CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

COURSE CODE: M23PH09DC
Discipline Core Course
Postgraduate Programme in Philosophy
Self Learning Material

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

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Continental Philosophy

Course Code: M23PH09DC

Semester - III

Discipline Core Course
Postgraduate Programme in Philosophy
Self Learning Material
(With Model Question Paper Sets)

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SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

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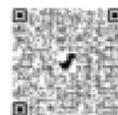Scan this QR Code for reading the SLM on a digital device.

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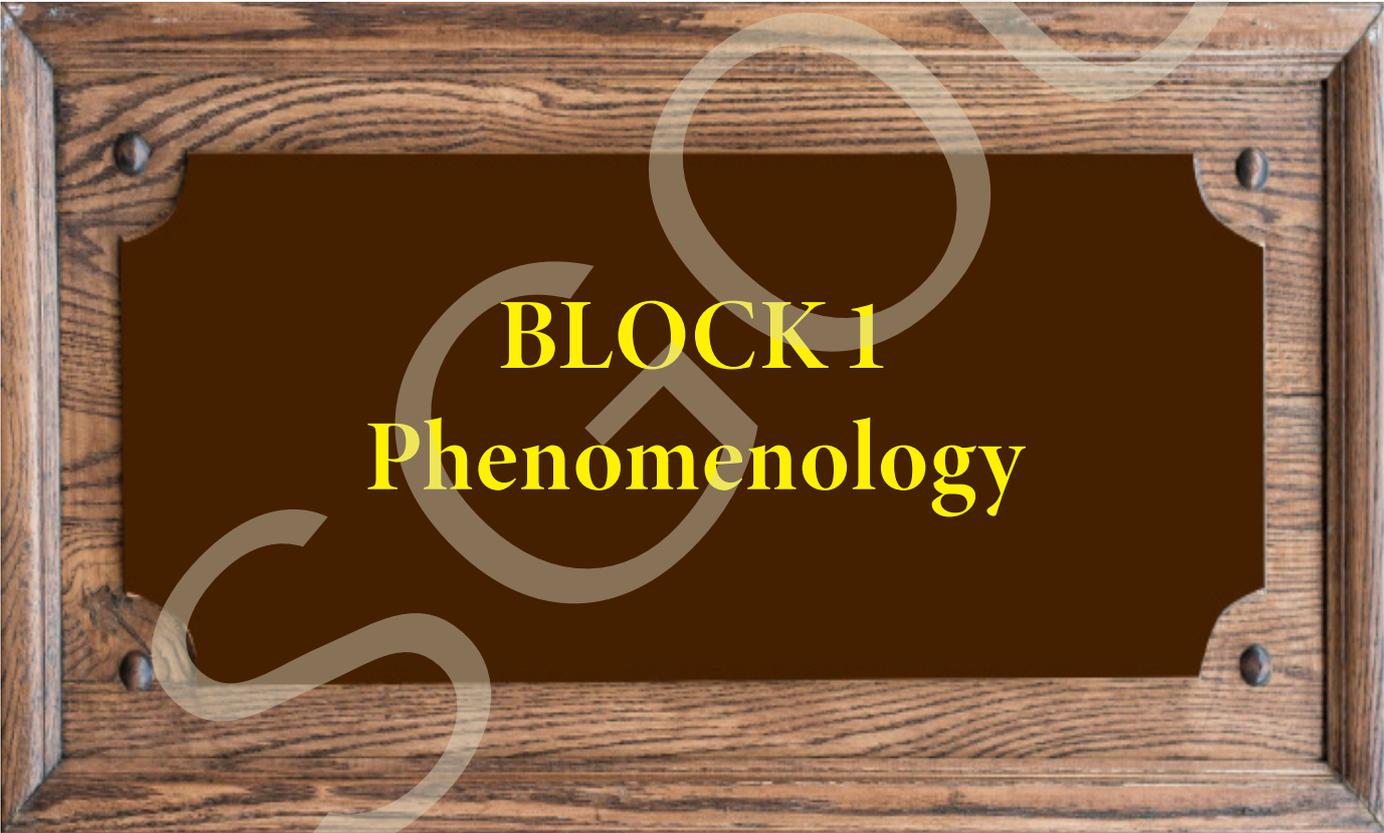
Warm regards.
Dr. Jagathy Raj V.P.   29-05-2025

Contents

BLOCK 1
Phenomenology

UNIT 1
Husserl

Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of this unit, the learner will be able to;

- examine the presumptions of natural sciences
- understand and appreciate phenomenology as a presuppositionless science
- analyse the notion of intentionality
- apply the method of *epoche* or bracketing

Background

Phenomenology is a movement in Western philosophy that flourished during the first half of the twentieth century. It aims at an accurate and complete description of the essential features of our experience by bracketing off all preconceptions. Edmund Husserl is considered as the initiator of phenomenological movement. Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are two other important and influential proponents of the phenomenological method. This block will briefly discuss the contributions of these philosophers. The first unit will familiarise the learners with the development of phenomenology as a new method of philosophising through the works of Edmund Husserl.

Keywords

Phenomenology, Rigorous Science, Intentionality, Natural Attitude, Epoche

1.1.1 Introduction

Phenomenology is one of the chief streams of thought in the twentieth-century Philosophy. It is often considered not as a philosophical theory or system, but rather as a philosophical method style or method. It attempts to investigate the structure and content of our consciousness by suspending all presuppositions and judgements. Phenomenology has generated many new ideas and has influenced several other currents of Western Philosophy in the twentieth century, like Existentialism and Hermeneutics. The application of the phenomenological method is diverse and extends to natural sciences, social sciences, literature, gender studies, etc.

• Phenomenology is a prominent method of philosophising in the twentieth century

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is known as the pioneer of phenomenology. Even though the term 'phenomenology' has been used earlier by philosophers like Hegel (in his work titled Phenomenology of Spirit), it is with Husserl that we see the development of phenomenology as a peculiar method of philosophy. His important works include Philosophy of Arithmetic (1981), Logical Investigations - 2 Vols. (1900-01), Philosophy as Rigorous Science (1910-11), Ideas: General Introductions to Pure Phenomenology (Vol. 1 in 1913; Vol. 2 and 3 published posthumously), Cartesian Meditations (1931), The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology (1936) and others. We find different phases in the development of Husserl's thought. In his pre-phenomenological period, which belongs to the last part of the nineteenth century, Husserl attempts to provide psychological grounds for the fundamental concepts of mathematics, like number, functions, etc. This psychologism gets subjected to serious criticism by Gottlob Frege, and Husserl rejects psychologism in his Logical Investigations, wherefrom his phenomenological period begins. He develops phenomenology as a descriptive science in this period, which finally leads to his transcendental phenomenology. In the later phase, Husserl resorts to the study of life-world, intersubjectivity, etc. Husserl's ideas have significant influence on many twentieth-century thinkers, among whom Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Emmanuel Levinas are a few important figures.

• Husserl is the forerunner of the phenomenological movement

1.1.2 Philosophy as Rigorous Science

Husserl envisages that philosophy should acquire the status of a rigorous science. It does not mean that philosophy should imitate the empirical sciences. It should be a science in the sense that it is a systematic inquiry that yields objective truths. Philosophy need not be founded on the natural sciences; rather, the task of philosophy is to provide a strict foundation for the sciences. Philosophy can become a rigorous science only if it adopts a radical approach. It should go back to the roots of all knowledge. It should become a science that begins right at the beginning, i.e., it must not take anything for granted. It should develop as a presuppositionless science.

Many philosophers had attempted to establish philosophy as a strict and rigorous science and failed as they could not account for the theoretical foundations of the natural sciences. We have seen Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and others, who in their respective era, attempted to re-establish the status of philosophy by inventing new methods. The systems developed by them subsequently became prone to criticisms and were refined, revised or rejected. Husserl specifically mentions the problems he finds in the two then-prevalent approaches in philosophy – naturalism and historicism.

