

## Human Nature and Human Destiny in Existentialism

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### ABSTRACT

Existentialism begins with contemplation on philosophy to solve the problems of life and society of the Danish European Soren Aabye Kierkegaard, in the 19th century, proposed a philosophical approach to the study of the human being, which he called the existentialism of man, and was the first to study this philosophy. It is thus recognized as the father of Existentialism. Then, in the 20th century, a French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, proposed an existential philosophy and emphatically accepted it as a philosopher of Existentialism. Since then, Existential philosophy has been a philosophy that accurately places great importance on the direct study of nature and human fate. Philosophers in this field devoted their intellect to studies, spreading the concept of humanity. The aim of man should be in the present life where each human being is equal, intellectual, conscious, has the right to choose, has the freedom to do, to be according to his or her desires, along with responsibility. Human nature in Existential philosophy means the existence of human beings before anything later. Each human being can be sure of each person's existence first, and then seek and be sure of the

otherness that follows. Human existence is not restricted, that is to say, there is freedom, ready to be, to be anything, as personal self would choose.

This philosophy aims to promote the existential awakening of human beings to face life and societal problems with humans themselves in a self-conscious manner in a world where each person has to live together.

**Keyword:** Existentialism, Human Nature, Human Destiny, Freedom, Authenticity

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## Introduction

What is a human? Where do they come from? What are their characteristics? Did someone create them or not? What is the purpose of human life? These questions have received answers from religion and philosophy for thousands of years. However, because every human shares one inevitable aspect of their nature, which is that they are born, live, and ultimately must die, those who have believed in the answers to these questions eventually pass away with their beliefs. New generations of humans are born and experience a world with new contexts, which leads to new questions and dissatisfaction with the old answers. Consequently, in this world, there are diverse and differing answers to questions about the nature and destiny of humans, and just as there are similarities, there are also continuous new sets of answers emerging.

Here are some examples of how different religious and philosophical traditions answer the questions about the nature and destiny of human life: Hinduism: In Hinduism, it is believed that the essence of human life is the "Atman," which is the eternal and unchanging soul. The physical body is considered temporary, and when a person dies, the Atman is reborn into a different existence in a cycle known as reincarnation. The Atman is said to come from the ultimate divine reality, often referred to as "Brahman." The purpose of human life is to live following the teachings of the religion, such as the pursuit of dharma (duty), karma (action and its consequences), and moksha (liberation from the cycle of rebirth). Buddhism: In Buddhism, human life is characterized by the "Five Aggregates," which include form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. These elements are impermanent, and Buddhism has no unchanging essence (Atman). Human nature is good or bad depending on their intentional action which is good or bad. The ultimate goal is to attain Nirvana, which is the cessation of suffering and the end of the cycle of rebirth. The path to Nirvana involves practicing ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom. Western Philosophy (Plato): In Plato's philosophy, he proposed the idea of "Forms" or "Ideals." According to Plato, everything in the physical world is an imperfect copy of a perfect Form in the realm of the divine. For humans, the highest Form is the "Form of the Good," and the purpose of life is to pursue knowledge and wisdom to come closer to understanding and aligning with this ultimate truth. Western Philosophy (Aristotle): Aristotle believed that the essence of human life is found in the development of reason and the pursuit of eudaimonia, often translated as "happiness" or

"flourishing." He argued that humans have a unique capacity for rational thought, and living a virtuous life by reason is the key to fulfilling one's purpose.

These are just a few examples, and there are many more philosophical and religious perspectives on the nature and purpose of human life. Each tradition provides its insights and answers to these fundamental questions, shaping the beliefs and values of its followers. Hence, this paper will try to interpret what is human nature and human destiny in Existentialism from the author's understanding which has limitations of space and time as well as the culture of Existentialism in Europe.

### **Short Introduction to Existentialism**

Existentialism originated in Europe and gained significant attention during the aftermath of World War II. It has its roots in the works of philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher who lived from 1813 to 1855. Kierkegaard is often considered a precursor to existentialism due to his exploration of individuality, subjectivity, and the human experience. However, existentialism became most prominent in the mid-20th century, particularly through the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, a French philosopher born in 1905 and died in 1980. Sartre played a crucial role in popularizing existentialist ideas, especially through literature. He expressed existentialist concepts in his works and integrated them with a sense of disillusionment with the developments in science, technology, business, and industry. Existentialism resonated with the younger generation at the time, who sought freedom and individuality.

The website Britannica.com (2020) defines Existentialism as a diverse philosophical movement that had the greatest influence in Europe during the mid-20th century, around the 1930s. Philosophers of this school of thought interpreted the human condition in a world that emphasized individuality and the various challenges of contemporary life.

