

The Existential 'I' and Inclusion

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Abstract

The idea of inclusion finds a lot of appeal in the educational and clinical practice, and rightly so, since it attempts to address the inequalities and aims at empowerment of every individual. Expressions of being included and empowered, of the existential 'I', find space in the autobiographies and narratives of disabled. However, if inclusion is not only about addressing the needs of the disabled, then one must think of the various experiences of being included. One must articulate the feelings of being cared for and not just about instances of exclusion. Further, there is also a need to reflect on oneself as 'the one' who is included with 'others'. This paper reflects on different aspects of inclusion from an existential perspective.

Keywords: Existentialism, authenticity, autonomy, inclusion, self-other relationships

An idea that becomes prominent in a particular context may also, at the same time, transcend that space and time. Existentialism, as is known today, had its origin in the nineteenth and twentieth century. However, existential questions were addressed even before that. Existentialism found its roots as a perspective, rather, as a way of life, in the first half of the twentieth century and has had a prominent effect upon writings in the various other perspectives as well, e.g. humanist, psychoanalytic, post-modern. Existentialism emerged within the context of World Wars, but, even though it emerged in a gloomy context, it is not just a pessimist product of a certain historic situation. It also leads to an optimism that is a result of deep reflection and contemplation of human predicament. This movement from a sense of helplessness and alienation to the power of will and agency is what Existentialism aims at.

The intrigue which unites existentialists is their enthusiasm for human freedom and demand for a social and political flexibility to provide space for the expression of the individual 'I'. Emerging from the Latin word '*existere*' which means 'to stand out, to emerge', the existentialists are concerned with human existence – what it means to exist and how should one exist. To answer the latter question, existentialists propose the idea of an authentic life, which even though is understood variously, is essentially concerned with being true to oneself and one's beliefs about what is right and wrong. To take responsibility

for one's actions while realizing the power that one has within oneself and to realize that one is free to give meaning to one's own existence. The existentialists emphasize one's freedom and choice that provides meaning to human existence. Even if this meaning is temporary and subjective, it is all that one has. An existential individual will be committed to this meaning. There is nothing absolute in the society, no eternal life, or afterlife, but only the meaning one creates for oneself.

An existential being is self-conscious, free, and an autonomous individual. She/he is conscious of their freedom, which may lead them to feelings of independence as well as loneliness. It is often said that we are self-conscious beings, and this is exactly what an existential being is - one who is self-conscious. The eternal questions of life like 'who I am?', 'What I actually want to be?' come to an individual sooner or later, depending on the particular situation an individual is in. As individuals, things matter to us and we also 'care about' our lives, and wonder about the purposes and meanings that we create for ourselves. Sometimes, when pre-existing meanings are challenged by individual experience, the individual search for meaning begins, despite there being no certainty of finding meaning in life. The post-war ethos created a sense of meaninglessness which became the background for the existential movement. The existentialists claim that meaning is created for oneself by the individual

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who is imbued with freedom. This brings anxiety with itself. Escaping the responsibility of creating meaning, or conforming to available meanings, both are regarded by the existentialists as inauthentic.

The agency and freedom, which one realises as an existentialist, comes from the confidence in oneself that gets reflected in giving direction to one's life and picking oneself after every fall, 'I' makes my reality. Even when the self is situated with others, the power, freedom and sense of being autonomous that one feels, is not something that one can experience within the confines of other social and political perspective on inclusion. It seems that the self-other dichotomy becomes stark: 'I helping myself' and 'others helping me'. The self-other relationships that underlie helping relationships are construed variously and they not only have implications for the social situation but also the self-conception of oneself. One wonders about the kind of impact that a feeling of being helped has on one's self-esteem as the helping relationships often promote prejudices, biases, and dependence. The experience of the 'other' is the experience of another free subject and the inter-subjectivity between the self and the other.

However, in what form would a 'woman' be a project of 'man', a 'poor' of the 'rich', a 'Jew' of the anti-semitic, and a 'disabled' of the non-disabled? The measurements, assessments, and evaluation of one's being that are implicit in such projects, can neither be controlled nor denied by oneself, lest, one completely denies to be a part of any such project. As *Simone de Beauvoir* explicates in detail in her book, *The Second Sex*, the verifiable and institutional place of females is characterized as the "second" sex, since social standards are characterized in male terms. Consequently, in a Sartrean understanding, the social truth, the "we"- the political subject- is constantly challenged.