Naturalism is the conceptual framework that emerges upon the discovery of nature "as a unity of spatio-temporal being subject to exact laws of nature" (Husserl, 1965, p. 79). This framework is what underpins the natural sciences. It is the philosophical attitude that takes for granted that there exists a world which is fundamentally physical in character. It is not the conclusion that they arrive at, but the premise assumed in all their proofs. This premise, however, cannot be questioned within their system. Naturalism thus could not establish itself on a strong foundation for the rational explanation of the world.

Husserl finds another issue with naturalism. As it considers everything as physical or derived from the physical, the soul or spirit is also treated in the same order as other entities of this natural world and is subjected to the same categories of explanation. The realm of knowing, thinking, valuing, judging, etc., is thus explained as causally dependent on matter. In simple words, naturalism naturalises consciousness, all the mental data, and all absolute norms and ideals. Thus, the possibility of formulating a self-contained science of the spirit is denied

Sidebar notes:

- Philosophy should develop as a rigorous science

- Previous philosophies could not establish themselves as rigorous

- Naturalism rests on unquestioned assumptions regarding the world

- Naturalism repudiates the possibility of a self-contained realm of consciousness and ideas

delete. The realm of culture, morality, etc. gets absorbed in the physical realm. A human being is now considered just another objective fact in the natural world. According to Husserl, this attitude would in no way improve our understanding of the true purposes of humanity.

- Historicism denies absolute validity to any thought and finally leads to scepticism

Historicism is another prominent philosophical approach that has emerged from the discovery of history and led to the development of humanistic sciences. This approach considers everything as part of the progressive development of the historical spirit or consciousness. It leads to a relativist view that different philosophies have prominence in their respective eras, and none of them is valid for all times. The absolute validity of any particular form of life-interpretation, religion, or philosophy disappears. In Husserl's words, historicism would pave the way for "extreme sceptical subjectivism" (1965, p. 125). Husserl concludes that naturalism and historicism have failed in providing philosophy the status of a rigorous science.

1.1.3 Phenomenology as the New Philosophy

- Need for a science of consciousness

According to Husserl, all rationality or all science depends on conscious acts. It is not that consciousness is the cause and the world is the effect. But the world is opened up, disclosed or made meaningful only through consciousness. Therefore, what we need is not an approach that completely ignores the foundational role of consciousness by assuming the reality of a physical world and considering consciousness as just one of the objects in the world. We need a science of consciousness that reveals the structure of our experience of everything. Husserl makes it clear that psychology could not be such a science as it is based on the empirical methods of the natural sciences. It is only concerned with the consciousness as an empirical being within the natural order.

- Phenomenology is the science of what appears to our consciousness

Envisioning a new way of understanding the subject of consciousness, Husserl thus introduces phenomenology as a science that focuses exclusively on what is fundamentally given to consciousness. The term phenomenology has its origin in the Greek words phainómenon (that which appears) and logos (science). It thus refers to the science of phenomena or appearances. It aims to go beneath the veils of various unquestioned assumptions in our way of acquiring knowledge and investigates what is directly given to the consciousness.

Phenomenology is a descriptive science. It seeks to understand phenomena as they manifest themselves to the experiencer, the consciousness. It is faithful to the deepest experiential evidence. Phenomenology does not resort to any speculation or abstraction. It does not aim to explain because explanation requires inferences from generalisations, or appealing to hypotheses, etc. There is no attempt to reduce, conjecture or hypothesise. It studies phenomena or that which appears, strictly in the manner in which it appears. Hence the famous slogan of phenomenology – 'back to things themselves'.

- Phenomenology is a descriptive science

Thus, as Husserl conceives, phenomenology is a presuppositionless science. It does not commit itself to any metaphysics. It is a rigorous science that does not borrow from any theory. It does not attempt to deduce or construct anything from theories or statements. It is the science of consciousness that pays attention to the structure of consciousness as in experience, and not from the picture provided by any tradition. It avoids all preconceptions and prejudices imposed on experience by common sense, religion, culture, science, and even existing philosophy.

- Phenomenology is a presuppositionless science

The fundamental principle of phenomenology, as given by Husserl, is to focus simply on what is presented before us, but only within the limits in which it is presented. In phenomenology, we are concerned only with phenomena or what appears to be. As long as we do not go beyond the things that appear, the problem of appearance/reality distinction is irrelevant, and there is no sense in which we are prone to be mistaken.

- Phenomenology focuses strictly on what is given, and does not go beyond

Phenomenology might seem subjectivistic in the sense that its investigation is initially directed towards the individual experiences. However, it is not so. It aims to provide universal truths regarding conscious experience in general. We are provided with a realm of objects (the phenomena) about which certain necessary and descriptive truths can be formed.

- Phenomenology ensures objectivity

1.1.4 Intentionality

Intentionality has an important place in phenomenology. It was first explained by Franz Brentano. He suggested it as a criterion to distinguish mental events from physical events and expressed his indebtedness to medieval scholastic thinkers who spoke about this earlier. According to him, every mental event is characterised by the intentional existence of an object, i.e.,

- Brentano explained intentionality as the peculiar property of mental events

- Intentionality refers to the 'aboutness' of consciousness

- Consciousness is always consciousness of something

- The intentional act of consciousness is called noesis
- The object intended in the act is called noema

- The realm of intentional objects is the autonomous field of study for phenomenology

some sort of 'relation to a content' or 'object-directedness'. He made it clearer by saying that in imagination something is imagined, in desire something is desired, in love something is loved and so on. This property is peculiar to mental events, and he thus defined mental events as those that contain an object intentionally.

Husserl was a student of Brentano, and he further takes up this notion of intentionality as a centrepiece in his phenomenology. Paying attention to our various mental events reveals the essence of all such experience as what is termed intentionality. Intentionality is the defining feature of consciousness. It refers to the 'aboutness' of consciousness. Consciousness in its various modes of thinking, believing, desiring, loving, hating etc., is directed to an object, or some sort of content.

Consciousness is always consciousness of something. There cannot be a bare consciousness devoid of objects. Thought and the object of thought are interlinked. All cogito contains some cogitatum. This notion undermines the dualism of Descartes, according to which the mind is an autonomous thinking substance that exists independently of all objects.

Suppose we see a rope and mistake it for a snake. We might get scared at that moment. Our experience of fear is directed towards an object, which is nothing but the snake. In this case, the snake is the intentional object. Husserl uses the terms noesis and noema, respectively, to denote the intentional act of consciousness and the object intended in the act. For example, when we have the fear of a snake, the act of fearing directed at the snake is the noesis. The snake to which the act of desire is intended is the noema.

Phenomenology focuses on the intentional object only. It does not care about the mind-independent existence or non-existence of the object. The objects need not exist in a way other than as objects intended in our conscious acts. The realm of intentional objects gives phenomenology an autonomous field of study that is irreducible to the naturalistic explanation concerning the existence of these objects outside consciousness. Physical objects, mathematical equations, time, love, etc. – all are subjects of phenomenological study in the sense that they appear to the consciousness.

1.1.5 Husserl's Method

Our usual way of looking at the contents of our consciousness is heavily distorted by various presuppositions and preconceptions. Also, understanding the essential features of conscious experience in general is not possible unless we go beyond all subjective elements that are part of individual experiences. So, to have a presuppositionless study of the structure and content of consciousness and discover the essential features, Husserl proposes a method of reduction that proceeds through three levels – phenomenological reduction, eidetic reduction, and transcendental reduction.

- Husserl proposes a method of reduction that proceeds through three levels

1.1.5.1 Phenomenological Reduction

Phenomenology seeks to discover the necessary features of the phenomena, i.e., the intentional objects. But Husserl feels that such a scrutiny of the structure and content of our conscious experiences is inhibited and highly distorted by numerous preconceptions that we have hitherto accumulated. These preconceptions include all scientific, philosophical, and cultural assumptions, as well as the practical concerns of our everyday life. For example, in natural attitude, we assume the existence of a mind-independent world and believe in many scientific theories that are grounded on this assumption. We may also have certain philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of consciousness and so on. All these would come in our way when we attempt to have an investigation of the structure of our experiences. This is what is called the natural attitude.