Philosophy Encyclopedia (Online) (2022) notes that defining Existentialism can be challenging because many philosophers commonly referred to as existentialists often reject the label and the existentialist philosophy altogether. However, the encyclopedia attempts to provide a summarized meaning of Existentialism as follows: "Existentialist philosophy emphasizes the explanation of 'human existence,' as opposed to 'essence,' as seen in the history of Western philosophy before. This means that we cannot explain human beings through a substance or essence but rather in terms of their existence."

In essence, Existentialism focuses on the lived experience and individual existence of human beings, emphasizing the idea that we cannot define humans solely through their inherent nature or essence. Instead, it is about understanding humans through their existence and their life choices. Existentialism is a philosophy that focuses on the study of human beings through "human existence" itself, rather than emphasizing the "essence" of humans. Existentialism directs its attention to the "existence" of humans and values it above contemplating philosophical questions, such as who created humans, the origin of the world, when it will end, and what the true nature of humanity is. These questions have been studied extensively in the history of philosophy but often remain unresolved and may not directly address the real-life challenges individuals face. Existentialism places importance on the individual as a human being who lives in the present moment. It emphasizes that individuals have emotions, feelings, and consciousness. It seeks to spread awareness among individuals about their own existence, encouraging them to understand themselves clearly. Existentialism asserts that individuals possess freedom and responsibility, and through self-awareness and taking responsibility for their actions, both on a personal and societal level, they can contribute to making themselves and society better. Existentialism ultimately encourages individuals to be more aware of their own humanity and take positive action.

### **Nature and Destiny of Human Beings in Existentialism**

In Existentialism, various philosophers have presented their views on the nature and destiny of humans, summarized as follows:

Humans possess a nature where each individual has inherent freedom from birth. Each person also bears responsibility for their actions, which they decide upon and cannot avoid. The decisions and choices made by each individual define who they are and how much they have developed themselves. In existentialism, this philosophy urges humans to recognize that life in the present moment is of utmost importance. Subsequently, living to seek one's own essence becomes a priority. Humans spend their time transforming themselves and seeking meaning. This essence is something that is given to oneself through one's own choices, responsibilities, and intentions for freedom. It is through these choices and responsibilities that humans shape their destinies and become what they choose to be. (Pantip Suphanakorn, 2000)

In Existentialism, the nature of humans is their existence. Existentialism, as a whole, holds that existence is more important than the essence of humans. For example, being a student or being a teacher is essence, while being human is existence. (Pantip Suphanakorn, 2000) Existence refers to the individual existence of each person and the existence of "I." The existence of "I" for each person is the most certain reality. From this certainty in oneself, it leads to the question of what one exists as (essence). For example, the essence of being a teacher cannot exist without existence which means being human. Each individual must start from their own "I" and then seek their essence from there.

The existence of humans is not limited (freedom). Human existence is unrestricted in the sense that it can accommodate any essence or whatness based on the individual's choices and responsibilities. This is in contrast to other things like a table or a rock, which have fixed essences and limitations. For example, a table will always be a table. This is because a table lacks existence. While, humans are the only ones with self-awareness, freedom, decision-making, choice, and responsibility; this is existence.

The existence (Existence) of each human is unique (Unique). Each person has their own "I" (self) that cannot be substituted for another. The uniqueness of each person's "I" (existence) means that every individual is equally important and should be equally valued. The existence of each human contains inner paradoxes. Each person is unique but ultimately ceases to exist (through death), leading to an inherent conflict within humans - the fear of losing one's existence, resulting in anxiety or dread. (Pantip Suphanakorn, 2000)

Human existence must confront the tension between being oneself and losing oneself. Humans are born without a predefined essence, allowing them to be themselves by self-awareness, using their freedom, making choices, and creating themselves as they wish. Conversely, humans also face the possibility of losing their selfhood, subject to environmental influences that determine their destiny, similar to how a rock can erode over time due to the elements until it turns into dust. (Pantip Suphanakorn, 2000) Humans have a nature that includes inherent freedom from birth, and each person carries the responsibility for their own choices and actions. The decisions and choices made by each individual define who they are to varying degrees. Existentialism serves as a reminder to humans that life in the present moment is of utmost importance. Subsequently, individuals embark on a journey to transform

themselves and seek meaning. This process involves using their freedom to make choices and take responsibility for their actions, all to pursue an authentic existence.

