

## The Existential Framework in Nāgārjunā's Sūnyavāda: A Way of Living an Authentic Life

**Surbhi Uniyal**

Research Scholar, Philosophy, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India

### Abstract

This paper aims to show that it is only humans who can add meaning to their lives and live an authentic existence. This paper gives an exposition of how authenticity is important for existential philosophy. Human existence is different from merely being alive like other entities in the world. It also shows that only humans have the possibility to put 'meaning in life' as they have freedom to lead the kind of life they want. The paper starts with how existentialism came into existence as a new system of philosophy and the contribution of a few dominant existentialist philosophers. Followed by Heidegger's and Sartre's concept of authentic existence. Further, it tries to analyse how in Indian Philosophy Nāgārjunā's philosophy of 'Sūnyavāda' comes close to existentialism.

### Introduction

To 'be alive' and to 'live authentically' are two kinds of existence where the former is attached to objects or entities in the world while the latter is attached to human beings. What does it mean to live an authentic life? Why is it the case that only humans can live an authentic life? Human life is not about merely being alive and leading a life without self-reflection, it is about leading a life analysing one's life through being conscious of oneself. Entities apart from humans are merely alive, they do not have the capacity to be conscious of themselves. All humans have the potentiality to be self-conscious and try to add meaning to their life, which other entities do not possess. Only humans have freedom to move away from what is already attached to them since birth like social, religious and cultural values. By reflecting upon these values and trying to revalue the present value makes a person lead a unique existence. If one remains caught up in these values without reflecting on them then he merely lives like other objects in the world. So one must move from 'what one is' towards 'what one wants to be'. This freedom to move from 'is' to 'ought' is unique to human existence.

The paper tries to give the exposition of how according to existentialism human beings are capable of living an authentic existence. The paper mainly focuses upon Heidegger's and Sartre's notion of authentic existence in an existential framework. Further, the paper tries to reconcile Indian Philosophy (Philosophy of Nāgārjunā) and Existentialism to see their connectedness in terms of giving 'meaning to life'.

### Meaning in Life: Existential Framework

"Existentialism has its roots in German Romanticism which was a protest in the name of individuality against the 'rationality' of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, more directly it derives from or at least recognizes as forerunners, the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard and the German moralist Friedrich Nietzsche."<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard is often viewed as the movement's founder and the two central figures of existential philosophy are Heidegger and Sartre. Both thinkers contest the adequacy of Husserl's reflective viewpoint to describe everyday existence. Husserl employed

<sup>1</sup>Passmore, John, *A Hundred Years Of Philosophy*, P.467

phenomenology to clarify our experience of nature, the socio-cultural world, logic and mathematics, but Heidegger argued that he had failed to raise the most fundamental question, that of the “meaning of being.”

Human existence is not just to be alive like many other things for e.g. cats, dogs, birds etc. rather it is something which is unique to persons. This “existence” means how people exist with what degree of passion, seriousness, and responsibility- with what effort to discover and live by their most important values. So rather than living an unreflective life we should reflect upon ourselves and put meaning in our life. Heidegger make a distinction between ‘being’ and ‘Being’ through which he has tried to show that ‘being’ is the entities in the world who are fixed but ‘Being’ is about human existence. ‘Being’ has potentiality for self-realisation and this potentiality leads a ‘Being’ towards ‘Becoming’. Heidegger term this ‘Being’ as ‘Dasein’ which means ‘Being- There’ or Being in the world. Heidegger says that we are ‘thrown’ in this world as everyone is located in a specific social, religious and political structures. “This characteristic of Dasein’s Being- this ‘that it is’- is veiled in its “whence” and “whither”, yet disclosed in itself all the more unveiled; we call it the “thrownness” of this entity into its “there; indeed, it is thrown in such a way that, as Being-in-the world, it is the there.”<sup>2</sup> Humans have possibility to transcend this ‘givenness’ of ‘thrownness’ through self-realisation and leads an authentic life. When a person remains only in his ‘thrownness’ he is then said to remain in facticity. Being through self-understanding tries to make sense of his life rather than merely being alive. Consciousness is very specific to humans as only humans are conscious not the entities in the world. Heidegger talks about the inward journey of consciousness which means reflecting upon oneself. He therefore says that rather than asking the question about ‘who am I’ which only involves giving description about or givenness we should ask the question ‘how am I’ which is about self- reflectivity. By reflecting upon oneself person reflect upon his life, the values he inhere and the kind of life he is leading therefore he tries to live a meaningful life by correcting the errors he made in past and the kind of life he wants to live in future.

Dasein according to Heidegger is not a type of object among others in totality of what is on hand rather human being is a ‘relation on being’, a relation of what one is at the present moment and what one can and will be in future. “On Heidegger’s view, we exist for the sake of ourselves: enacting roles and expressing character traits contribute to realizing some image of what it is to be human in our own case.”<sup>3</sup> Human existence therefore has directedness or purposiveness in leading a meaning life. So only humans have capacity to live a meaningful life but when a person doesn’t reflect upon oneself and merely lead his life he is said to be caught up in facticity and becomes ‘being’ like entities in the world. So a person should reflect on oneself and reflect upon his past, present and future and through this process should aim for a better future. This make his existence an authentic existence rather than just being merely alive.

Sartre says that while human beings share their “facticity” with other entities in the world, they are unique among the totality of entities insofar as they are capable of distancing themselves from what is “in itself” through reflection and self-awareness.