- Our experiences are distorted by preconceptions in the natural attitude

Husserl proposes what is known as epoche, meaning suspension or bracketing, in order to isolate the essential features of the phenomena under investigation from the labyrinth of all other frameworks. He compares it to the bracketing done in mathematics. In mathematical equations, the content within brackets would be outside our immediate consideration at first. It would not be entirely removed from the equation. However, for the time being, we take them away from our consideration to focus on the other important part of the equation.

- Epoche stands for suspension or bracketing

The suspension of natural attitude is practised in the following way. While considering the nature of some phenomena, we should restrict ourselves from affirming or denying the mind-independent existence of the same. All such assumptions should be bracketed out to exercise our entire focus

on what appears to us strictly within its modes of givenness. The bracketing is different from the doubting of a sceptic. To doubt is also a sort of stance taken with respect to a problem. What we need to do is to abstain from making any sort of judgment regarding the different problems. Moran describes it in this way: "Under the natural standpoint we believe that things are genuinely present in space and we are aware of time passing and ourselves as in some sort of continuity with the world. When we effect the phenomenological bracketing, all that disappears and, according to Husserl, we are left with a residuum of pure consciousness, …" (2000, p. 150).

The first stage of reduction, marked by epoche or the suspension of natural attitude, is known as phenomenological reduction.

1.1.5.2 Eidetic Reduction

The suspension of the natural attitude enables us to discover the structure of consciousness. However, it seems as if we are only dealing with the manner in which our own individual experiences are structured. There should be some way to get rid of this subjective element and obtain universal truths, i.e., we should move beyond our particular forms of experience to uncover the structure of experience in general. Husserl's phenomenology calls for a continuous application of the bracketing. Proceeding further with the process, Husserl speaks about eidetic reduction (eidos in Greek means 'essence'), where we try to shift our focus from the contingent features of the phenomena to their necessary and essential features.

In this stage, we view the phenomena not in terms of their particularity, but in their generality or essence. We are concerned only with those aspects of the phenomena which make them examples of certain sorts of types of phenomena. We bracket off the particularities of the intentional object that might change concerning the varying ways in which the object is experienced in our consciousness, and focus on only those aspects without which the object would not be experienced as a certain kind of object. Husserl uses the term 'eidetic variation' by which we could check whether variations in the different features of the object experienced destroy the object's identity accordingly. For example, we may have different experiences of a table; we may experience tables with different colours, sizes, etc. We see that any change in the colour or size of the

- Suspension of the natural attitude allows one to focus exactly on what is given

- Eidetic reduction shifts focus from contingent features to essential features

- Eidetic reduction helps to ensure objectivity in the phenomenological analysis of our experience.

table does not destroy our experience of it as a table. Thus, we realise that colour or size is not an essential feature of our experience of a table. In this manner, by bracketing off all such contingent features in our different experiences of the table, we come to focus on those aspects which are common in all our experiences of the table. Phenomenology is concerned with the 'whatness' of the phenomena rather than the 'thisness.' It is why Husserl describes phenomenology as eidetic science or the science of essences.

1.1.5.3 Transcendental Reduction

Further radical application of epoche or the bracketing off leads to the transcendental reduction. Every act of consciousness presupposes an individual ego. The individual ego or the empirical ego also needs to be bracketed in order to reveal the meaning of the experience that is essential to any ego in general. Husserl calls that which remains even after the bracketing of the individual ego as the transcendental ego. It is presupposed in all acts of consciousness. It is the precondition of all meaningful experience and cannot thus be bracketed off. It is with respect to this transcendental ego that a pure phenomenology, which studies what is given in the experience in terms of noetic-noematic relation, becomes possible.

- Transcendental reduction brackets off the individual ego and sheds light on what is experienced by the transcendental ego

The method of reduction takes Husserl towards transcendental ego as the formal basis of all experience, and reveals the manner in which consciousness is always directed to the world of its intentional objects. This worldliness of consciousness further leads Husserl to his conception of Lebenswelt, or the lived world. It acquires the central role in the later phase of his philosophy, which is beyond the scope of this unit. In brief, it can be said that Husserl discovers, in all scientific and philosophical inquiries, the existence of the everyday world as presupposed. It is the surrounding world in which all of us have our conscious existence. It is the world that we always experience. All sciences and cultures are in this world. No physiological, psychological, sociological, or philosophical theorising is possible without presupposing the existence of the life-world. A phenomenological analysis of the life-world is what Husserl calls for then.

- The later phase of Husserl's phenomenology focuses on Lebenswelt or life-world as the basic presupposition in all thought and action

Summarized Overview

Phenomenology is one of the prominent currents in the twentieth-century Western philosophy. Edmund Husserl is considered the forerunner of phenomenology. Husserl wants philosophy to be a rigorous science but finds that the then-prevalent philosophical currents of naturalism and historicism could not establish themselves on strong bases. He envisages phenomenology as a new way of philosophising that studies the structure of consciousness and its objects. The etymological meaning of phenomenology is the science of phenomena, where phenomena means that which appears. Husserl conceives phenomenology as a presuppositionless science that does not resort to any existing theory and focuses strictly on what is given. Following Brentano, Husserl understands that intentionality is the defining feature of consciousness. It refers to the aboutness of consciousness. Consciousness is always consciousness of something. Phenomenology concerns itself only with intentional objects and does not care about anything beyond.

The phenomenological method proposed by Husserl proceeds as follows. He observes that in our natural attitude, we understand our experiences on the basis of various preconceptions. He introduces the method of *epoche,* or bracketing off, to suspend all unnecessary judgements and thereby confine focus only to that which is given before the consciousness. Eidetic reduction ensures that, rather than the contingent features of an experience, only its essential features are focused upon. Phenomenology thus gets rid of the subjective element and moves to universal truths. In transcendental reduction, even the individual egos are bracketed off in order to see what is given before the pure transcendental ego. Many subsequent thinkers adopt phenomenology mainly based on its method of reduction, which helps to focus on the essential features of our experience. The influence of Husserl and phenomenology is seen in the development of philosophical currents like Existentialism and Hermeneutics.

Self-Assessment

1. Why does Husserl reject naturalism and historicism?
2. How does phenomenology acquire the status of a rigorous science?
3. Define intentionality with examples.
4. What do you mean by the suspension of natural attitude?
5. Explain Husserl's method of reduction.

Assignments

1. Outline the problems that Edmund Husserl finds with naturalism and historicism.

2. What are the salient features of phenomenology?

3. Shed light on the notion of intentionality.

4. Define *epoche*. How is it practised?

5. Write a short note on eidetic and transcendental reductions.

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Suggested Reading

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

UNIT 2
Heidegger

Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of this unit, the learner will be able to;

- explore the philosophical problem of Being as posed by Heidegger
- acknowledge the application of phenomenology to understand human existence
- comprehend the fundamental aspects of the Being of humans
- distinguish between authentic and inauthentic ways of living

Background

Edmund Husserl's phenomenology attracted many other thinkers of the twentieth century. Martin Heidegger from Germany finds the phenomenological method as the most appropriate for the analysis of human existence, which, according to him, allows one to understand existence in general. He sets out to discover the fundamental aspects of the Being of humans and brings to light the unique way in which humans engage with the world. Heidegger's views on the authentic and inauthentic modes of human existence have become influential in the flourishing of modern existentialism. This unit provides a brief account of the ideas of Martin Heidegger.

Keywords

Being, Dasein, Being-in-the-world, Inauthenticity, Authenticity

1.2.1 Introduction

Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) is one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century. He refuses to identify himself with any system of philosophy. He aims to understand human existence in the best way possible. He transforms the hitherto abstract and remote concept of Being into a subject that is of intense concern to every human being. In order to convey his thoughts without the ambiguities caused by the language that had been in use, he even developed a new vocabulary and gives new meanings to old words. His major work, *Being and Time* (Sein und Zeit, 1927), despite its dense and difficult structure and language, is an enduring philosophical masterpiece. It is regarded as the main source of modern existentialism. Heidegger could bring into effect a new conception and understanding of humanity through his novel interpretation of the concept of Being.

