CHAPTER II

HISTORY/DEVELOPMENT OF EXISTENTIALISM
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Philosophy, combining two words meaning love and wisdom is from the Greek language and is the name given by some early Greek thinkers to the search for truth for its own sake. It can be defined as “rational critical thinking of a more or less systematic kind, about the conduct of life, the general nature of the world, and the justification of belief” (Schacht, 2002, p.925).

Various philosophies prevailing in the present time can be divided into 1) Western Philosophy 2) Eastern Philosophy 3) Abrahamic Philosophy and 4) African Philosophy.

Since existentialism is a western philosophy a brief account of history of western philosophy is given.

History of Western Philosophy

The history of philosophy is customarily divided into six periods - ancient philosophy, medieval philosophy, Renaissance philosophy, early and late modern philosophy and contemporary philosophy.

Ancient Philosophy:

Ancient philosophy is the philosophy of the Graeco-Roman world from the sixth century BCE to the fourth century CE. It is usually divided into three periods: the pre-Socratic period, the periods of Plato and Aristotle and the post-Aristotelian (or Hellenistic) period. Sometimes a fourth period is added that includes the Christian philosophers as well as Neo-Platonist ones (some of whom also called
themselves ‘Philalethians’). The most important of the ancient philosophers (in terms of subsequent influence) are Plato and Aristotle.

**Medieval Philosophy:**

Medieval philosophy is the philosophy of the medieval era or the middle ages, roughly extending from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance. Medieval philosophy is defined partly by the rediscovery and further development of classical Greek and Hellenistic philosophy and partly by the need to address theological problems and to integrate sacred doctrine (in Islam, Judaism and Christianity) with secular learning.

Philosophers of middle ages include the Muslim philosophers Alkindus, Alfarabi, Alhazen, Alvicenna, Algazel, Avemp ace, Abubacer and Averros; the Jewish philosophers Maionides and Gersonides; and the Christian philosophers Augustine of Hippo, Boethius, Anselm, Gilbert, Peter Abelard, Roger Bacon, Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham and Jean Buridan.

**Renaissance Philosophy:**

The Renaissance (‘rebirth’) was a period of transition between the theological philosophy of the middle ages and the modern thought. During this period the study of classics (especially Plato and Neo-Platonism) and of the humane arts, such as history and literature enjoyed a new popularity. The concept of man became the central object of philosophical reflection. Main philosophers of this period are Nicholas, Giordano Bruno, Francis Bacon and Telesius.
Early Modern Philosophy:

Modern philosophy begins with the response to skepticism and the rise of modern physical science. Philosophy in this period centers on the relation between experience and reality, the ultimate origin of knowledge, the nature of the mind and its relation to the body and the emergence of a secular basis for moral and political philosophy. Important philosophers of this period include Hobbes, Descartes, Locke, Spinoza, Leibniz, Berkeley, Rousseau, Hume and Kant.

Nineteenth Century Philosophy:

In the nineteenth century, work of Kant was transformed by German idealists, such as Fichte, Hegel and Schelling who maintained that the world is constituted by a rational or mind-like process and as such is entirely knowable.

Contemporary Philosophy (c. 1900 – present):

In the early and mid-twentieth century, Husserl initiated the school of phenomenology, Peirce and William James initiated the school of pragmatism, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche laid the groundwork for existentialism, Karl began the study of social materialist philosophy.

Much of 20th century philosophy concerns itself with explaining the relation between the theories of the natural sciences and the ideas of the humanities or common sense. In the Anglophone world, analytic philosophy became the dominant school. Then continental philosophies came into being. Phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics, critical theory, structuralism and post structuralism are included within this category.
Before discussing development of existentialism, a brief introduction of some major western philosophies has been given.

**Idealism:** Idealism holds that the basic reality consists of mind, ideas, thought or selves. The world is interpreted by means of a study of the laws of thought and of consciousness and not exclusively by means of objective science. Since the universe has a meaning there is a kind of inner harmony between the world and man. Objective world is the real in the sense that it exists and demands our attention and adjustment to it. It however is an incomplete expression of reality and requires to complement it a higher type of reality and that is spiritual world.

