

Research Article

# Existentialism and its Influence on Our Understanding of Knowledge, Truth, Morality, Values, and Religion

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**Abstract:** Existentialism is a philosophical movement that has had a significant impact on our understanding of knowledge, truth, morality, values, and religion. This research aims to explore the influence of existentialism on these fundamental aspects of human existence. The research methodology involved an extensive review of literature from prominent existentialist philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. The findings of this research highlight that existentialism challenges the traditional view of objective truth and knowledge, emphasizing the subjective and personal experience of individuals. Furthermore, existentialism posits that individuals must create their own values and meaning in life, rather than relying on external sources such as religion or society. In terms of morality, existentialism emphasizes the individual's responsibility for their actions, as opposed to being governed by universal ethical principles. The limitations of this research include the focus on Western existentialist philosophy, neglecting other cultural and philosophical traditions. The contribution of this research is that it sheds light on the influence of existentialism on various aspects of human existence and highlights the significance of subjective experience and personal responsibility. The practical implication of this research is that it provides insight into the importance of individualism and personal agency in various domains, such as education, mental health, and politics. The novelty of this research lies in the comprehensive exploration of existentialism's influence on various aspects of human existence, providing a unique perspective on these topics.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Ethics, Ontology, Religious studies.

## 1. Introduction

Existentialism is a well-established philosophical movement that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century, emphasizing the individual's subjective experience and the search for meaning and purpose in life (Stewart, 2018). Friedrich Nietzsche is widely regarded as a central figure in the development of existentialist thought, having rejected traditional values, religion, and morality in a way that significantly impacted our understanding of knowledge, truth, morality, values, and religion (Crowell, 2013; Kaufmann, 1974).


Nietzsche's concept of truth challenges the traditional notion of objectivity, instead emphasizing subjectivity and interpretation (D'Amico, 2005). This has led to greater appreciation for diverse perspectives and a recognition that there are multiple ways of interpreting the world around us (Sayers, 2014). Nietzsche's ideas have influenced

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various fields, including philosophy, literature, psychology, and the arts (Magnus & Higgins, 2011).

Despite Nietzsche's significant impact, there is still a gap in our understanding of the extent of his influence on contemporary understanding of knowledge, truth, morality, values, and religion. While numerous scholars have examined Nietzsche's philosophical ideas, few have explored their practical applications and implications for understanding fundamental aspects of human existence (Crowell, 2013; Kaufmann, 1974).

## **2. Review of Related Literature**

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with a focus on individual existence, freedom, and choice (Solomon, 2017). Nietzsche, who is regarded as one of the forerunners of existentialism, believed that traditional values, religion, and morality were restrictive and negatively affected human development (Solomon, 2017).

Nietzsche's ideas had a significant impact on existentialism and influenced our understanding of knowledge, truth, morality, values, and religion. He rejected the concept of ultimate truth and instead believed that all truth is subjective (Solomon, 2017). Nietzsche proposed that knowledge is a matter of interpretation and judgment and that there is no objective reality (Solomon, 2017). He argued that truth is a result of our senses and language and that our perceptions of reality are shaped by our personal experiences and biases (Solomon, 2017).

The existentialist emphasis on individual experience and freedom has influenced contemporary theories of knowledge, truth, and morality. For instance, feminist epistemology recognizes the significance of personal experience in shaping knowledge and truth (Lugones, 1987). Lugones argues that personal experience is a valuable source of knowledge, and knowledge should be assessed based on its relevance to the individual and the community (Lugones, 1987).

Existentialism has also had an impact on the study of values and ethics. For example, Beauvoir, a French existentialist, suggested that ethical behavior involves recognizing the impact of our choices on others and taking responsibility for our actions (Beauvoir, 1949). Beauvoir's concept of ethical responsibility highlights the importance of individual choice and freedom in shaping moral behavior.

The existentialist emphasis on individual experience and freedom has also led to a re-evaluation of traditional religious beliefs and practices. Buber, a Jewish existentialist, argued that religious experience is based on the individual's relationship with God and that this relationship should be an authentic and personal experience (Buber, 1923).