Heidegger is indebted to Husserl whom he assisted for a short period of time in his academic career. He also explicitly mentions in the introduction of *Being and Time* that the investigation that he has undertaken would not have been possible if Husserl had not introduced the phenomenological method in the *Logical Investigations*. Heidegger says that what attracts him in phenomenology is what he calls the 'phenomenological seeing' that allows one to get back to the things themselves. He even opposes certain superficial conceptions of the existing phenomenology, which claimed the status of 'essential insight' without sufficient justification. Phenomenology, for him, discloses the essential possibilities of situations. It should be said that Heidegger pushes the phenomenology of Husserl further and replaces the study of consciousness and its intentional objects with the more fundamental study of Being as such.

1.2.2 The Question of Being

Before trying to understand what Heidegger means by the question of Being, we should familiarise ourselves with a few terms. First, we need to distinguish between ontic inquiries and ontological inquiries. By ontic inquiries, we mean the inquiries undertaken by various sciences like physics, chemistry, biology and so on, that study certain distinctive aspects of entities. However, ontological inquiries are inquiries about those

- Heidegger aims to understand human existence in the best way possible

- Heidegger's phenomenology replaces the study of consciousness and its intentional objects with the more fundamental study of Being as such

notions and principles that are presupposed or taken for granted in the ontic inquiries. All sciences have some assumptions that are not questioned within their systems. At a certain stage, when difficulties tend to arise with these assumptions, an examination of the same will be done. Such examinations belong to a specific field of study, which is nothing but Philosophy. It is the task of a philosopher, and not a scientist, to discuss the nuances in the basic assumptions of science. It is the task of a philosopher, and not a mathematician, to discuss the nuances in the basic assumptions of mathematics. This is why there are disciplines like philosophy of science, philosophy of mathematics, etc.

Now, despite the fact that philosophy has been dealing with several ontological inquiries for so long, Heidegger feels that the meaning of Being has not yet been clarified. According to him, Being as such is something more basic and fundamental than those principles discussed in the so-called ontological inquiries. For example, when philosophy deals with questions like whether consciousness is just one among the physical entities or a non-physical spiritual entity, the meaning of what it means for an entity 'to be', i.e., the meaning of 'Being' for any kind of entity, is taken for granted. Heidegger makes it clear that what he wants to question is not the peculiar way of being of different entities, but that by which any entity 'is' or exists. It is not about the 'how' of an entity's existence, but about the meaning of 'existence'. This is why he comes to the conclusion that philosophy has not yet dedicated itself to clarifying the meaning of Being.

Heidegger is not talking about any sort of 'highest being' like God that is said to encompass everything or from which everything originates or derives. Being is not just one among other entities. We would not include it with apples, rocks, humans, trees, etc. when we make a list of all things that exist. However, all the things on that list have their Being. Being is that which determines entities as entities, and on the basis of which entities stand as already understood.

Heidegger points to certain presumptions that have led philosophers to refrain from studying Being as such. At first, it is said that Being needs no such special attention as it is already understood as the most universal concept in the sense that we culminate in it when we proceed with the process of abstraction from entities. That is, from cats, dogs, and horses we may have an abstracted idea of animals, then from animals, plants,

etc. the idea of living beings, and then from living and non-living beings, the idea of Being as such. But Heidegger notices that Being is not any kind of genus or species. Secondly, it is maintained that the attempt to understand Being in specific terms is futile because Being is indefinable. It cannot be derived from any higher concept or reduced to any lower concept. The set of categories by which we define different kinds of entities is insufficient to define Being. But Heidegger remarks that the lack of a conceptual framework to understand Being does not eliminate the question as such. In fact, it demands serious attention from us. Thirdly, it is claimed that Being is self-evident and we use the same in all our assertions like 'the sky is blue', 'I am merry' etc. (note that 'is', 'am' etc. stand for 'to be'). So, as everyone already understands how to deal with Being, we need not bother much about it. But Heidegger points out that the meaning of Being is still veiled under darkness, and there is a pressing need to bring it to light.

- Heidegger examines the presumptions that have led to the disregard for the study of Being

1.2.3 Dasein as the Object of Study

Now, the question has been formulated. But Heidegger observes that "Being is always the Being of an entity" (1927/2001, p. 29), i.e., Being does not stand by itself as different from all entities. There is no 'existence' apart from existing things. We cannot study Being as isolated from the entities. Heidegger thus looks for an entity such that if we interrogate the Being of that entity, we would be able to understand the meaning of Being in general.

- Being is always the Being of an entity

Heidegger finds human beings as the object of interrogation. But why does he choose human beings as the appropriate entity that should be studied for understanding Being? Because Heidegger says, a human being is the only entity for which its Being is an issue. All entities exist – rocks, trees, cats, humans. But unlike the non-living things and animals that are not concerned about 'how to be' or 'what to be', existence is a pressing issue only for the human being. Non-living things are not 'alive' in any sense, and the living things, like animals, exist instinctively by self-preservation and reproduction. However, being this way or that way is not a given fact for the human being. Each moment it has to decide its Being; it has to choose to be itself or not itself. It is always concerned with the different possibilities.

- Human being is the only entity for which its Being is an issue

So far, we have been using the term 'human being'. But Heidegger wants to use a term to focus exclusively on the

relevant aspect, i.e., Being, of the human being than any of its properties that other disciplines study, like the physical configuration and chemical constitution of the human body, the evolution of human species, or the historical development of the human society. *Dasein* is the term by which Heidegger refers to the human being for whom Being is an issue. This German term *Dasein,* meaning 'being there,' is often left untranslated.

In Heidegger's words, "Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein's Being. Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological" (1927/2001, p. 32). As we mentioned earlier, an ontic inquiry studies an entity in terms of its distinct way of being. The properties that distinguish an entity from other can be termed ontic, and thus entities differ ontically. When we compare Dasein and other entities, we come to know the qualities that distinguish the existence of the former from that of the latter. Heidegger says that the ontic difference in the existence of a human being as compared to the existence of other entities is that the human being's existence is ontological. By 'ontological,' Heidegger means that the existence of the human being is always directed towards or involves an awareness of its existence.

Moreover, while existing, Dasein deals with different entities around it. It can be said that the understanding of the existence of each and every entity dealt with is a concern for Dasein. So, a study of the Being of Dasein will help to understand the Being of all entities. This also validates Heidegger's decision to focus on the Being of Dasein to solve the mystery of Being.

Being is a problem to be solved for Dasein. However, it cannot be solved by disinterested theorising, but only by Being, i.e., existing. It is said that Being is so close to Dasein, and not so in the case of other entities, as Dasein is always directed towards Being, whereas other entities are not. At the same time, Being is farthest from Dasein as it always lies hidden, covered, or in a disguised manner.

1.2.4 Phenomenology as the Method

The question has been formulated, and the object on which the inquiry is supposed to be conducted has been decided. Now, the question about the 'how' of the inquiry remains. An appropriate method should be followed to solve the mystery of Being. Heidegger feels that the then-prevalent methods in the study of Being or ontology are questionable as they cannot help

tracing back to or consulting the history of ontologies. He does not want the method to subscribe to any standpoint or represent any direction. The long history of philosophy has hitherto proposed different solutions to the question of human existence – a rational soul temporarily imprisoned in a material body, a rational animal, a creature of God, the thinking substance, a material mechanism, a transcendental ego, the absolute subject etc. (Melchert & Morrow, 2019). Heidegger wishes to set aside all such theories that miss the Being of Dasein and focus only on its average everydayness. This is where Heidegger sees the application of the phenomenological way of investigation.

- Heidegger does not want to subscribe to any standpoint or represent any direction

For Heidegger, phenomenon "signifies that which shows itself in itself, the manifest" and phenomenology is the science of phenomenon that "signifies primarily a methodological conception". Phenomenology is a way of research that can be better characterised as emphasising not the nature of the objects of research but the nature of the procedure. Phenomenology, with its 'back to things themselves' approach "is opposed to all free-floating constructions and accidental findings; it is opposed to taking over any conceptions which only seem to have been demonstrated; it is opposed to those pseudo-questions which parade themselves as 'problems', often for generations at a time". Heidegger believes that a phenomenological analysis can bring to light the nature of the Being of Dasein, which lies hidden, covered, or disguised.