<sup>2</sup>Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, P.174

<sup>3</sup>Varga, Somogy and Guignon, Charles, "Authenticity", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/authenticity/>. As on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2017

Rather than being an item in the world with relatively fixed attributes, what is distinctive about me as a human being is that I am capable of putting my own being in question by asking myself, for example, whether I want to be a person of a particular sort. In addition, human consciousness is the source of the “not” because it is itself a “nothingness”. So consciousness is not merely representative it rather strives towards things which are not yet this is called transcendence. In other words, a human being is not just an “in itself” which means mere objects in world but also a “for itself (pour soi) which is human being as a conscious being, thus characterized by what Sartre calls “transcendence”. As transcendence, we are always more than what we as facticity because, as surpassing our mere being, we stand before an open range of possibilities for self-definition in the future. “My consciousness of myself thus already implies a projection of myself towards my possibility, what I lack in order to be myself identified with myself; and this is the structure of desire and the movement towards fulfilment.”<sup>4</sup>Sartre says that it is only humans of ‘being-for-itself’ has freedom to choose the kind of life they want to lead. Whereas ‘Being-in-itself’ doesn’t possess any freedom they remain the way they are. “A being that exist before its essence, which Sartre labels a being-for-itself, must be able to choose and define itself. In contrast, a being that does not exist before its essence, a being-in-itself, has no choice but to be what it is.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Existentialism in Nāgārjunā**

Nāgārjunā in ‘*Vigrahvyāvartani*’ says that ‘All things in the world are devoid of an intrinsic nature’. Nāgārjunā follows the basic doctrine of Buddhism which is the doctrine of *Pratityasamutpāda*, according to which everything is dependent on something else for its existence. By being dependent on other things a thing cannot possess a fixed intrinsic nature as things are always changing. The Mādhyamikā philosophy of Nāgārjunā is a teaching that shows us that our belief systems and the intellectual judgments we make about the nature of self and reality, or about what ultimate reality is, are all impermanent and changeable over time because they are inherently questionable, dubious, unfixable, insecure—or in a word: empty (null and void). Nāgārjunā calls it ‘*sūnya*’ which means being empty or devoid of intrinsic nature.

In both Buddhism and existentialism, importance is placed on the idea of properly experiencing nothingness, learning how to enjoy life from this standpoint, relying on this creative nothingness that we are. In Buddhist terms, this is to live in and from an awareness of ‘*sūnyatā*’. Nothingness is a term denoting the absence of essence or inherent existence in things. According to Nāgārjunā humans are seen to be attached to material wellbeing, which inevitably leads to suffering. Getting attached to the material world restricts human being from attaining ‘*nirvana*’ according to Nāgārjunā, Similarly in the existential philosophy if a human gets attached to the objects which is called being-in-itself in Sartre and ‘being’ in Heidegger, then the person is said to be in facticity and cannot attain transcendence. According to both existentialism and Nāgārjunā’s philosophy is a person gets attached to essence then person cannot make sense of his life. In order to make sense of one’s life person should not get attached to essences.

Like Buddhism, existentialism provides a view of man as founded on the insights of inward-seeing. “This inward-seeing generated in Buddhism a conviction about the

<sup>4</sup>Blackham, H., *Six Existential Thinkers*, P.113

<sup>5</sup>Bantas, Hercules, *Understanding Sartre: Existentialism is a Humanism*, P.2

inevitable restlessness of man in the world, his afflictions in different situations to which he cannot but cling as long as he is a bundle of desires, and about the metaphysical 'inanity' (or nirvana) into which our world-consciousness finally dissolves. The existentialists look upon human consciousness as a self-transcending and self-fulfilling act, a reality 'fallen' in the world but forever 'open' towards God, Being, or Nothing."<sup>6</sup> According to Nāgārjunā things are conditional and always changing it therefore paves the path for moral life. As only when our life is not fixed then can we think of possibilities to lead a better life. If our life would have been fixed then morality would not make any sense and nirvana would remain unattainable. This create a possibility to lead a meaningful life by reflecting upon oneself and aspiring for better future. Similarly according to Sartre humans possess freedom to transcend their facticity and lead an authentic existence, as this freedom helps one to choose amongst the choices and lead the kind of life one wants. This freedom is closely linked to responsibility, as only when one is free to do what one wants to than he becomes responsible for his acts as he could always have done otherwise because of the variety of choices. So this moving away from essence and looking for possibility helps a person to add meaning in his life according to both Nāgārjunā and existential thinkers.

### Conclusion

Following from the above discussion it can be seen that there is a close relationship between Nāgārjunā's sūnyavada and existentialism of Heidegger and Sartre, in order to lead an authentic existence. Both are trying to give importance to the possibility of change in life rather than merely getting attached to the essences. This possibility is the means through which one leads a meaningful life by inward reflection and on the values one inheres and what one wants to be in future. This unity of what values one inhere, what he is in present and what kind of future he wants to have helps a person to add meaning in his life. This capacity is only possessed by humans therefore only humans are capable of living an authentic life through self-reflection.

### Bibliography

1. Passmore, John, *A Hundred Years Of Philosophy*, Penguin books limited, 1972
2. Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, Trans. Macquarrie and Robinson, Blackwell publishers ltd., 1962, U.K.
3. Varga, Somogy and Guignon, Charles, "Authenticity", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/authenticity/>>. As on 6th March 2017
4. Blackham, H., *Six Existential Thinkers*, Routledge, 1961, London
5. Bantas, Hercules, *Understanding Sartre: Existentialism is a Humanism*, 2012
6. Sinari, Ramakant, "The Experience of Nothingness in Buddhism and Existentialism", *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, Edited by Margaret Chatterjee, Motilal Banarasi Das, 1974, New Delhi.
7. *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, Edited by Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist, Routledge, 2001, New York.

<sup>6</sup>Sinari, Ramakant, "The Experience of Nothingness in Buddhism and Existentialism", *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, P.284