**Realism:** Realism is the disposition to think and act in the light of things as they are; it is a preoccupation with fact or reality; it emphasizes the objective and the scientific as opposed to the subjective and the speculative. For the realist, the universe is so inexorably ‘out there’ that the only thing we can do is to make the best terms possible with it.

**Naturalism:** Naturalism holds that the only reality is nature; there is no supernatural being, realm or entity and scientific method is the most reliable means of enquiry for exploring nature. Human experience is the ultimate source and justification for all knowledge. Values derive from human needs and desires. It denies the existence of God, freedom of the will, immortality of the soul and supernatural entities.

**Pragmatism:** Pragmatism is an attitude, a method and a philosophy which uses the practical consequences of ideas and beliefs as a standard for determining their value and truth. It places greater emphasis on method and attitude than upon a system of philosophical doctrine. It is the method of experimental inquiry carried into all realms
of human experience. Pragmatism uses the modern scientific method as the basis of philosophy.

**Perennialism:** Perennialism is a strong and continuing protest against the pattern of contemporary western culture with its science and technology, its corporate industrialism and its political and educational institutions. It emphasizes that we turn to those conception of nature, of man and of society from which we were tempted hollow and arrogant promises of natural sciences and middle class economics.

**Positivism:** Positivism holds that science is the only valid knowledge and that philosophy does not possess a method that is different from science and that the task of philosophy is to find the general principles common to all the sciences and to use these principles as guides to human conduct and as the basis of social organization.

**Existentialism:** Existentialism as a universal element in all thinking is the attempt of man to describe his existence and its conflicts, the origin of these conflicts and the anticipations of overcoming them. “Existentialism is a philosophy of reaffirming and regaining the lost status of man in the advanced scientific and technological society. Therefore, this is a theory of individual meaning which asks each man to ponder over the reason for his existence” (Ravi, 2011, p. 185).

**Development of Existentialism**

Philosophers, saints and seers have been dealing with the problem of being and existence since ancient times. Thus existential themes and ideas can be located and a wide variety of work can be traced throughout the ages. Modern philosophers and writers who identify themselves as existentialists have drawn heavily on this heritage.
Existentialism emerged after World War I and became influential after the World War II. The terribly destructive events of war period led to serious human sufferings like uncertainty about human existence, anxiety, depression, recession and the confusion about the positive role of education to be played for man and society. The two wars shattered to pieces all hopes and confidence of man in himself and God. Man realized that the omniscient, omnipotent and geomeaning God was no more or, perhaps never was, that his existence in this chaotic world has been left without any dependable philosophical control and that all the up till then existing philosophies of pure thought and reason put together are unable to help him out of this helpless situation; that the earlier securities, certainties and meaningfulness of life have now been reduced to insecurities, uncertainties and absurdities; and that he has become for himself the biggest and the most mysterious problem for the solving of which he has to solely rely on his own sense of judgement, power of discretion and freedom of choice in all matters of life. Thus man set out to discover new meanings and values in life and come to discover and define the modern philosophy of existentialism.

Precursors of Existentialism:

The roots of Existentialism are found in the Socratic dictum ‘know thyself’. It was Socrates (469-399B.C) who first questioned human existence and saw man as a problem in himself and as a subject and object of true knowledge and enquiry. He stressed that self enquiry and self knowledge must be made the beginning as well as the end of life and that it is impossible for a man to live a genuine and fruitful life on earth unless first fully discovered. But Socrates’ philosophy cannot be taken as the existentialism proper as apart from his famous dictum, it contains nothing of an existential character.
Socrates’ disciple Plato had many existentialist elements in his thinking. Plato used existential terms when he spoke of the transition from existence to essence or from essence to existence; of the fall of the souls; of the seeming but not true character of the world of appearances and opinions; or of the bondage of the soul in the cave of shadows.

Certain portions of the book of Ecclesiastes have recognizable existentialist content. For example we find existentialist element in the verses quoted below:

As he came forth of his mother’s womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labor, which he may carry away in his hand. And this also is a sore evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath labored for the wind? (Ecclesiastes 5:15, 16)

In the above verses the author is exploring the very existentialist theme about how a person can find meaning in life when that life is so short and destined to end.

St. Augustine has an existentialist viewpoint of human fallenness, an emphasis on the existing individual and an existential attitude of involvement. The stance of man’s withdrawal into his own spiritual interior that we find in Marcel and Sartre has already been marked by Augustine.