- Heidegger finds the 'back to things themselves' approach of phenomenology as appropriate for his study

Heidegger also indicates a sort of interpretation to bring the phenomena to light. He calls it *hermeneutics,* the term that refers to the tradition in which texts like the Scriptures are interpreted. To understand the obscure meaning of a text, we need interpretation. Similarly, to get to the obscure meaning of Being, we require a method that is both phenomenological and hermeneutical.

- The method for the study of Being needs to be hermeneutical also

1.2.5 Fundamental Aspects of Dasein's Being

Heidegger endorses that Dasein does not confine itself to a specific way of being, and always projects itself beyond the present circumstances to different possibilities. The term 'exist' has etymological roots that suggest the meaning of a possibility to project out from the given situation. In this way, only Dasein's 'exists' for Heidegger. He even writes it as 'ek-sists' to emphasise the possibility of going beyond the given. We define different entities by their essential features. But in the case of Dasein, its essence is its existence.

- Dasein's essence is its existence

So, a phenomenological analysis to understand the basic structure of the Being of Dasein can be called existential analysis or, in Heideggerian vocabulary, *existential analytic*. The aim of the existential analysis of Dasein is to discover the most basic features of its existence. These features, which in a way resemble the traditional categories used to define other entities, are known as *existentials*. Let us now have a look at some such basic features of Dasein as discovered by Heidegger through his phenomenological and hermeneutical method.

Heidegger states that Dasein essentially is-in-the-world. We cannot understand Dasein apart from the world. To be in the world is constitutive of Dasein. This is against the views of Descartes, who said that the soul can exist independently of the world. In fact, Heidegger points out that the whole philosophical tradition has always got this wrong. The world is taken to be made up of different substances and the soul is also understood as a substance. The prominent question which then arises is an epistemological one – whether the soul as the subject can know the object (world) as it is without being affected by the subjective features. Heidegger feels that this question is the product of an improper understanding of the Being of Dasein. He says that the fundamental relation between Dasein and the world is not epistemological, but ontological. Dasein's Being is *Being-in-the-world*. This relation is deeper and richer than any propositional knowledge could completely express (Melchert & Morrow, 2019).

What does Heidegger mean by Being-in-the-world? Is Dasein spatially contained in the world like a pencil in a box? No. We could better consider it as a matter of engagement or involvement, like, for example, being in love. Dasein is not located in the world. It dwells in the world. Dasein's Being-in-the-world is in the sense of being engaged in projects, being involved with others. Heidegger explains, "Being-in-the-world has always dispersed itself or even split itself up into definite ways of Being-in. The multiplicity of these is indicated by the following examples: having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it . . . accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining . . .". Thus, the relationship that Dasein has with the world is more basic than that of subject-object knowledge. It is not that Dasein first exists and then has some sort of relationship with the world. Dasein's Being-in-the-world is not a property that it sometimes has and sometimes does not. Bein-in-the-world is one of the fundamental aspects of Dasein's existence.

Heidegger explains the nature of the world in which Dasein is Being-in. He draws our attention to the manner in which we see different kinds of equipment around us. He takes the example of a hammer. It is true that the hammer has many properties like being made from a certain kind of material, having a particular shape, size, and weight, etc. But in our everydayness, we are concerned only with the use, function, or purpose of the hammer, which is to hammer or to drive the nails onto a wall. We do not usually have a detached observation at the hammer. Similarly, we do not first have an understanding of the properties of a pen, rather, we are concerned about its function of writing. Heidegger calls such equipment the *ready-to-hand*. Now it can be seen that the hammer does not exist independently. It exists for driving the nails. The nails exist for being driven into the wall to hang or fasten something. The pen exists for writing on paper. The paper exists for being written on. This shows, according to Heidegger, that the being of each equipment involves the context of others in the form of being assigned to or being referred to. Thus, the whole world is such an interconnected totality of equipment.

Dasein's fundamental mode of relation with the world is not that of a theoretical or scientific understanding, but practical. We understand how to drive a car, write with a pen, sit on a chair, etc. Heidegger also remarks that the totality of equipment or the world exists for the sake of something, and this something is nothing but Dasein. The whole world gives "the image of an immensely complicated, crisscrossing network of functional assignments in which all the entities in the world are caught up and have their Being. This network is anchored in the Being of Dasein…" (Melchert & Morrow, 2019). Nature is considered a resource for Dasein, not as an object of scientific inquiry.

Heidegger draws our attention to the situations where equipment fails, for example, the hammer fails to accomplish its purpose. We would suddenly look at the equipment, focusing on its physical features and other properties. There we have a detached observation as the equipment fails to fulfil our practical concern. The equipment thus stands out disconnected from the interrelated totality of equipment. It has now become an object. It is no more a *ready-to-hand* but is merely *present-at-hand.* The realm of such *present-at-hand* entities is the one that calls for contemplation and scientific investigation. Hence, Heidegger could show the manner in which the world

- The world is the totality of equipment that is *ready-to-hand* for Dasein

- Dasein's fundamental mode of relation with the world is practical

- The world studied by natural sciences is a modification of the more fundamental world of *ready-to-hand* entities

becomes the object of scientific inquiry. But it should be noted that the realm of *present-at-hand* is a modification of the more fundamental *ready-to-hand*. That is, the world studied by natural sciences is a modification of the more fundamental world of interconnected equipment with which we engage practically in our everydayness.

Heidegger shows that a closer look at the interconnected totality of equipment also reveals to Dasein, the existence of other entities with a similar kind of Being. The hammer was already made by somebody. The nails were already manufactured by someone. The walls were already built. These reveal that there are other entities with the same kind of Being as Dasein's. Thus, for Heidegger, even the problem of the existence of other minds raised by some previous philosophies becomes pseudo-problems like that of the existence of an external world. These form part of the given for Dasein.

- The existence of other human beings also gets revealed

Like Being-in-the-world, another fundamental feature of Dasein that Heidegger notes is its *Being-with*. Dasein cannot exist isolated from others. Dasein thinks, speaks, acts just as one among the many, the *They*. Heidegger interestingly states that even if one tries to run away from the group of people around him, one would be running away in the manner as someone else runs away in a similar situation.

- Dasein's Being is Being-with others

Heidegger also speaks about *thrownness*, *facticity*, and *projection* of Dasein. By thrownness, he means that we are thrown into this world. We did not determine the year in which we were born, or the country, culture, family we became part of, or even the features of the body that we possess. However, our current situation as well as the future possibilities are influenced by these factors of our existence that we did not choose voluntarily. Such an event of being involuntarily thrust into our existence is what Heidegger calls thrownness. The burden that we carry as a result of being thrown into this existence is termed facticity. It is the sum total of all factors of our current situation and the limits that they set for our future possibilities. The term projection refers to the efforts of Dasein to actualise its possibilities. However, this projection is always within the limits set by the facticity we carry as a result of being thrown into this existence. Heidegger says that thrownness is not something that is already completed for Dasein. Dasein is continuously thrown into its Being-in-the-world and is one of its fundamental features. In other words, "I am *thrown* out of

- Thrownness, facticity, and projection of Dasein

the past and into the present while projecting from within my thrownness towards the future" (Watts, 2011).

Heidegger succeeds in exposing that Dasein is not primarily a knowing subject. What is most fundamental to Dasein is *care.* Care is not some ontic property of Dasein that it might occasionally display. Dasein's Being is essentially caring. The practical engagement and the theoretical investigation presuppose this care. All existentials of Dasein can be unified under the *care* aspect of Dasein's Being. Watts puts it in this way: "Care embodies Dasein as a whole: it is the "constellation" in which Dasein exists, the basic feature in us that underlies and constitutes all our experiences and involvements in the world, thus providing us with a sense of existence as an integrated "organic" whole".