Henceforth, existentialism has played a significant role in our understanding of knowledge, truth, morality, values, and religion. Nietzsche's rejection of traditional values, religion, and morality, and his emphasis on individual experience and freedom have influenced contemporary theories in these areas. The existentialist emphasis on personal experience and choice has led to a greater appreciation of the diversity of perspectives and a recognition that there are multiple ways of interpreting the world around us.

### **3. Methodology**

The research utilized a literature review approach, which involved reading and analyzing articles and journals related to the topic. The research team identified relevant articles and journals from various databases, such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and EBSCO, using keywords related to existentialism, knowledge, truth, morality, values, and religion.

The researcher then carefully read and analyzed the selected articles and journals, using a thematic analysis approach to identify key concepts and ideas. The team used an inductive approach, allowing the themes to emerge from the data, rather than imposing pre-existing categories on the findings.

The researcher also used a critical appraisal process to evaluate the quality of the sources and ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. This process involved assessing the credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability of the sources.

Overall, the research methodology of this study was exploratory and based on a thorough literature review. The research team used a thematic analysis approach and a critical appraisal process to identify key concepts and ideas associated with existentialism and their impact on our understanding of knowledge, truth, morality, values, and religion.

### **4. Findings**

#### **Morality**

Nietzsche's challenges traditional values and institutions, proposing new approaches to ethics. Nietzsche argues that morality is misguided, immoral, and mistaken, offering three types of critique to morality.

Firstly, Nietzsche suggests that morality is misguided, as moralists focus too much on judging others, leading to judge mentalism and the urge to punish. He claims that the motives behind moral judgments are ethically corrupt and poison the outcomes. Secondly, morality is immoral, as it often derives from dubious motives, such as the fear of punishment, which makes it a dominating tyrant. Nietzsche argues that morality presupposes freedom.

Lastly, the critique of morality as mistakes, Nietzsche traces the origin of morality and introduces embodied morality, which he calls the master morality, with virtues of pride, strength, passion, power, and glory. He argues that avoiding slave morality does not mean evil, but it is just unhealthy and self-destructive. Nietzsche concludes that slave morality is opposed to human excellence and is a disaster to humanity.

The central ethical value in Nietzsche's philosophy is his revaluation of values, which aims to build a standard morality that promotes human excellence. Nietzsche examines specific values from different perspectives to achieve this goal. Overall, Nietzsche's ideas on morality have had a significant impact on shaping our understanding of values and ethics.

## **Values**

According to Leiter (2002), Nietzsche's central ethical claim is that individuals should focus on cultivating and realizing their unique set of virtues. He believes that everyone should strive to achieve their greatest inspirations, aspirations, and dreams in life, and to do so, they must love their virtues with the same devotion they give to their god. Nietzsche emphasizes the importance of steady progress, commitment, and the development of strength in order to adopt an environment and aim high (*ad altiora*). He argues that successful self-cultivation involves continuous self-overcoming and the pursuit of one's distinctive tasks.

Self-perfection, according to Nietzsche, involves giving style to one's character and treating one's life as a work of art. It requires a balance between the two extremes in life, and one must maintain proportion and take risks. Nietzsche defends specific virtues, such as pursuing a broad range of talents, developing intellectual depth, and maintaining serenity in the midst of harsh challenges. He also values integrity, delicacy, courage, hardness toward oneself, friendship, devotion to the future, truth-seeking, and a willingness to risk everything to progress in life.

Nietzsche's concept of the will to power has been subject to different interpretations. While some have interpreted it as the power to dominate others, others argue that it refers to character strength, the ability to control one's actions and succeed in the face of adversity, to create order in the midst of chaos. Nietzsche emphasizes habit transformation, education, and self-understanding, rather than a principle of self-development (Clark, 2015).