Blaise Pascal had insisted on the precarious position of man situated between Being and Nothingness: “We burn with the desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereon to build a tower reaching to the Infinite. But our whole groundwork cracks and the earth open to abysses” (Reynold, 2011, p.72). Blaise
Pascal’s unfinished notes, “the Pensees” (“Thoughts”), put forward many of the fundamental themes of existentialism.

The requirement to know man in his particularity and therefore, in terms of a procedure different from scientific procedure to obtain knowledge of natural objects was dealt with by Wilhelm Dilthey. He viewed ‘understanding’ as the procedure and thus as the proper method of the human sciences. Understanding, according to him, consists in the reliving and reproducing of the experience of others. Hence it is also a feeling together with others and a sympathetic participation in their emotions. Understanding, therefore, accomplishes a unity between the knowing object and the object known.

During the later portion of nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, a number of writers contributed to the growth of existentialism. The Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky also is often considered to be a forerunner of existentialism and his “Notes from Underground” are thought to be a rich source of existentialist thought. “Dostoevsky (1821–1881) probed deeply into human subjectivity and freedom in his works” (Peterfreund and Denise, 1967, pp.192-193).

Poets such as Holderlin (1770-1843) and Rilke (1875-1926) addressed themselves into the problem of man overcoming his alienation from God. Henri Bergson (1859-1941), a French philosopher opposed to the tyranny of scientific concepts in the area of human existence. He held that the price we pay for excessive dependence on intellectual analysis is the loss of our very identities.

Paul Tillich’s (1886-1965) most important contribution to existentialism is his exploration of three types of anxiety which are genuinely existential- the anxiety of fate and death, the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness and the anxiety of guilt.
and condemnation. He calls first of these the threat to ‘ontic self-affirmation’, second is the threat to ‘spiritual self-affirmation’ and third is the threat to the ‘self affirmation’.

Karl Barth (born 1886) united Christianity and existentialism. Martin Buber (1878-1965) has dedicated his life to promoting the thesis that one’s love of God must be expressed through his love of each particular man. Furthermore, it is the uniqueness in each particular man rather than generic ‘man’ that is the proper object of rest. Thus the existentialist theme that ‘existence is prior to essence’ is presupposed by Buber’s philosophy.

Franz Kafka described human existence as the quest for a stable, secure and radiant reality that continually eludes it or he described it as threatened by a guilty verdict about which it knows neither the reason nor the circumstances but against which it can do nothing - a verdict that ends with death.

In “The Rebel” (1951), Albert Camus described the ‘metaphysical rebellion’ as the movement by which a man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation.

**Chief Exponents of Existentialism:**

A detailed discussion on development of existentialism has been made taking into account the ideas of following chief exponents of existentialism who dealt with the same general themes from some of the same perspectives:

1. Soren Aabye Kierkegaard, Danish Christian philosopher (1813-1855)

2. Friedrich William Nietzsche, German atheist (1844-1900)
3. Karl Theodor Jaspers, a great psychologist (1883-1969)

4. Martin Heidegger, a great philosopher (1889-1976)

5. Gabriel Honore Marcel (1889-1973)


1. Soren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855):

The official founder of existentialism is the Danish philosopher and Christian fundamentalist, Soren Aabye Kierkegaard who in the nineteenth century posed the fundamental existential question ‘what it means to exist’? He is mostly referred to as the father of existentialism.

Soren Kierkegaard was born on 5th May 1813, in Copenhagen and died in 1855. His life was a tragic failure. He was deformed physically having a hunchback; psychologically he was an introvert and solitary. It is commonly interpreted that his thought is direct product of his physical abnormalities and his psychological crippling.

Kierkegaard’s physical deformation and sufferance from guilt, disposed him to despair and dissipation while his exceptional intellectual and literary quality and a genuine Christian inwardness and uncompromising religious spirit gave him the confidence in himself and the courage to love his individuality and to safeguard it against all sorts of attacks on it. This created a tension between despair and dissipation on one hand and hopefulness and concentration on the other. He wanted to carve out for himself a real existence. He wanted to become a unique individual different from others and exist as ‘the individual’ or ‘that individual’. For this, Kierkegaard first turned to Christianity but soon realized that Christianity offered not
much scope to an individual to exist as an ‘individual’ by and for himself. So he then
turned to Hegel’s philosophy of pure thought and being for solutions to his problem of existence, but here again he was disappointed as Hegel’s philosophy of pure thought too, offered no scope to a man to exist as a sovereign individual.