- Care is the fundamental aspect of Dasein's Being

1.2.6 Authentic and Inauthentic Existence

Dasein experiences its Being in two ways that are characterised respectively by the presence and absence of self-awareness. The way of Being marked by the presence of self-awareness is termed *authentic*, whereas the one with a lack of self-awareness is the *inauthentic.*

- Dasein experiences two modes of existence

Heidegger uses the term *They-self* to denote the inauthentic version of Dasein. Recall from the previous section, the fundamental aspect of Dasein's Being is called Being-with. It has been said that Dasein exists as one among the others-in-the-world. The different socio-cultural customs, expectations and interpretations of the world that Dasein dwells in, influence the Being of Dasein. In its everydayness, Dasein accepts the way provided by the *They,* which eventually guides and structures Dasein's mode of Being. Heidegger points out that "We take pleasure as *They* take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *They* see and judge; likewise, we shrink back from the "great mass" as *They* shrink back…". Isn't it interesting to observe that a person who does not wish to conform to the standards of the masses and wants to become an authentic individual behaves in the same way as those persons who have earlier shown such non-conformity? Rebels who refuse to be conditioned by the popular culture eventually get conditioned by the counter-culture. There is no real escape. In one or the other way, Dasein is influenced by the *They*; it is thrown to be like that.

- Inauthentic version of Dasein is the *They-self*

Heidegger uses the term *fallen-ness* to refer to the way in which Dasein falls away from its authentic mode and becomes a *They-self.* He, however, points out that this falling is not a moral failure. It is a universal condition of Dasein. Dasein exists in the *They-self* mode from birth. Its modes of survival, understanding, and behaviour are shaped by the already given explanations, values, and standards of the *They* of the particular society and the time-period into which Dasein is thrown. Any kind of distinction from the mass is levelled off, and the scope of choices gets limited. In fact, the pre-given standards make Dasein's Being meaningful and comprehensible. However, when Dasein tends to go with the flow simply by obeying and satisfying the easily handed rules and norms of the *They,* it disburdens itself from the responsibility to choose its way of Being. Such an existence of conformity to the masses and escape from one's responsibility is what Heidegger calls inauthentic existence.

- Inauthentic existence is marked by conformity to the masses and the escape from one's responsibility

In fact, the *They-self* mode has a necessary function in everyday life. If there is no such given basis for our existence in the form of conventional ways of thinking and behaving, we would feel the lack of a solid foundation to comprehend the life around us. We would then find ourselves at the edge of an abyss of meaninglessness. Also, Dasein's engagement as an inauthentic Being in the everydayness is what gradually paves the way for the situations of alert that lead to an understanding of the authentic way of existence. This understanding or awareness never comes from anything outside the Dasein.

- Inauthentic existence is somehow necessary

According to Heidegger, Dasein's Being is a *Being-toward-death*. Death is one of Dasein's possibilities. As soon as we are born, there is the possibility of death. We are, in fact, thrown into this possibility. However, the everydayness often makes Dasein forget about its *Being-toward-death*. "Everydayness transforms death from one's own most possibility into an event that is distant and then says it is nothing to be *afraid* of" .

- Dasein, as the *They-self*, forgets that its Being is Being-toward-death

However, in certain situations, for example, in the traumatic experience of the death of the beloved, or in the discovery of the incurable nature of one's disease that might lead to death, Dasein experiences what Heidegger calls *anxiety.* This anxiety forces Dasein to step back from the everydayness. The existing values and norms of the *They* do not seem meaningful anymore. Dasein experiences itself as *not-at-home-in-the-world.* Anxiety thus triggers an awakening for the Dasein from the *They-self*

- Situations of anxiety trigger an awakening in Dasein towards the authentic mode of existence

mode towards "the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself". Dasein becomes aware that it is responsible for its Being.

However, it is not easy to move away from the pull of the masses. Dasein, by belonging to the *They,* has enhanced the latter's power over itself. So, as it tries to set itself free, Dasein would be challenged, pressurised, and persuaded in different ways by the *They.* Dasein even experiences different forms of guilt at times while moving away from its hitherto followed way of Being. It takes immense existential courage, or *resoluteness* as Heidegger calls it, on the part of Dasein to embrace its possibility of an authentic Being. To take control over one's own life, to understand one's thrownness and facticity, to be aware of the possibilities available, and to explore them within the realisation of one's Being-toward-death, is what we conceive of Heidegger's description of authentic Being.

- Immense existential courage is needed to embrace the authentic way of Being

Summarized Overview

Martin Heidegger points out that the philosophical tradition has hitherto been undertaking investigations on existing entities rather than trying to clarify the meaning of existence as such. He thus sets out to solve the mystery of Being. Being cannot be studied in isolation, as Being is always the Being of an entity. Heidegger identifies human being as the entity that is unique in the sense that its Being is always an issue for it. He uses the term Dasein, meaning 'being there', to emphasise the Being of the human being rather than any of its other physical or social features. Heidegger finds the phenomenological way of seeing things as appropriate to study the Being of Dasein.

Heidegger carries out an existential analysis of Dasein that reveals the fundamental aspects of its existence. Heidegger discovers that Dasein's Being is always Being-in-the-world. Dasein cannot be apart from the world. The relationship that Dasein has with the world is not that of a knower-known distinction. Dasein engages with the world practically. The world is a totality of equipment existing for the projects of Dasein. Heidegger also discovers that Dasein's Being is always Being-with others. When Dasein conforms itself to the expectations and standards of the masses, it becomes a *They-self.* This mode of existence is inauthentic in the sense that Dasein escapes from its responsibility and finds solace in what is given by the masses. Heidegger explains that when Dasein experiences anxiety in certain situations, it gets awakened to its authentic mode of Being. As an authentic Being, Dasein would take control over one's own life, understand one's thrownness and facticity, become aware of the possibilities available, and explore them within the realisation of one's Being-toward-death.

Self-Assessment

1. Differentiate between Being and beings (entities).

2. How does phenomenology help in analysing the Being of Dasein?

3. Outline the fundamental aspects of Dasein's Being.

4. Define thrownness, facticity, and projection.

5. What do you mean by *They-self*?

Assignments

1. Give a brief account of the question of Being as formulated by Heidegger.

2. Comment upon Heidegger's statement "Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological".

3. What do you mean by Dasein's Being-in-the-world?

4. Dasein is thrown into Being-in-the-world. Explain.

5. Differentiate between authentic and inauthentic ways of Being with examples.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

UNIT 3
Merleau-Ponty

Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of this unit, the learner will be able to;

- understand the limitations of objective thought
- analyse Merleau-Ponty's original contributions to phenomenology
- appreciate the primacy of perception
- critically discuss the notion of body-subject

Background

The phenomenological movement witnesses some novel and enduring contributions from the French thinker Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He reviews the major ideas in the phenomenology of Husserl and proclaims that the method of phenomenology could overcome the limitations in the then-prevalent conceptual frameworks to provide an accurate account of our everyday lived experience. He pioneers the study of the relation between consciousness and embodiment, which has now become the subject of major debate. This unit engages the learner with the major ideas put forward by Merleau-Ponty.

Keywords

Objective Thought, Phenomenology, Perception, Body-Subject

3.3.1 Introduction

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 – 1961) was a French thinker who made original contributions to phenomenology in the post-Husserlian era. His work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, published in French in 1945, establishes an important place for him in the history of the phenomenological movement. His main project is to overcome the difficulties in the explanation of our lived experience given by the then-prevalent conceptual frameworks that approach reality with a dualist subject-object attitude. His phenomenology, based on the in-depth study of perception, reveals the embodied nature of our consciousness. Merleau-Ponty deals with a wide range of topics that include perception, action, memory, nature, intersubjectivity, madness, time, truth, and language. His ideas retain an ongoing relevance in diverse fields like cognitive science, psychology, anthropology, sociology, etc.