In summary, in Existentialism, the nature of humans is defined by existence, which is the primary concern before considering what one becomes. Each individual can be most certain of their existence, and from there, they seek and become certain of their essence or what they become later on. Human existence is not restricted but rather holds freedom, allowing one to become anything by the choices made by their selves. This state of existence is characterized by floating, wavering, and freedom. Every individual possesses a unique essence that cannot be replaced by others, and they should receive equal importance. Humans experience inner conflicts due to their dual nature - the fear of losing their existence and the awareness of their unique significance. They must confront the tension between being themselves and the possibility of losing themselves. Human existence is not predetermined, and individuals have the freedom to shape themselves by realizing, choosing, acting freely, and taking responsibility to create the destiny they desire.

To expand a detailed understanding of how the nature and destiny of humans are perceived in Existentialism, it is essential to examine the perspectives of two renowned philosophers within this philosophical tradition. We will focus on 1) Søren Aabye Kierkegaard acknowledged as the father of existentialism, and 2) Jean-Paul Sartre, a prominent figure in existentialism, widely recognized as one of its leading proponents.

### **Nature and Destiny of Human Beings in Existentialism of Søren Aabye Kierkegaard**

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher who lived from 1813 to 1855, had a profound impact on philosophical thought during and beyond his 42 years of life. Despite his relatively short lifespan, Kierkegaard made significant contributions to intellectual advancement that continue to influence people today. He started as a lecturer and was deeply interested in philosophy. Throughout his life, he produced over 30 works, many of which have left a lasting imprint on philosophical thinking in the 20th century, particularly in the realm of Existentialism.

Kierkegaard was a pioneer in advocating the idea that each individual must draw upon their personal experiences to construct their philosophical perspectives. He emphasized that every person possesses a unique philosophy, distinct from others. Studying the philosophical ideas of others served as a means to better understand how different individuals encountered

philosophy. This practice allowed individuals to sharpen their intellectual acumen and gain a deeper grasp of their thought processes. For these reasons, Kierkegaard is widely recognized by scholars as the father of Existentialism. His innovative approach to philosophy, which emphasized the importance of personal experiences and individualistic philosophical development, has left an enduring legacy in the field of philosophy. (Kirti Bunchua, 1978)

Kierkegaard's philosophy of Existentialism rejects the notion that there exists a systematic truth capable of explaining all events through a unified set of rules, as well as a perpetually true reality of that nature. The belief in a systematic and immutable truth provides warmth and assurance to those who adhere to it, allowing them to lead a meaningful life in this world. It also enables them to set goals for their existence, rather than living in a purposeless. However, dissatisfied with such a systematized mode of thinking, Kierkegaard challenges Hegel's philosophy, which proposed a systematic philosophy of absolute reality. By rejecting Hegel's ideas, Kierkegaard argues that truth is a situational experience, occurring in each moment when individuals confront different situations. Humans bear the responsibility of making decisions within those specific situations, and there is no universal guideline or global method to explain each unique circumstance. Individuals cannot evade the necessity of making choices. Human misery, according to Kierkegaard, arises from attempts to avoid decision-making. This perspective captures Kierkegaard's viewpoint on the nature and destiny of humanity within his existential framework. (Kirti Bunchua, 1978)

According to Kierkegaard's philosophy, the nature of humans is their existence, and existence itself is what truly defines a person. It encompasses life, consciousness, emotions, knowledge, feelings, freedom, the right to choose, dignity, and responsibility for one's choices. Kierkegaard doesn't imply a predetermined state of humanity as some other thinkers attempt to construct or imagine, such as a human condition or essence. He fundamentally disagrees with such notions. Kierkegaard acknowledges that human subjectivity, one's individuality, and self-assurance are the essential foundations of each person. In other words, one's uniqueness and self-affirmation are what can unequivocally confirm their existence. Therefore, individuals must embark on a journey of self-discovery to establish the genuine essence of being human. (Kirti Bunchua, 1978)

Each individual engages in various activities to truly experience human existence. These activities encompass personal daily life routines, social interactions, and various

everyday tasks. However, despite participating in these activities, humans often fail to fully appreciate and become conscious of them. In other words, their inner spirit has not yet connected with these activities. They have not engaged in these activities with a genuine and passionate desire. For Kierkegaard, desire is a significant symbol for becoming aware of one's humanity, as he stated, "It is impossible for a human being to live without desire unless we understand the word 'existence' in a lower sense." He eloquently compared our lives to a journey towards the future, akin to a horse with wings. To steer our lives towards a better future, we must harness that winged horse ourselves, with our very existence. There is no external force that can help us discover human existence, except through the conscious living of one's own life or one's true humanity. This entails choices, decisions, freedom, responsibility, despair, and various feelings. All of these are crucial components that signify human existence, and they play a pivotal role in pointing toward genuine humanness. (Kirti Bunchua, 1978)