The disillusionment with speculative philosophy and his continuing despair sent him back to the Christian faith again and he then aimed to reform traditional Christianity and to make it acceptable to the existential beings. He criticized organized Christianity and protested against the Danish state church of his time because in his view it prevented the individual’s confrontation with God and thus made real religious experience impossible. Further, it was ignoring the individual subjective element that is always paramount in religious experience and was engulfing the individual and the realities of his own experience. From 1846 to 1850, Kierkegaard published a series of works examining ‘what it meant to be a Christian?’ “Training in Christianity”, published in 1850, is a summation of Kierkegaard’s interpretation of what it means to follow the teachings of the Bible.

Kierkegaardian philosophy is fundamentally indirect antithesis to Hegelianism. The main element in Hegel’s idealism that Kierkegaard attacked is objectivity and determinism. In opposition to Hegel’s objectivity of history according to which the world process is all-inclusive and completely logical, whatever happens in history must happen; whatever is, is right, Kierkegaard emphasized the essentially subjective existence of the individual and his passionate involvement in his existence. In opposition to determinism, Kierkegaard emphasized the freedom of the individual to choose and the necessity of this choosing, together with the individual’s awareness of his crucial character.
According to Kierkegaard, the crucial question ‘what should man do and what should he believe’? should be asked and answered. Most people live their lives without ever asking themselves why they live as they do and whether they ought to live as they do. Hence Kierkegaard felt that his first task was to disturb people, so that they would begin to look at themselves and at the way they lived. Kierkegaard attempted to make each of us aware of our primal subjectivity, so that we may live authentically, without the crutch of antecedent social and intellectual guides. One can only live authentically – become a person – by bearing the sole responsibility for his decisions rather than by appealing to the authority of custom or even of one’s own past patterns of thought. This awareness of the conditions for becoming authentic constitutes a part of self knowledge.

Kierkegaard found despair as the fundamental human condition. He also described three forms of despair that are mentioned in the first chapter. The investigation of these modes of despair constitutes Kierkegaard’s most remarkable treatise on human psychology.

Kierkegaard also described three stages of life experience: (1) aesthetic, (2) ethical, and (3) religious. These represent three attitudes toward life, three philosophies of life. Some people progress from one stage to the next, while others never go beyond the first stage. Kierkegaard sometimes fused the second and third stages, referring to them as the religio-ethical. The third stage is the superior. All the three stages reflect man’s attempt to win salvation, to gain satisfaction for life’s greatest good, while it is still within reach. Kierkegaard discussed these stages in a number of his writings, but he devoted a most famous work, “Either/Or”, to a detailed analysis of the first two stages.
a) **The Aesthetic:** In this stage, man looks for fulfillment from his outside activities and from within himself. He may seek romance, pleasure or intellectual pursuits as means to satisfy himself. However, these activities are not enough and hence not ultimately satisfying. The man becomes bored with himself and his activities. This boredom turns to despair. If not checked, the despair ends in suicide.

b) **The Ethical:** In this stage, Kierkegaard gives the remedy for aesthetic despair. According to him commitment gives meaning to life. The person achieves selfhood through commitment. The individual becomes aware. His choices are made with passion and emotional commitment. The person now chooses and acts, thereby establishing his selfhood and integrity.

c) **The Religious:** The third and greatest stage, the stage where man finally finds contentment, is the religious stage. In the first stage the person looks for fulfillment and in the second stage he commits himself, but in this religious stage his commitment is to one who is able to satisfy completely - God. In this stage man is finally content because of his commitment to God. Selfhood cannot be achieved ultimately and completely within the self. The self must be committed to the one beyond, to God.

