



Navigating Identity Crisis: A Sartrean perspective on Existential Philosophy

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Abstract

This study investigates the concept of identity crisis from an existential perspective informed by the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. Through an analysis of existentialist principles such as freedom, responsibility, and authenticity, the paper explores the existential roots of identity crisis and its implications for individual self-awareness and personal development. By examining Sartre's ideas on the nature of existence and the human condition, the paper elucidates the existential dimensions of identity crisis and offers insights into how individuals can navigate this existential challenge to attain greater self-understanding and authenticity. Drawing on existential philosophy, the study underscores the importance of embracing the uncertainties of existence and taking ownership of one's identity in the face of existential crisis.

Keywords: Identity crisis, existentialism, jean-paul sartre, freedom, responsibility, authenticity, self-awareness, personal development

Introduction

The concept of identity typically refers to a unique and distinguishing set of characteristics possessed by an individual, setting them apart from others. Each person is inherently aware of his/her own identity, encompassing personal traits, beliefs, appearance, and communication style. It encapsulates an individual's understanding of oneself, including his/her role within social groups. Identity encompasses a person's distinct qualities, beliefs, physical attributes, and mannerisms, serving as a reflection of their values and opinions.

The challenge of identity crisis emerges when an individual begins to question or lose faith in their own values and self-perception. During such crises, individuals may distance themselves from their accustomed way of life, grappling with existential questions like "who am I?" and doubting their sense of identity. In essence, an identity crisis occurs when an individual experiences a loss of confidence in themselves.

Identity Crisis in Existentialism

Existentialism, a significant philosophical movement, centers on human existence, asserting that individuals are responsible for assigning meaning to their own lives. It is regarded as the most profound philosophical perspective on existence and its dilemmas. Within existentialism, the notion of identity crisis is expounded as an "existential crisis." Although these terms are somewhat distinct, they are not entirely separate concepts. An identity crisis can precipitate an existential crisis, wherein individuals

scrutinize the very essence of their existence. Questions concerning the meaning, purpose, and validity of existence surface, evoking intense feelings of anxiety, confusion, and a quest for deeper insights into life. While both identity crisis and existential crisis are profoundly disquieting, they diverge in their focus and magnitude. An identity crisis revolves around questioning one's fundamental traits and life circumstances, whereas an existential crisis delves into inquiries about the essence of life itself, pondering its meaning and worth. When an identity crisis deeply embeds itself in an individual's psyche, it can escalate into a more profound form of existential crisis, where one may even question the value of their own existence.

The issue of identity crisis holds significant importance in our lives, especially in a world where we juggle multiple roles such as being a mother, daughter, teacher, soldier, and more. At times, we find ourselves grappling with the question of our true identity amidst these varied roles. Existentialism delves into this very inquiry, focusing on the genuine essence of individual identity, which is existence itself. When pondering the real identity of a human being, existentialism posits that it lies in their existence. The concept of existential crisis finds its answer in existentialist philosophy through notions of freedom and nothingness. Among existentialist thinkers, Jean-Paul Sartre stands out for his profound exploration of the existential crisis.

Sartre's Perspective on Existential Crisis:

According to existentialism, every individual possesses the consciousness to act and define themselves. Yet, humans can also encounter a form of unawareness regarding their own existence, which constitutes an existential identity crisis. Jean-Paul Sartre introduced the notion of "existence precedes essence," suggesting that humans attribute meaning to their own lives. Thus, individuals have complete freedom to interpret and select their actions. However, this freedom carries significant responsibility, leading to feelings of anxiety and fear as individuals grapple with their choices. During such crises, people experience confusion and uncertainty regarding their roles, purposes, and the meaning of life. Sartre's philosophy vividly portrays existential crises through concepts such as freedom, responsibility, anguish, and abandonment.

Freedom

In Sartrean philosophy, the concept of existential crisis is closely linked with the idea of ultimate freedom and responsibility. Sartre, an atheist existentialist, rejected the traditional notion of God and posited that man's identity is rooted in his existence and freedom. According to him, humans are self-created beings, facing themselves and determining their actions without any external divine intervention. Man has the capacity to shape his own life, nature, purpose, and values, and is inherently free in every aspect of life. Through freely made choices, individuals construct their destinies and bear responsibility for their actions.

Each individual possesses subjectivity, with their own unique perspectives and opinions, signifying the freedom they possess. This subjectivity grants complete freedom to choose and decide in any given situation. Freedom, for Sartre, is not merely a capability but an intrinsic condition that defines human essence and must be confronted in every circumstance. Man's subjective reality enables him to freely select his actions, with each choice influenced by past experiences and shaping future ones. At every moment, man is bound by his freedom, which forms the foundation of his actions.

Since man is synonymous with freedom, he cannot deny it; he has the liberty to choose, although he cannot avoid making choices altogether. According to Sartre, natural freedom is an inherent aspect of human existence, and individuals are acutely aware of it. This absolute freedom does not necessarily entail obtaining desired outcomes, but rather entails determining one's own desires, even if they remain unfulfilled. It signifies that individuals do not choose the world but choose themselves within the world.