When Kierkegaard speaks of the individual existence of each person, he refers to it from a unique and specific perspective. He means that a human being is not merely a biological, psychological, or sociological entity. Rather, a human being is the state of being human and possesses an authentic mode of existence. What we call a "human being" is a living, constantly evolving entity that experiences wonder in every moment of life. It is more marvelous than the mechanical workings of the physical body. Human beings, or individuals, aspire to reach the unique essence of their own being. This is achieved through freedom, hope, and various actions. The individual's selfhood is motivated by an inner driving force that ignites desires and aspirations. It compels individuals to be masters of their own lives, creators of their values, and the architects of their existence. (Kirti Bunchua, 1978)

To sum up, according to Kierkegaard the nature of humanity is this existence. It is not defined by qualities like intelligence or specific abilities, but rather, it is the presence of existence itself. This existence manifests in various moments, even in moments of despair, and hopelessness, and when all motivation seems lost. Existence is not something simple; it is a struggle to overcome obstacles, turn despair into hope, ignite desires, and find the strength to persevere in moments of discouragement. Therefore, understanding and accessing one's existence involves detaching from societal pressures and expectations. Even after enduring battles and reaching moments of despair, humans often return to the fight and find new life. Humans must awaken their inner selves to continue the struggle, infuse life with the fire of

desire, and push themselves to become the architects of their existence. This is why humans are often referred to as having an essence or existence. In essence, the significance of existence lies in how humans manage their lives, embracing freedom and autonomy through determined actions and a sense of responsibility.

### **The Nature and Destiny of Human Beings in Jean-Paul Sartre's Existentialist Philosophy**

Jean-Paul Sartre was an existentialist philosopher who emphasized the utmost importance of human freedom, considering it the most significant aspect of an individual's existence in the world. While Sartre was not the originator of existentialist philosophy, he was the first to openly embrace and publicly declare his commitment to this philosophy, providing detailed explanations and justifications for his philosophical standpoint. (Kirti Bunchua, 1978)

Existentialism, as championed by Sartre, became synonymous with the concepts of existential freedom and human autonomy. Sartre played a pivotal role in popularizing these ideas and spreading them to the general public. He articulated his thoughts with depth and precision, establishing himself as a leading figure at the forefront of this philosophical movement worldwide. In the context of Thailand, Sartre remains the most widely recognized existentialist philosopher. His influence extends not only to philosophers and intellectuals but also to writers, social activists, and politicians who have invoked his ideas in advocating for freedom from authoritarian regimes. Sartre's philosophy has left an indelible mark on Thai literature and various forms of media, with his ideas continuing to influence the intellectual discourse and social movements in the country. (Pinit Ratanakul, 1998)

Jean-Paul Sartre was born on June 21, 1905, in Paris, France, and passed away on April 15, 1980, in Paris. Sartre lost his father at a young age, just when he was two years old. He was then raised by his maternal grandparents. Later, Sartre's mother remarried, and his stepfather, Carl Schweitzer (uncle of the famous Albert Schweitzer), was a professor of German at the Sorbonne. Sartre had a passion for reading and writing from a very young age, and by the age of nine, he aspired to become a writer. He pursued higher education at the École Normale Supérieure, where he completed his doctoral studies in philosophy in 1929. After his studies, he worked as a philosophy professor in Le Havre from 1931 to 1945. (Pinit Ratanakul, 1998)

Sartre's philosophy emphasizes confronting the problems of the present moment, solving them, and taking responsibility for one's actions in specific situations. He encouraged

individuals to find satisfaction and pride in exercising their freedom and embracing their sense of responsibility. Sartre's philosophy essentially teaches that humans should accept the fact that this life is all there is, and they should not dream of anything more than what exists. By doing so, they can find contentment and lead a happy and peaceful life until death. Sartre's philosophy is often referred to as the philosophy of freedom, as you mentioned earlier.

Sartre believed that the nature, meaning, and value of all things depend entirely on human perception. Humans are the ones who define the nature, usage, and value of everything. If we remove these suppositions, then things still exist, but they lack any inherent meaning; they exist but are empty. This is because all things are a form of being, either being-in-itself or being-for-itself, as outlined in the field of ontology.