Major works by Kierkegaard include “Either\Or” (1843), “Fear and Trembling” (1843), “Philosophical Fragments” (1844), “Concluding Unscientific Postscript”(1846), “The Sickness unto Death” (1849) and “Edifying Discourses”. In his work “Either\Or”, the focus is on the task and rewards of adopting an ethical in preference to a consciously hedonistic or ‘aesthetic’ way of life. In “Philosophical Fragments” and “Concluding Unscientific Postscript”, Kierkegaard’s principle philosophical pseudonym attacks the Hegelian notion of an objective science of
human spirit for obscuring the nature and place of Christian faith, as well as for the subjective viewpoint from which alone the questions which prompt faith can meaningfully be raised. “The Sickness Unto Death” offers a systematic psychopathology of progressively deliberate renunciations of a Christian ideal of human fulfillment. Kierkegaard also published in his own name a large number of “Edifying Discourses” dedicated to ‘that individual’. His works were translated into other languages, mostly after his death and had tremendous influence. Because of this great later influence and his concerns with the existential themes of existence and the ‘authenticated’ man, he came to known as ‘the Father of Existentialism’.

Thus Kierkegaard’s original and extremely important contributions to existentialist philosophy include 1) his interpretation of the essentially subjective nature of human existence; his insistence on the complete freedom of the individual to choose and to become what he wills himself to become and his consequent denial of determinism and of the priority of essence over existence. 2) His protest against institutionalized Christianity and emphasis on the personal encounter with God that is the only true religious experience. And 3) his analysis of human condition as being one of despair and anxiety.

2. Friedrich William Nietzsche (1844-1900):

The next important figure in the existentialism is the German philosopher Friedrich William Nietzsche. He was born in Rocken, in the province of Saxony in 1844 and died in 1900. He was one of the authentic geniuses of the nineteenth century. Nietzsche studied at Leipzig and became professor at Basle. His first book was “The Birth of Tragedy” (1872). Other works are “The Gay Science” (1882), “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” (1883-85), “Beyond Good and Evil” (1886) and “Twilight
of the Idols” (1889). In last years of his life his most aggressive antitheistic book was published namely “The Antichrist” (1895).

The key to Nietzsche’s existentialism lies in his first work, “The Birth of Tragedy”. Nietzsche in his protest wants a complete renunciation and revelation of existing values, he wants a full acceptance of life as essentially tragic as well as essentially joyful and he demands, above all, an unbounded, ever striving self expression. Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche had a basic religious theme but he reacted differently to the character of religion as he said, “God is dead and we have killed him”. We have killed God with reason and with rationalistic philosophies, as well as with rationalistic science, we have killed him with our pretensions to objective truth and since God is dead, religion is also dead. Each of us is on our own.

Nietzsche predicted that ‘a new episode in the history is to begin’. He thought he saw the beginning of a ‘more manly, a warlike age’ and this age was to be preparatory to a time in which man would carry heroism and strong character into pursuit of knowledge. He called this man “Superman”.

Nietzsche foresaw with great clarity the problems that were to haunt man in the twentieth century, problems that many of us have not even faced, much less solved. His statement of and reactions to these problems form one of the great contributions to the modern philosophy and their influence on the development of present day existentialism is decisive. (Wingo, 1974, p.317)

‘Will to Power’ is chief concept in Nietzsche’s philosophy. According to him the ‘Will to Power’ works in all sorts of human behaviour and valuation. “In
Zarathustra he proclaimed it man’s basic motive and suggested that it is to be found in all living things” (Kaufmann, 1967, p.510). According to Nietzsche ‘Will to Power’ is the ultimate reality. Nothing is real except our world of desires and passion and thus we can rise or sink to the reality of our drives only. He further argues that the ‘Will to Power’ is not simply the will to self preservation, it is not the effort to experience pleasure and avoid pain. From ethical perspective, pain and suffering cannot be avoided since they are necessary elements in that experience of those who live dangerously. Nietzsche warns man against the easy pessimism into which the pleasure seekers or hedonists are prone to slip, since they make their value judgements on the basis of pleasure and are therefore, sickened by the pain that surrounds them.

Thus Nietzsche’s major contribution to existentialism is the introduction of the ‘concept of the death of God’ (his atheism) that results in man’s owning of his own destiny, ‘the Superman’ (his ethical relativism) and ‘the Will to Power’. He vigorously attacked Christianity and democracy as moralities for the ‘weak herd’ and argued for the ‘natural aristocracy’ of the ‘Superman’ who driven by the ‘Will to Power’ celebrates life on earth. Such a heroic man has the courage to live dangerously and thus rise above the masses, developing his natural capacity for the creative use of passion.

3. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976):

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger was born on September 26, 1889, and died on 26 may, 1976. Though Heidegger disclaimed as being an existentialist on the ground that he was concerned with the problem of being in general and not only with the personal existence and ethical units, the critics of existentialism have recognized him as one of the most original and influential existentialist philosophers
because he shared with existentialists not only their themes and ideas but also the language and the logical ideas of the subject.


The philosophical problem of being is a paramount concern of Heidegger’s philosophy. For Heidegger there is only one basic question in philosophy: the question of being. His philosophy thus held that the nature of human existence involve active participation in the world, regardless of what that participation entailed. This he termed as ‘being there,’ in German ‘Dasein’ Dasein is being or ‘being there’. It expresses only existence. Only Dasein can be said to have or not to have meaning; hence Being is meaningful solely in terms of human existence. Man exists through his choices and his being, therefore is entirely indeterminate. Other things like trees, rocks and animals and angels and God are also there but they do not exist. It is man alone who can be said to exist because man has conscious awareness about his
existence. To exist, to have authentic being, is to reflect on oneself, to be concerned about oneself. True being is self being, involving not only consciousness, but responsibility and free decision as well.

Moreover the real nature of Dasein is revealed in its temporality. Man is not simply his present; he is his past and future. “Being human is always a process of becoming oneself, living into possibilities, into one’s future” (Sheeham, 2005, p.357). Man is projected toward future, he transcends himself toward the future. He lives continually ahead of himself. His very being is temporality.

Being is revealed most dramatically by experiences that show the gap between nonbeing and being. The most profound such experience is reflection of the prospect of one’s own nonbeing, that is, death that functions as a radical condition for the possibility of human experience and gives authenticity to human beings.

Death is important in Heidegger’s system. For Heidegger there is no reality for an individual before birth or after death. The man who recognizes this fact, freely accepts its inevitability. He is no longer bound by fear of death or imaginary retributive punishment after death. He is able to choose his actions, thereby choosing his existence and ultimately his essence. This is man with dignity.

He further argues that human existence is a being-in-the-world that means the very constitution of the individual is constituted by relation of self with others and with the world.

In conclusion we can say that Heidegger’s greatest contributions to the existential thought are 1) His concept of Dasein (being-there). And 2) exploration of the horizons of time (and temporality as the basis for the possibility of time) as a
fundamental dimension of human existence and of the way understanding this existence.


Karl Jaspers was born on 23\textsuperscript{rd} February, 1883 in Oldenburg and died on 26\textsuperscript{th} February, 1969. Karl Jaspers studied law at Heidelberg and Munich. He later studied medicine at several German universities and made important contributions to pathological and psychiatric research. In 1922 he became professor of philosophy at the University of Heidelberg. Works by Jaspers include “Psychology of World Views” (1919), “Man in the Modern Age” (1931), “Philosophie” (1932) “Reason and Existen” (1935), “Philosophy of Existence” (1938) and “The Question of German Guilt” (1946).

Jaspers’ philosophical thought proper began with the work “Philosophie”. His philosophical activity was influenced by studies of Kant and Hegel, but Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have dominated his thought. His basic philosophic concern was with concrete individual and he believed that genuine philosophy must spring from one’s individual existence and address itself to other individuals to help them gain a true understanding of their existence. His philosophy “can be best characterized as a disciplined and organized description of the critical fringes of human existence, such as impenetrable limits, unmitigated freedom, and the experienced indefinite expanse of space, time and consciousness” (Koestenbaum, 1967, p.254).

Jaspers introduced two states of being: the Dasein (not to be confused with Heidegger’s Dasein) and Existenz. Dasein is existence in its most minimal sense; it is the realm of objectivity and science. Objectivity is considered a simplistic approach in discovering the nature of existence and the self. Existenz is the real and valuable in
man. It refers to the richness of authentic being. “Jaspers defines it as the authentic self and as the experience of total freedom, of infinite possibility and of loneliness” (Shashi, 1992, p.125). It has to do with personal choice and is known through individual insight or intuition. Existenz is inaccessible to conventional philosophic investigation, which quest for certainty. True philosophizing can begin only when such quest have been failed upon the limitations of existenz which Jaspers called the ‘boundary situations’. “The situations which are felt, experienced and conceived at the limit of one’s existence are termed boundary situations” (Ara, 2002, p.30). One encounters the Self at the ‘boundary situations’ of existence, at those points where all knowledge and action fail. At these boundary situations of finite existence one is driven either to despair or to a discovery of authentic selfhood in freedom. These boundary situations include death, suffering, guilt and chance. Of these, death is the most important since the anticipation of death is the source not only of such negative emotions but also of true zest for life. Jaspers analysis of these boundary situations has been most influential.