• Merleau-Ponty made original contributions to phenomenology

In the later phase of his philosophy, Merleau-Ponty feels as if his phenomenology still contains the elements of the subject-object dualism. He puts forward an ontology of chiasm and the flesh in his work, *The Visible and the Invisible,* which unfortunately remains incomplete. However, in this unit, we will confine our discussion to Merleau-Ponty's views on the phenomenological method, the primacy of perception, and embodied consciousness from the *Phenomenology of Perception.*

3.2.2 Merleau-Ponty on phenomenology

According to Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology does not have a commonly agreed-upon definition. Even though it is mainly conceived as "the attempt to provide a direct description of our experience such as it is, and without any consideration of its psychological genesis or of the causal explanations that the scientist, historian, or sociologist might offer of that experience" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, Preface), the differences in the early and late Husserl as well as the Heideggerian analysis cause problems in arriving at an exact definition for phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty hence asserts that phenomenology is better recognised as a mode of thought or a style. It is a movement that is prior to reaching a full philosophical consciousness.

• Merleau-Ponty conceives phenomenology as a mode of thought or style

The importance of phenomenology is made clear by pointing out the flaws in the existing conceptual framework.

Merleau-Ponty thinks that our conceptual framework for understanding consciousness, the world, and their relation is flawed. It describes the nature of the things but fails to accurately reflect the same. This leads to a number of problems. Merleau-Ponty uses the term 'objective thought' to refer to the then-prevalent conceptual/philosophical framework. According to that framework, we see the world as composed of different entities causally connected to each other. All such entities have definite spatio-temporal positions and exhibit several properties that can be determined using certain laws. This world becomes the object of knowledge for a subject who can have knowledge about the world as it is, without being affected by subjective interpretations and other concerns. Merleau-Ponty believes that this way of thinking is prejudiced. It focuses on the objects of experience rather than the experience itself. Merleau-Ponty shows the example of a theorist who tries to understand the visual experience of human beings by studying the nature of the objects presented in the visual experience, rather than studying the experience itself.

- The conceptual framework of objective thought has difficulties

Empiricism and intellectualism are just different versions of this objective thought framework. They both agree on the nature of the world, but differ mainly with respect to its metaphysical status. Correspondingly, they differ in their conceptions of consciousness also. Empiricism can be identified with the framework of the natural sciences. Consciousness, for it, is just another thing in the natural world that obeys the natural laws. Intellectualism points to the properties of consciousness that defy the causal explanation of the natural sciences and claims that consciousness is not merely one among the many entities in the natural world but rather stands outside and may even constitute the natural world. Idealist philosophies come under this version of objective thought. According to Merleau-Ponty, empiricism and intellectualism fail in providing a comprehensive understanding of human experience.

- Empiricism and Intellectualism fail in providing a comprehensive understanding

Merleau-Ponty conceives of phenomenology as capable of developing a new framework which dissolves the problems. However, he wants to review the notions of phenomenology practised by Husserl. He feels that Husserl's phenomenology advocates some sort of idealism,which comes under the above-mentioned intellectualism, by stating that the entire world of experience has its roots in the transcendental ego. Merleau-Ponty notices that going back to things themselves need not lead us to such an idealistic position that claims that consciousness

constructs or constitutes everything. He proclaims that the world is always here well before we undertake an analysis of it, and needs only to be described, not constructed. Husserl at once quotes St. Augustine and says that it is in the inner man that the truth dwells, and we need to turn to ourselves. Merleau-Ponty refuses to endorse this and declares that there is no 'inner man'. Man is always within the world. It is only in the world that man recognises himself. In Merleau-Ponty's words, a man exists as "a subject vowed to the world". What Merleau-Ponty says about phenomenological reduction also clarifies this. He says that the great lesson we need to notice about the reduction is that complete reduction is never possible, thus closing the way to idealism.

Merleau-Ponty also reverses the eidetic reduction of Husserl that brackets existent facts to focus on the essences. For him, eidetic reduction is not an end, but a means that helps to capture the living relations of experience, just like a net that catches fish and algae. This reversal is in line with the shift effected by the existentialists from essence to existence. Moreover, the notion of intentionality, for Merleau-Ponty, is not something that only points to the directedness of our conscious acts. It reveals the existence of a world as something 'already there' or 'ready-made'. It underlies our entire relations to the world and our comportment toward others.

3.3.3 Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception

Phenomenology, according to Merleau-Ponty, aims at exploring the basic structure of our experience of the world in its given form prior to all investigations. Merleau-Ponty believes that perception has privileged access to the basic structure of our experience. However, he points out that the traditional view of knowledge gives primacy to rational consciousness. In his work *Phenomenology of Perception*, he says that he aims to restore the world of perception.

The traditional view takes the dualist subject-object standpoint, according to which, there is the thinking and knowing mind, and the world of objects known or thought by the mind. Empirical observation can only describe events. It cannot answer the *what* and *why* of the same. It is the mind that knows everything. Descartes concludes this with his example of wax. Suppose we have some wax in front of us.

We could see it as possessing certain colour, fragrance, shape, hardness, etc. But as and when we bring the wax near to the fire, the wax melts. The colour, the fragrance, the shape, all change. The wax even loses its hardness and becomes soft. However, we still could identify it as wax. How? Descartes answers that we know wax through the mind, or the intellect. Later, Kant also speaks in the same manner. Our mind has some categories which exist prior to all experience, and they shape the way in which we experience everything. So, once again, it is with the mind that knowledge is possible and the world is objectified. Merleau-Ponty also notices that the traditional way of looking at the world with reason always keeps a difference between the phenomena and reality. It assumes that the phenomena that we perceive have some underlying reality that lies unperceived by us. The mind is the mirror that reflects reality.

Merleau-Ponty feels that this rationalist attitude towards knowledge has raised various practical concerns. When rational certainty is taken as the measure for all knowledge and socio-political values, it raises the question of the absoluteness of the same. Can the rational description of a good society that is reflected in some mind be applicable to all ? Can such intellectual conceptions address actual life events? Merleau-Ponty indicates that this outlook has often been used as the justification for the exertion of force to make everyone accept certain theories or laws.

Merleau-Ponty thus advocates for a primacy of perception, which in fact becomes the central thesis of his project. However, 'primacy' here does not mean that perception should enjoy some exclusive right as that which provides the unquestionable and thus ultimate evidence for knowledge. By the primacy of perception, Merleau-Ponty means the nature of perception as constituting the ground level of all knowledge. He states that "the perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence". According to him, "We never cease living in the world of perception, but we go beyond it in critical thought—almost to the point of forgetting the contribution of perception to our idea of truth… The perceiving mind is an incarnate mind. I have tried, first of all, to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world, going against doctrines which treat perception as a simple result of the action of external things on our body as well as against those which insist on the autonomy of consciousness".

- Rational thought cannot capture the primordial, less articulated, and non-propositional form of experience

Most of the traditional philosophies concentrate on well-formed rational thought in the form of concepts and language. However, Merleau-Ponty feels that they ignore the primordial, less articulated, and non-propositional form (i.e., not in the subject-predicate form) of experience from which conceptual thinking arises. This pre-predicative experience is nothing but that of a being with a body caught up in a finite situation, together with the experience of several possibilities within the situation. Merleau-Ponty reckons that our whole understanding of the world is grounded in this corporeal nature. This pre-reflective awareness cannot be captured by any transcendental reflection or introspection, as Husserl thought.

- Empiricism and intellectualism face difficulties in their conceptions of perception

The study of perception is hence indispensable for any study of science or culture. The task of philosophy is to see and describe the world as it is presented in perception as concretely as possible. Merleau-Ponty points out the limitations in the way perception is understood by the existing versions of the Objective thought framework – Empiricism and Intellectualism. Both theories agree with the claim that perceptual experience is composed of sensations. However, they differ in their accounts on how these sensations are combined to form perceptual experiences. Empiricism claims that sensations are combined by automatic, causal processes, whereas according to Intellectualism, the perceiver (consciousness) interprets the sensations and forms judgments on whatever is seen. Merleau-Ponty undertakes a detailed analysis of the manner in which these frameworks study perception and shows that the theories that try to account for perception in the form of sensations would face several difficulties.

