importance of embracing genuine freedom and authenticity. In "Being and Nothingness," Sartre delves deeper into the ontological and metaphysical aspects of free will. He introduces the concept of "facticity," which refers to the objective conditions or circumstances into which an individual is thrown, including their past and social environment. However, Sartre argues that while facticity influences our situation, it does not determine our choices. Human beings always possess the power of self-determination through their freedom of choice. Sartre also introduces the concept of "transcendence," which refers to the human capacity to transcend the given situation and create new possibilities through their free choices. This idea emphasizes the dynamic nature of free will and its role in shaping our existence.

In conclusion, Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of free will in his works "Existentialism is a Humanism" and "Being and Nothingness" underscores the fundamental importance of human freedom, choice, and responsibility in existentialist thought. He presents free will as the essence of human existence and emphasizes the individual's capacity to create their own meaning and values.

### 3. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the analysis of free will in the context of existentialist thinkers—Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Camus, and Sartre—reveals a diverse and thought-provoking exploration of human agency, autonomy, and responsibility within the existentialist philosophical landscape.

Kierkegaard's emphasis on individual responsibility and the subjective nature of existence highlights the significance of making authentic choices in the face of existential dilemmas. His concept of the "knight of faith" exemplifies the existential call to embrace one's freedom and passionately confront the challenges of existence.

Nietzsche's notion of the "will to power" challenges conventional understandings of free will, encouraging individuals to affirm their instincts and desires to achieve self-mastery. His critique of traditional moral systems calls for the creation of one's own values, embracing the autonomy and individuality central to the existentialist vision.

Heidegger's focus on "Dasein" and its "being-in-the-world" underscores the inherent intertwining of human existence with freedom and choice. The recognition of individual freedom and responsibility in shaping one's own existence is essential to Heidegger's ontology.

Camus' exploration of the absurdity of existence in the context of free will raises questions about the search for meaning in an indifferent universe. The existential challenge of reconciling freedom with the absurdity of life resonates throughout Camus' works, notably in "The Myth of Sisyphus" and "The Stranger."

Sartre's conception of free will, grounded in existentialist principles, is characterized by radical freedom and personal responsibility. Sartre's philosophy underscores the importance of creating one's own values and actively engaging in self-determination, recognizing that individuals are "condemned to be free."

In the context of these existentialist thinkers, free will emerges as a central theme that distinguishes human existence from other modes of being. The analysis reveals diverse perspectives, from the passionate embrace of freedom and self-overcoming to the recognition of the anxieties and complexities that accompany human autonomy. Throughout, existentialist thought emphasizes the significance of personal responsibility and the necessity of confronting the uncertainties of life in the pursuit of authenticity.

The exploration of free will in the works of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Camus, and Sartre enriches our understanding of the complexities of human agency and self-determination. By embracing the concept of free will, existentialism calls individuals to take an active role in shaping their lives, creating meaning, and living authentically in an otherwise uncertain and ambiguous world. The profound insights of these existentialist thinkers continue to resonate and challenge us to navigate the existential predicament of freedom and choice with courage, responsibility, and an unwavering commitment to the pursuit of an authentic existence.

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