Jaspers also identified the importance of freedom and considered it as central to man. It is recognized with choice, awareness and selfhood. Jaspers himself claimed, ‘Decision makes Existen real’. This suggests that the kind of person one becomes is a product of the series of choices and decisions that he/she has taken. To choose means to be free and man’s freedom is his being. This freedom leads to the overriding importance of choice which becomes the problem of moral responsibility. The theme of individual freedom permeates Jaspers’ work.

Another important concept of Jaspers’ philosophy is the “encompassing”. It is fundamentally religious concept, intended to suggest the all embracing transcendent
reality within which human existence is enclosed. It is the ultimate experiencable horizon. For Jaspers, transcendence is man’s spiritual transcendence to be made possible through participation in the life of the world. He attempted to advance personal existence into experience of transcendence. Transcendence is about a struggle in actual life that man has to face and undergo in order to form himself/herself as a person. It is about human growing. Transcendence also seems to suggest a particular state or being that is beyond our perception, that goes beyond our grasp and comprehension which at the same time is unknown. Both senses of transcending, as the Divine and as an act of growing, are descriptions of a human person’s journey towards his/her Being. Jaspers calls his own philosophy as Existenz philosophy and he basically speaks about the ‘human person’s journey towards his/her own transcendence’. His “Existenzphilosophie” is his unique contribution to existentialism.

As far as his religious outlook is concerned, Karl Jaspers was a man of faith, but not a traditional Christian. His break with tradition was a rejection of the formality and complex nature of organized religion, not a rejection of a supreme power or divine nature. Jaspers influenced contemporary theology through his philosophy of transcendence and the limits of human experience.

Thus Jaspers major contributions to the development of existentialism include his concept of two states of being: “Dasein” and “Existenz”, “Boundary Situations”, “Transcendence”, and “Encompassing”.


Jean-Paul Sartre was born on June 21, 1905 in Paris and died on 15 April, 1980. He is a living philosopher and literate of international repute, the pioneer of the
French existentialism and the central figure in the modern existential movement. He, for many is the personification of existentialism. Besides a number of important philosophical works, his plays, short stories and novels are the best expression of his existential experience and outlook. Despite great diversity of his writings which range from deep ontological dialectic to political journalism and film scenarios the central theme that runs through all Sartre’s work is his passionate interest in human being. Major works by Sartre include “Nausea” (1938), “Intimacy” (1939), “Being and Nothingness” (1943), “The Age of Reason” (1945), “Troubled Sleep” (1949) and “Dialectic Reason” (1960).

One of the basic concerns in Sartre’s philosophy is the ontological question of being. He distinguished between two forms of being: being-in-itself (‘en soi’) and being-for-itself (‘pour soi’). By being-in-itself, Sartre means the self contained being of things, in other words the objects like trees, stones, chairs tables and so forth. They are what they are in themselves. It can never be anything other than what it is. Sartre says “The in-itself has nothing secret; it is solid…it can encompass no negations. It is full positivity. It knows no otherness; it never posits itself as other-than-another-being. It can support no connection with the other” (Sartre, 1947, p.13). While being-for-itself is the realm of human consciousness and therefore is always outside of and ahead of itself. It can be more than what it is. It is free mobile and spontaneous. The being of man is always for itself. Being-for-itself establishes for the man, the value of his own existence. These forms of being are explained in his philosophical masterpiece, “Being and Nothingness”.

Sartre also developed an ontological account of what it is to be human. To be human is characterised by an existence that precedes its essence. “Existence precedes
essence” is his famous dictum. Sartre completely denies the idea that there is some universal concept “man” that exists prior to the existence of particular men and determines their nature. There is no common human nature although all humans are involved in a common set of circumstances, that Sartre called “the human condition”. Man is what he makes of himself. But instead of being his unique self, man tend persistently to make himself conform to accepted social patterns. As a result he wastes his life sustaining a series of conventional roles. “One man in his life plays many parts, but, according to Sartre, every man should concentrate throughout his life only on being himself” (Casserly, 1955, p.207).