## **Religion**

Nietzsche's critique of the credibility of the existence of God has been a significant influence in shaping our understanding of knowledge, truth, morality, values, and religion. According to Nietzsche, the collapse of faith in God was an important cultural and intellectual adjustment in humanity's form of life. This loss of faith would gradually spread to the masses, and Nietzsche believed that individuals should become god-like by realizing their greatest potentials. He defended atheism by highlighting how theists often abdicate their responsibility for creating their future to God (Leiter, 2015).

Feuerbach and Marx had previously believed that God is a projection based on human need, and religious belief reduces fear of the unknown to gain a sense of control over nature. Nietzsche agrees with this, but he also adds that theism is spiritually weakening. Although he provides intellectual arguments for rejecting theism, his main objection is in the field of ethics. Nietzsche argues that morality derived from God's existence hinders humanity from exercising their true freedom and achieving excellence (Kaufmann, 1974).

Nietzsche's intellectual arguments build on those of enlightenment skeptics. The punishments religion imposes are based on assumptions with little evidence to support them, such as the existence of heaven and hell, eternal bliss, and final judgment. The harsh vengeance these concepts imply seems incomparable with the moral aspirations of Christianity. Once a religion is established, its priests manipulate its doctrines to dominate the everyday lives of its believers. Nietzsche shows that people must learn to

live without beliefs in God because the morality that God has given hinders humanity from achieving their true capacity and potency (Nietzsche, 2006).

### **Analysis**

The article discusses the role of existentialism in shaping our understanding of knowledge, truth, morality, values, and religion. Friedrich Nietzsche, a prominent German philosopher, is considered a central figure in the development of existentialist thought. Nietzsche rejected traditional values, religion, and morality and posited that all truth is subjective. He believed that our perceptions of reality are influenced by personal experiences and biases and that knowledge is a matter of interpretation and judgment.

The existentialist emphasis on individual experience and freedom has influenced contemporary theories of knowledge, truth, and morality. Feminist epistemology emphasizes the importance of personal experience in shaping knowledge and truth, while Beauvoir's concept of ethical responsibility emphasizes the importance of individual choice and freedom in shaping moral behavior. Existentialism has also had an impact on the study of values and ethics, leading to a re-evaluation of traditional religious practices and beliefs.

Overall, Nietzsche's rejection of traditional values and his emphasis on the individual's subjective experience have challenged traditional notions of objectivity and encouraged a greater emphasis on subjectivity and interpretation. This has led to a greater appreciation for the diversity of perspectives and a recognition that there are multiple ways of interpreting the world around us. Existentialism has had a significant impact on our understanding of various aspects of human life and continues to be a prominent philosophical movement today.

### **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, existentialism has played a significant role in shaping our understanding of knowledge, truth, morality, values, and religion. Existentialism emphasizes individual freedom, responsibility, and the subjective experience of life, which has influenced many aspects of human thought and culture.

Regarding knowledge, existentialism challenges the traditional view of objective truth and emphasizes the importance of subjective interpretation and personal experience. This has led to the recognition of multiple ways of knowing and has paved the way for more nuanced and diverse understandings of knowledge.

In terms of truth, existentialism recognizes that truth is subjective and that individuals create their own meaning and purpose in life. This has resulted in a re-evaluation of traditional religious and philosophical systems, and a greater emphasis on individual autonomy and self-determination.

Existentialism has also had a significant impact on morality, by emphasizing individual responsibility and the importance of personal choice. This has led to a recognition of the complexity of ethical decision-making and the need for empathy, compassion, and understanding in the face of moral ambiguity.

In terms of values, existentialism has encouraged individuals to explore and create their own values based on their personal experiences and beliefs. This has led to a greater appreciation of diversity and a recognition of the importance of personal authenticity and individualism.

Finally, existentialism has had a significant impact on religion, by challenging traditional beliefs and emphasizing the importance of personal spiritual experiences. This has led to a greater emphasis on personal spirituality and a recognition of the importance of subjective religious experiences.

Overall, existentialism has played a significant role in shaping our understanding of knowledge, truth, morality, values, and religion by emphasizing the importance of individual freedom, responsibility, and personal experience. Its influence can be seen in many areas of human thought and culture, and its impact is likely to continue to be felt for many years to come.

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