Anyone who is different from us is conceptualised as the other. However, what makes all the difference is, how this other is understood. For instance, there are various terms that are used to refer to a person with special need, e.g. specially-abled, handicapped, persons with disability, and persons with a specific challenge. To some extent, the underlying assumption does make some sense but only in the academic discourse. The experience of being disabled has only a little to do with the academia and its vocabulary. In the common parlance, disability alludes to a deficiency in a person. It

alludes to a judgement that something is not being done and cannot be done in a specific way.

However, for an existentialist, the being is not defined by the body, which is not even a facticity any more since there are ways to modify that as well. Thus, for an existentialist, disability can also be more of a social and political construct that needs to be unpacked and deconstructed so as to explicate the fundamental assumptions and presumptions. Thus, hindrances are not objective and ahistorical but rather moulded by the changing presumptions about what profitable human bodies and brains ought to resemble. A cross-cultural study of the history of disability would attest to the changing idea and attitude towards the disabled according to the social and political context.

It needs to be realised by the masses that the generalization about persons with disabilities, such as, they are powerless, uninformed, can't learn, are befuddled, have no confidence, have a low personal satisfaction, are poor, unemployed, need to be with their own kind, are in consistent torment, frequently dribble, have no social graces, a social weight, need philanthropy and welfare, are asexual, and broken, are not much different in spirit than generalizations about the African Americans or the Asians based on colour and against women based on sex.

An existentialist person with disability would not view herself as someone with deficiency that needs to be remedied; a lack that needs to be filled; or as someone who is incomplete. The context that debilitates the fulfilment of oneself does not impact only the disabled but it is the human condition. Every single person is impaired and is trying to deal with obstacles to make life meaningful. There is a difference in being disabled and dis-facilitated. It seems that to understand the real experience of disability more phenomenological studies are required.

An existential life would be a life in which one outperforms, overcomes, accepts and transcends one's own handicaps. It is not to be a constant reminder of one's lack but a constant benchmark to cross. This subjective feeling and belief of not being limited to one's disability or lack, along with the desire to transcend the limit is at the root of the forward moving capability of an existentialist. The hopes and ambitions of a person with disability from the perspective of existentialism would be that one is permitted to be handicapped, as long as one constantly endeavours to overcome and rise above it, instead of rationalising and searching for excuses. Incapacity is just ever part of facticity

of human life. An existentialist would also take note of the impact of others on her own feelings about herself and thus, the prejudices, biases, and presumptions about anyone become problematic. Such a position would not ask, for example, why a considerable measure of open structures isn't available.

Finally, such a position may be critiqued by the socio-political thinkers by saying that it does not reflect the ideas of social justice and negates the attempts to empower and support by the State. However, to this an existentialist would reply that the being of a person cannot be limited to the idea of a citizen or a member of the society. Rather, if the person takes responsibility for herself and her decisions, then it is the responsibility of the state or the society to create an enabling context for everyone as per their needs. The existential emphasis is on the development of the whole being rather than just the capacity to cognize, rationalise, and behave in any particular way. An existentialist would find any socio-political identity limiting this idea of being. This sentiment is reflected in the words of Rabindranath Tagore, where he calls for a world that "has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls", "where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection", and "where the mind is without fear and the head is held high". In the similar vein and in the popular parlance, the lyrics of the movie *Rockstar* also express the same feeling "*O eco-friendly, nature ke rakshak, main bhi hoon nature; kyun deewaron se Kate mujhe bante mujhe*". O Eco Friendly, O protector of nature, I am nature too... then why do you divide me with

your customs and social norms. This objection to norms comes from the feeling of being limited, restricted, and sometimes even defined by others and not by oneself. This power that the crowd asserts on the individual is what the existentialist is vary of.

What is needed, thus, in a democratic state, is the acceptance of the alternatives, of the lifestyles and individuality of the minority, the freedom as per human rights and acceptance of responsibility by the State towards each and every individual and not just of the 'productive'. The rights-based approach may be more suited to bring the idea of social justice and equality to the fore. It can also take care of the expression of one's own individuality and personality. Instead of a culture based on the feelings of pity and sympathy, what we need is a culture based on trust, with opportunities for the development and realisation of potential to all those who choose to do so.

In this direction, we, as a society need to reject philanthropy and grant-in-aid as an alternative to the refusal of the State to take responsibility. We need to accept that each and every person has some challenge in her life and that everyone deserves a chance to realise one's potential; and, if a State cannot provide such opportunities then that is because of the lack of foresight on the part of the government. A chain is as strong as its weakest link, and so is a nation; as strong as its inhabitants. The feeling of nationalism ought not to be born out of the fact that you are born in a particular geographical area, but by the attachment that you have with the community, society, and its people.