The conditions of existence are not only that man is whatever he has chosen to be but that whenever he chooses he is not choosing for himself but for all mankind and this is unavoidable responsibility. The responsibility that weighs on all men is incomputable and it is this fact that is the source of anguish, anxiety and despair. Like Kierkegaard, Sartre believes that there is no man outside the condition of anguish and despair. Some people do not exhibit these but they are hiding their anxiety and running away from it.

Another important theme that Sartre dealt with is forlornness. According to Sartre, forlornness arises out of existential individuality and subjectivity.

Thus Sartre’s greatest contribution to the existential thought is his famous dictum “existence precedes essence”, the idea of two forms of being: ‘being-in-itself’ and ‘being-for-itself’ and his concern for desolate, forlorn and anxious man on whom has been thrown the total responsibility of existence by way of a dignified choice of his own.

Gabriel Marcel, the French philosopher and playwright, was born on 7\textsuperscript{th} December, 1889 and died on 8 October 1973. Marcel is “an existentialist in his stress on key experiences and on the impossibility of adequately conceptualizing the important features of human life” (MacIntyre, 1967, p.150). Like Kierkegaard he was also a personal thinker whose thought sprung from personal experience. His thought revolves around a number of root ideas as modes of concrete experience: estrangement, nostalgia and homecoming; presence and absence; appeal and response; fidelity and betrayal; availability and unavailability; despair, recollection, courage and hope. He dealt with such themes as participation, incarnation, man as being in the world and the priority of existence as a starting point for philosophy. Major works by Marcel includes “Metaphysical Journal” (1927), “Being and Having” (1935), “Creative Fidelity’, “Homo Viator”, “The Mystery of Being” (2 vols.) (1951) and “Man Against Humanity” (1951).

One of the most characteristic features of Marcel’s thinking is his distinction between two types of thinking, primary and secondary reflection. Primary reflection is characterized as abstract, analytical, objective, universal and verifiable. The thinking subject in primary reflection is mind, not the individual human. Primary reflection deals with the realm of the problematic.

Secondary reflection is concerned not with problems, but with mystery. It is concerned not with objects but with the presence of being and is typically concerned with the individual’s own life meaning. Secondary reflection penetrates into the mystery of existence and being only when it works in conjunction with love, fidelity, faith and the other ‘concrete approaches’. Marcel induce “a sense of the mystery that
envelops and unfolds within experience that informs, illumines and fulfills experience, the mystery that is not alien to existence because it is itself that from which existence has its being” (Keen, 1967, p.154). Man reveals the source of his own meaning and creative power by retrieving this inner bond between existence and mystery. Example of secondary reflection is Marcel’s discussion of man’s relationship to his body that is incarnation. According to Marcel it is with the incarnate being, the existing subject that philosophy must begin. Existence is that in which the subject participates and from which thought begins its quest for meaning. The assurance of existence is an outcome of an individual’s direct participation in the world via his sensation and feeling because these are inseparable from the body; his knowledge of existence is tied up with his being incarnate.

Being, for Marcel is eternal and inexhaustible. It does not allow itself to be dissolved by the dialects of experience. Only by participation in being man overcomes isolation, despair and tragedy.

The distinction between ‘having’ and ‘being’ has also been an important characteristic feature of Marcel’s existential philosophy. ‘Having’ implies possession, an encumbrance. ‘Being’ suggests freedom from this encumbrance or burden. It is rooted in detachment. Marcel suggests that man should shed off encumbrance of possession to reach the realm of being, the realm of freedom and the realm of the realization of true existence.

Marcel was not an atheist (Marcel joined the Catholic Church in 1929). In the work of Marcel, there is reaffirmation of certain religious categories of experiences. Marcel believed that “Without a belief in God there is no hope — life is meaningless”
(Gaur, 1985, p.2). The only answer to despair is to treat life as a kind of special grace or gift and thus God is restored as the Giver of life and the Ruler of heaven and earth.

Thus Marcel’s contribution to existentialism includes conception of ‘Primary and Secondary Reflection’, distinction between ‘having and being’ and the concepts of ‘incarnation’ and ‘participation’.