According to Sartre, Being-in-itself refers to entities that lack consciousness or self-awareness. They exist but are unaware of their existence, meaning they cannot define relationships or attributes. For example, a rock is a being-in-itself. It exists as a physical entity but is unaware of its existence or any meaning attributed to it. Being-for-itself, on the other hand, refers to beings that possess consciousness and self-awareness. Humans fall into this category. Being-for-itself can define meaning, purpose, and attributes. For instance, when a person decides to use a table for dining, the table takes on the meaning of a dining surface. When the same person decides to use the table for writing, it transforms into a writing surface. Humans, being-for-itself, can create their worlds based on their intentions. (Pantip Suphanakorn, 2000)

In Sartre's view, humans are unique because they have consciousness and the ability to attribute meaning and purpose to the world around them. This concept underscores the idea that humans are not passive observers of reality; instead, they actively engage with the world, imbuing it with meaning based on their intentions and perceptions. Sartre's philosophy highlights the existential responsibility of humans to create and define their existence, emphasizing the significance of individual freedom and choice in shaping their lives and the meaning they find in the world. Therefore, in Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of Existentialism, human beings are synonymous with existence. Existence is consciousness; it is the act of questioning, denying, feeling, and imagining. Existence (Being-for-itself) is thus uncertain, with various contradictory states compared to things (being) that are in themselves (Being-in-itself),

which remain constant in the face of actions by existence. In other words, consciousness is at the core. (Pantip Suphanakorn, 2000)

This consciousness, according to Sartre, is synonymous with knowledge. To know is to be conscious, and consciousness is not an object of knowledge. Sartre sees that consciousness of belief is belief, and belief is consciousness of belief. Therefore, consciousness is nothingness, as it is not an object. Hence, it chooses to be anything, and choice means freedom.

One thing, humans cannot avoid is choosing. Choosing is not arbitrary but is guided by freedom and responsibility. Thus, people must choose what is better, both for themselves and for others, based on the freedom they possess. Consequently, freedom is the essence of Existence or Being-for-itself or Consciousness. Because of this, Sartre famously states that "man is condemned to be free." Since humans have freedom, they can wonder and choose to be whatever they want, to live or die. While they cannot change their past, they can choose whether the past influences them. The environment does not limit human freedom but offers opportunities for humans to use their freedom to select their surroundings. Humans and freedom are inseparable, no matter the circumstances, and even though humans may not fully understand why they must have freedom, they are condemned to be free. (Kirti Bunchua, 1978)

In summary, in Sartre's perspective, the essence of human nature is existence, and the fate of individuals depends on their choices and responsibilities. Sartre's philosophy revolves around the concepts of Existence, Consciousness, Being-for-itself, Choice, Freedom, and Responsibility, all of which define the human condition. Sartre argues that humans are fundamentally free and responsible for their choices. He emphasizes that human beings are conscious (Being-for-itself), which means they are aware and capable of questioning, rejecting, feeling, and imagining. This consciousness is what sets humans apart from other things. Sartre also introduces the concept of Being-in-itself, which represents entities like rocks or material objects in the world that lack consciousness, choice, and freedom. These entities simply exist without awareness or the capacity to make choices. The central idea in Sartre's philosophy is that humans are condemned to be free. This means that they must make choices and take responsibility for those choices. Failure to do so would reduce humans to the level of mere material objects, like rocks or metals. Therefore, Sartre encourages individuals and society to

awaken to their freedom and take responsibility for their actions. He believes that without the conscious exercise of freedom and responsibility, humans are no different from inanimate objects. In essence, Sartre's philosophy highlights the importance of recognizing one's freedom, making authentic choices, and accepting the responsibility that comes with it. Failure to do so results in a life devoid of meaning and purpose, akin to the lifelessness of an inanimate object.

### Conclusion

Existentialism is a philosophy that seeks to answer questions about the nature and destiny of humanity. Existentialist philosophers assert that humans are fundamentally free beings. They presented philosophies rooted in freedom because they aimed to address the societal issues of their time, where people were often alienated, lacked purpose, and felt disconnected from themselves and society. These existentialist philosophers believed in the importance of individual freedom and responsibility as a means to combat the sense of despair and aimlessness that prevailed in society. They encouraged people to take charge of their own lives, become aware of their freedom, and accept responsibility for their choices. By doing so, they hoped to instill a sense of vitality, hope, and collective responsibility in society. In comparison with Buddhist philosophy. It can be argued that the progress and prosperity in Western societies today are, in part, a result of the philosophy that recognizes human nature as inherently free. This recognition has empowered individuals to actively participate, take initiative, and contribute to the betterment of society. It is possible to say that Existentialism, with its emphasis on freedom and responsibility, has played a role in shaping these advancements and innovations.

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