Responsibility

In Sartrean philosophy, absolute freedom bestows upon individuals a profound sense of responsibility for their actions and choices. Sartre famously remarked, "freedom is not only a blessed right but also a curse and a Yoke," (Mishra 84) underscoring the dual nature of freedom as both empowering and burdensome. Since each person enjoys complete

freedom and acts solely for themselves, they bear full responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

In the absence of a guiding deity, individuals are solely accountable for their choices. They must exercise careful consideration and responsibility in their decision-making, fully aware that they alone are accountable for the outcomes. Sartre emphasizes that individuals are not only free but also responsible for their actions, with no external force to absolve or assist them. Every decision carries significant weight as it impacts not only the individual but also the wider world. According to Sartre, individuals shoulder the weight of the world, bearing responsibility for the choices they make. They cannot deflect blame or lament their circumstances, as every situation they encounter is a consequence of their own freedom. Furthermore, individuals must acknowledge the potential impact of their actions on others, highlighting their responsibility towards fellow beings. Sartre underscores the interconnectedness of human existence and the inherent responsibility that accompanies it.

The anguished freedom

Human existence is marked by a pervasive sense of anguish and abandonment arising from the weight of responsibility. The realization that our actions carry consequences for ourselves and others imbues life with a profound sense of anguish. Sartre describes anguish as a deeply felt awareness of the weight of responsibility, a sentiment that every individual inevitably confronts. According to Sartre, anguish is an intrinsic aspect of the human condition, stemming from the inherent freedom and responsibility of each individual. No one can entirely escape this feeling, as it is an essential part of human existence. Sartre emphasizes that rather than serving as a justification for avoiding responsibilities or remaining passive, anguish should be embraced as a fundamental aspect of existence, spurring individuals into action.

Human beings act precisely because they possess the capacity to make choices; without this freedom, they would be reduced to mere objects. The presence of choices gives rise to a sense of anxiety, a constant companion in the decision-making process. Despite attempts to suppress or deny absolute freedom to alleviate anxiety, it remains an unavoidable aspect of life. In moments of anxiety, individuals may try to evade their freedom and responsibility by adopting false beliefs, convincing themselves that their choices and actions are predetermined by external forces such as a divine power. Sartre refers to this self-deception as "bad faith," wherein individuals deny their freedom to evade the anguish that accompanies it.

Existential Crisis and Bad Faith:

Sartre contends that during an existential crisis, individuals often resort to inauthenticity or engage in what he terms "bad faith." Bad faith refers to the deliberate neglect of acknowledging one's freedom to make decisions and the subsequent responsibility for those decisions. It essentially involves self-deception, wherein individuals deceive themselves to evade their anguish and responsibilities.

In an effort to escape feelings of anxiety and the weight of their choices, individuals adopt false beliefs, convincing themselves that their actions are predetermined rather than freely chosen. Bad faith manifests as a deliberate concealment of one's true identity or a refusal to accept the reality of one's freedom and existence. This avoidance of reality leads individuals into a crisis where they grapple with doubts regarding the true meaning and authenticity of their lives. As Sartre observes, individuals often seek refuge in a fabricated reality, attempting to escape the existential angst that accompanies true freedom. This avoidance only exacerbates the crisis, as it perpetuates a state of denial and prevents individuals from confronting the fundamental truths of their existence.

Existential Crisis in an Optimistic Light

Sartre's existential philosophy delves into the profound impact of human freedom and responsibility on existence. While individuals possess boundless freedom, it often leads to a crisis situation. Realizing the weight of responsibility for their actions and decisions, individuals experience anguish and doubt. They recognize that their choices reverberate beyond themselves, affecting those around them, which can provoke feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about the worth of their existence. This crisis prompts questioning of fundamental aspects of identity, values, beliefs, and self-worth.

However, existential crisis is not solely pessimistic and gloomy. Those who confront it may find newfound clarity in life. They learn to distinguish between their own intrinsic meaning and external expectations imposed upon them. This journey allows individuals to prioritize what truly matters to them and focus on their own life trajectory. Like Kierkegaard said – “You may not necessarily be happier, but you will be more true to yourself” (Julian Baggini, 79).

Contrary to being mistaken for depression, existential crisis can serve as a catalyst for personal growth and understanding. It offers an opportunity to reevaluate one's values, purpose, and the choices made. Through introspection, individuals may discover a more authentic path, leading to a deeper sense of fulfillment and meaning in life. It marks a point of transformation where one can make more intentional and genuine choices, aligning with their newfound understanding of life's essence.

Conclusion

Jean-Paul Sartre, extensively elucidates this predicament in his existential philosophy. According to Sartre, individuals possess boundless freedom, and they alone bear the responsibility for their actions and the course of their lives. This realization places individuals in a perpetual state of pressure, as they recognize that their choices impact not only themselves but also others. The weight of this freedom and responsibility can induce anguish, leading individuals to question the purpose and meaning of their existence, culminating in an existential crisis.

However, Sartre suggests that existential crisis can be navigated by embracing the true essence of freedom. He emphasizes that individuals have the power to choose how they perceive and respond to their circumstances. By recognizing their inherent freedom, individuals can transform existential crisis into an opportunity for growth and self-discovery. Rather than viewing it solely as a source of distress, existential crisis can serve as a catalyst for reevaluating life choices and making necessary adjustments to lead a more fulfilling existence. Ultimately, by understanding and embracing their freedom, individuals can transcend existential crisis and pave the way for a more authentic and purposeful life.

The positive aspects of Sartre's existential crisis lie in its potential for personal growth, self-discovery, and the cultivation of authenticity in our daily lives. It prompts individuals to question their beliefs, values, and life choices. This introspection fosters a deeper understanding of oneself and encourages authenticity in aligning actions with personal convictions. It serves as a reminder of this freedom, empowering individuals to take ownership of their decisions and shape their destinies according to their own aspirations.

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