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Few Continental philosophies are as misunderstood as existentialism.  Often cited for negativism bordering on nihilism, its stress on the individuality and freedom of every human is overshadowed by the misperceptions associated with it.  Some of the confusion surrounding a clear definition of existentialism is because the diversity of positions associated with the philosophy makes it impossible to define precisely.  However, certain themes common to virtually all existentialist philosophers can be identified, including the stress on individual existence, freedom, responsibility and choice; the idea that existence precedes essence; the fact that life is absurd; anguish is a fundamental condition of human existence; there are no objective values; and a systematic refutation of many Hegelian ideals.

The history of philosophy is marked by refutations and revisions of earlier ideas, and the historical development of Continental philosophy’s existentialism and phenomenology is no different.  From the philosophical tenets of Hegel , philosophers such as Schelling, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Schelling, and Marx opposed its brand of idealism and posited explanations of existence that sought to refute Hegelian ideals.  Considered the most influential of all the German idealists, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel attempted to construct a comprehensive system of thought about the world.  Hegelian idealism imagined a world spirit that develops out of, and is knowable through, the dialectical logic.

The Hegelian dialectic explains how a thesis inevitably generates an antithesis, and the interaction of these leads to a synthesis.  His phenomenological approach to philosophy begins with the exploration of phenomena as a means to grasp the absolute, logical, ontological and metaphysical world spirit behind the phenomena.  By this logic, the idea of being is fundamental, but it evokes its antithesis, of non-being . The synthesis of these two concepts is explained as becoming.

Through his brand of German idealism, Hegel deduced that all activity is basic, progress is rational, and logic is the basis of the world process, which is absolute, knowable, and develops by its own self-creating plan ( The Columbia Encyclopedia , 2004).  While Hegel’s contributions have been credited as influencing existentialism and phenomenology, it has mostly been through its refutation of his attempts to create a complete philosophical system.

After Hegel’s death, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling set forth to counter the influence of Hegelian philosophy.  As a former collaborator of Hegel, Schelling later became more religious in his philosophizing and criticized the Hegel’s brand of rationalism.

The interpretation Schelling offered of Hegel during his later years helped to shape subsequent generations’ understanding of Hegel, encouraging the understanding of Hegel as a metaphysical thinker in the pre-Kantian dogmatic sense (2004).  A great deal of Schelling’s criticisms of Hegel’s rationalism also became the foundation for existentialist philosophy, especially through the work of Kierkegaard, who had attended Schelling’s lectures.

Existentialism has its roots firmly planted in the mid-nineteenth-century opposition to Hegelian idealism.  Contemporary experts on existentialism such as Walter Kaufmann see the philosophy as a collection of ideas that are more difficult to categorize than the diverse thinkers who contributed to its lexicon.  Of existentialism, Kaufmann says:

“ Certainly, existentialism is not a school of thought nor

reducible to any set of tenets.  The three writers who appear

invariably on every list of ‘ existentialists,’ Heidegger,

Nietzsche, and Sartre — are not in agreement on essentials.

Such alleged precursors as Pascal and Kierkegaard differed

from all three men by being dedicated Christians; and Pascal

was a Catholic of sorts, while Kierkegaard was a Protestant’s

Protestant.  If, as is often done, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky are

included in the fold, we must make room for an impassioned

anti-Christian and an even more fanatical Greek-Orthodox

Russian imperialist.  By the time we consider adding Rilke,

Kafka, and Camus, it becomes plain that one essential feature

shared by all these men is their perfervid individualism”

(Kaufman, 1962, p. 11).

From this diversity, comes the difficult task of unifying the main ideas so that they can illuminate the questions surrounding the philosophy.

Some of the difficulty in defining existentialism results from the characteristics of the philosophy itself.  For example, most existentialists deny that reality can be neatly summarized into a system, and so they reject all-inclusive views like Hegel’s (Raymond, 1991).  This does not mean that existentialists are unsystematic, but rather that they tend to emphasize the richness of human experience rather than construct a framework to fit neatly in the systemized world of philosophy.  Therefore, a precise definition seems highly unlikely, however existentialists suggest one major theme above all else:  a stress on individual existence and the subsequent development of personal essence.  This makes most existentialist thought the direct counter to Hegelian idealism.

The opposition of Kierkegaard to Hegel’s system of absolute knowledge became the first major instances of existentialist thought.  Kierkegaard vehemently rejected Hegelian idealism, preferring to focus on the specificity of individual experience.  Nietzsche was also a vocal opponent of Hegelian idealism.  He largely criticized any systems that claimed absolutes including Hegel’s philosophy and Christianity, which he saw as denigrating the importance of this world, reason, and human excellence.

Nietzsche also rejected Hegel’s brand of optimism, expressing dissatisfaction with social mores, while believing in the virtues of creative activity, and support of individual freedom.  Many of Nietzsche’s philosophical tenets stressed the subjectivity of existence and the duty of the individual to assert himself in the world through a will to power.  His philosophy is often used to justify extreme political viewpoints, such as Nazism, underlining the politically divisive impact of existential philosophy influenced by Hegel.

While Hegel supported progressive but non-revolutionary politics, his subsequent followers split into “ left-” and “ right-wing” factions; the left-wing Karl Marx developed his own approach to the world, society, and history which incorporated many Hegelian ideas into Marx’s materialistic outlook (Redding, 2006).  Marx agreed with Hegel about inevitable historical progress in a dialectical pattern, but he argued that material, physical forces lead to progress instead of a self-creating plan.

Marx influenced the course of existentialism with his communist ideology by arguing that individuals were socially alienated by the capitalist system that unnaturally usurps freedom and dignity.  Existentialists would later build on both Marx’s, as well as Kierkegaard’s, fear that industrialization threatened the dignity of the individual, and they too stressed the importance of human values in an increasingly technical world (Fulton, 1999, p. 6).  While Hegel’s philosophy influenced existential thought, it also affected Continental philosophy’s phenomenology.

In academic philosophy, Hegelian idealism underwent a fierce revivalist opposition in both Great Britain in the last decades of the nineteenth century.  To British thinkers like Bertrand Russell, Hegel became one of the main targets of attack.  According to philosophical historian Paul Redding (2006), to the founders of the burgeoning “ analytic” movement, like Russell, “ destroyed Hegel’s metaphysics by overturning the Aristotelian logic on which it was based, and in line with this dismissal, Hegel came to be seen within the analytic movement as an historical figure of little genuine philosophical interest.”

Much of this opposition to Hegel continued throughout the twentieth century phenomenological tradition that developed in continental Europe.  However, interest in his work and his contributions continued to influence academic philosophers, like Jean-Paul Sartre and Edmund Husserl, and contributed to greater understanding of existentialist and phenomenological thought.

While the exact influence of Hegel’s philosophy can be largely debated as being beneficial to subsequent modes of thought, its influence cannot be debated.  Hegelian idealism sought to create a systemic explanation for existence, encouraging followers and opponents to vehemently debate and create offshoots of Hegel’s original ideas.  Whether in the form of opposing existential viewpoints or concurrent phenomenological ideals, Hegel’s influence as positive or negative may be debatable, but its impact is unquestionable.

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