

Viktor frankel
existentialism
psychoanalysis not
marxism philosophy
essay



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Existentialism can be defined as a “ philosophical movement oriented toward two major themes, the analysis of human existence and the centrality of human choice.” (Answers). It is a philosophy that implies that one can define his own value or meaning of life in a place that is void of meaning. There is also an implication that one has the freedom to choose his or her own path. Existentialism is a belief that one has the freedom to make his or her own choices and with this freedom comes individuality, authenticity, and responsibility. In other words, existentialism is the essence of humanity, the thing that makes us different from anyone and anything else in the world. It means being aware of ones freedom and the acceptance of things such as death and other tragedies of life. It is the responsibility to create ones’ self, to be individualistic and authentic.

Satre believed one was “ condemned to be free; that there is no limit to ones freedom except that we cannot cease being free.” (Stevenson & Haberman, 2009) Satre believed that every part of one’s life involves a decision; that even emotions and the “ subconscious” involve a choice on one’s part; nothing is due to happenstance or heredity. Freud, on the other hand believed the one was divided between the ego/superego, and his or her own disposition. Freud believed some things were not based on one’s freedom of choice, but on that which was passed on to person through heredity. Marx, being a material determinist, believed people really did not possess the freedom of choice or of authenticity. Marx believed “...first, that (a) the material powers of production, condition or limit, (b), the relations of production (e. g., the hand-mill fits into the feudal structure, but large machinery such as the steam mill requires capitalism); secondly that (a) and

(b) together ("the economic structure") condition or limit, (c) the ideological superstructure." (Stevenson & Haberman, 2009) Marx believed that one was conditioned and limited but the dictations of society. He did not believe in freedom of choice or individualism, versus the societal leadership on the people. According to Marx, "...men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces." (Stevenson & Haberman, 2009 pg 168). He believed a person's "social being determined their consciousness and not the other way around." (Stevenson & Haberman, 2009 pg 168)

"We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." (Frankl, 1959)

Viktor Frankl's time and experiences while in the concentration camp was torturous, to say the least, to the extent that he relied on optimism and faith; however, this reliance was yet a decision that he was able to make regardless of the situation of which he was a part. Frankl had to make the decision to "not run into the wire", a means of committing suicide by so many of the prisoners, on numerous occasions. Regardless of all that was taken from Frankl, one thing they could not take was his mental freedom and his ability to make a choice as he is quoted, "The chapter addresses

present-day concerns and how it is possible to "say yes to life" in spite of all
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the tragic aspects of human existence.” (Frankl, 1959 pg. 17) Frankl’s ability to recognize he still yet possessed the freedom of choice has a direct relation to the beliefs of existentialism and that of Satre, who believes “ there is no limit to freedom except one can not cease to be free.” Whereas Marx believed “ the key to human history lay not in mere ideas - and certainly not in God or a cosmic Spirit - but in the economic conditions of life.”, Frankl believed that even in presence of horrific physical and mental conditions, one still had a choice and could obtain a deeper spiritual life.

When considering the philosophies of Marx, Freud, and Frankl, I am much more inclined to agree with the philosophies of Frankl. Frankl relied on his faith, spiritual meaning, and his freedom of choice to help him endure the sadistic conditions of the concentration camp and remain an individual versus a number. Life throws many tragedies into a person’s life and it is up to the person to exercise his or her freedom to not be dehumanized by the conditions presented by life. One has the choice of maintaining a status of individualism and not allowing society to dictate how he or she should view or handle a situation.

In closing, I leave the final quote of Frankl...” Under the influence of a world which no longer recognized the value of human will and human dignity, which had robbed man of his will and had made him an object to be exterminated...under the influence the personal ego finally suffered a loss of values. If the man in the concentration camp did not struggle against this in a last effort to save his self-respect, he lost the feeling of being an individual, a being with a mind, with inner freedom and personal value...his existence descended to the level of animal life.” (Frankl, 1959 pg70)

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