- Phenomenology of perception is a phenomenology of the world as perceived by embodied consciousness

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception is, in fact, a phenomenology of the world as perceived by embodied consciousness. He thinks that the study of the complex issues of human relations in the realms of language, culture, and society is possible through a closer phenomenological analysis of the present and living reality. For the same, one of the strategies that Merleau-Ponty adopts is the examination of the situations of bodily impairments to bring to light the structure and procedures hidden in our normal state. He thinks that failures reveal most clearly how the system works under normal conditions.

3.3.4 Embodied consciousness or the body-subject

One of the prominent contributions of Merleau-Ponty is his idea of the 'body-subject'. Merleau-Ponty thinks that the relation between consciousness and body is by no means straightforward. In order to understand what it means when one says, "I am my body", we will first have a look at the different theories of self. Materialism states that a person is a highly complicated physical object and all the so-called mental facts are in one way or the other way dependent on physical facts. It thus reduces the mental and the subjective to the physical and the objective. Idealism states that a person is essentially consciousness that is non-physical in nature, and all the physical facts about the person are in one or the other way dependent on consciousness. This theory reduces the physical and the objective to the mental and the subjective. Mind-body dualism states that a person is a non-physical mind contingently surviving in a physical (non-mental) body. The person may survive without the body but not without the mind. The mind-body dualism, even though it captures both the subjective and the objective, fails to explain the relation between them. So, Merleau-Ponty thinks that all these theories are flawed. He introduces a new theory that identifies the subjective with the physical. According to him, the self is the body.

- Merleau-Ponty thinks that all existing theories of the self are flawed

Let us now see how Merleau-Ponty arrives at his notion of embodied consciousness. Merleau-Ponty argues that the experience we have of our physical body is different from our experience of other objects. We are all familiar with two kinds of experience. We perceive the bodies of other people or any other physical objects around us through our senses. It can be rightly said that they are not us, or that what we perceive in such experiences is what we are not. This experience can be called a third-person experience. Now, one also has the experience of one's own body, not in a third-person way, but as being the body. This can be called the first-person experience then. Merleau-Ponty contrasts these experiences in several ways.

- Merleau-Ponty contrasts the experiences we have of our bodies with the bodies of others

In case of any other physical object (that is not me), I can come closer to it or go away from it, see it from a distance if I want to, and do many things like lifting it, etc. But none of these is possible regarding my body. An object can always be taken away from my experience of it. Its presence always has within it the possibility of its absence. But regarding my body, there is

- My body cannot be taken away from my experience

no such possibility of absence. My body cannot be taken away from my experience. So, my body is never an object of my perception. In fact, it is a constant in all my experience.

Moreover, I can have different views of any other object by observing it from different angles while walking around it or in some other sense. But I cannot observe my body. Observation involves the scope of varying the points of view without changing the object. I may try to look at my body by tilting my head, etc. The freedom in my observation of it would be far too limited as compared to my observation of any other object. Even then, what can be said utmost is that a part of my body that is visually available to me can in some sort be an object of my perception. In such cases also there is also the body that is the subject of perception or the perceiver, which can never be observed as an object. In Merleau-Ponty's words, I would need a second body in order to have a free observation of my body, but then the second body would remain unobservable. Thus, my own body is not one among the other objects that I may encounter in my course of experience of the world. The body is the subject of perception, the perceiver. I am my body.

- The body is the subject of perception – the perceiver

According to Merleau-Ponty, perception reveals the fact that we are embodied beings projected into the world in a peculiar way. We do not experience ourselves as spatial objects in a spatial world. We discover ourselves in the world, as part of the world. We possess a very specific and organic relation with the world as determined by the functioning of our sensory and motor capacities. It seems as if the world is made in such a way to be discovered by and respond to our sense organs. He points to a mutuality and interrelatedness in the relation between the self and the world.

- We are embodied beings projected into the world in a peculiar way

Merleau-Ponty draws our attention to some empirical studies done on brain-damaged people. He mainly talks about the study undertaken by Gelb and Goldstein on a First World War veteran, namely Schneider, whose brain was damaged by shrapnel. Schneider exhibited peculiar symptoms. For example, even though his motor ability was functioning, he could not perform bodily movements in the manner that humans normally do. He had to move his whole body and later confine the same to a specific body part to show which part was touched upon by the doctor. But he had no problems in scratching a body part as soon as a mosquito bit him. The study revealed that Schneider could perform many of his habitual

- Merleau-Ponty studies the cases of people with bodily impairments

actions without any difficulty. Merleau-Ponty undertakes an in-depth discussion of this case and exposes how empiricism and intellectualism fail in their explanations of this case.

- Our orientation in the world, including that of sexuality, depends on the body

For Merleau-Ponty, our orientation in the world depends on the body, and it occupies the 'zero-point' based on which we discover different things as left, right, tall, small, etc. The body also brings us into the world of sexuality in accordance with the kind of sexual orientation that the body unfolds for me. He says that our concrete existence is always as sexual beings and that perception has an erotic structure. He again points to the example of Schneider, whose sexual dysfunction is proof of the normally sexed manner of our bodily awareness and sensations.

- Merleau-Ponty gives examples to show that perception and bodily actions are not separate

Merleau-Ponty analyses the relation between perception and action in various instances of our daily life. He points out with examples that perception and action are not separate capacities. There are two sides to our ability to engage with the world. What we perceive in a particular occasion relates to what we can actually do. The more we familiarise ourselves with an environment, the better we gain mastery over the motor skill required in that environment. Since motor skills are essentially bodily, we can say that it is the body that familiarises itself with the environment. Thus, the body should be conceived as the subject of perception.

- The thinking subject is embodied

Merleau-Ponty also speaks about thinking as essentially a bodily activity. Generally, different theorists of mind conceive thoughts either as non-physical representations contained in the non-physical mind, or as constituted by physical events, i.e., brain events. In both cases, thought has less to do with the body. However, Merleau-Ponty conceives thought in terms of its expression. A thought is expressed in various ways, like painting, music, etc. A thought is also expressed in the form of different gestures, for example, the thought that we have of showing a nearby object to our friend is expressed in the form of our raising a hand to call the friend. Expression is a bodily activity. Hence, Merleau-Ponty comes to the conclusion that the thinking subject is embodied.

- The subject of emotion is embodied

Now, emotions are considered part of one's subjective life. Merleau-Ponty says that emotions are our modes of engagement with the world. Our perception of something constitutes our feelings for the same. Our perception of something influences which actions we perform. We perceive a person's lovable

appearance. The perception constitutes our feelings for that person and influences the way in which we behave. It was already said above that the subject of perception and action is embodied. Applying it here, we get that the subject of emotion is also embodied.

Merleau-Ponty asserts that whatever knowledge we have, it is the product of our body's perception of the world. There can be no knowledge devoid of the activity of our body. The body is the means by which we have access to all things that exist. The world of thought and culture is attributed to the self, and the natural world is considered external to the self by many philosophies. However, Merleau-Ponty finds these two worlds united in a fascinating world of the flesh.

- The body is the means by which we have access to all things that exist

For Merleau-Ponty, the world is disclosed to us in a certain way by the body. The body becomes the transcendental condition for the possibility of experiencing different objects. It is the means of our communication with the world.

Summarized Overview

Maurice Merleau-Ponty takes phenomenology to new levels. He conceives it as a mode of thought or style that could overcome the difficulties in the objective thought frameworks of empiricism and intellectualism. Merleau-Ponty reviews Husserl's ideas and stresses that the phenomenological reduction need not lead to idealism. He observes that the traditional philosophies have given primacy to rational certainty. However, he argues that the primordial aspect of our experience can be studied only through perception. He thus undertakes a phenomenology of perception.

Merleau-Ponty feels that the traditional philosophies that study perception in the form of sensations have failed. According to him, perception reveals that we are embodied beings projected into the world in a peculiar way. He points out certain case-studies of persons with bodily impairments and also draws our attention to various real-life examples. He thereby claims that the subject of perception, thought, emotion, etc., is embodied. Whatever knowledge we have, it is the product of our body's perception of the world. The world is disclosed to us in a certain way by the body. The body is the means of our communication with the world. Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodied consciousness or the body-subject has gained much popularity. It has influenced the studies undertaken in cognitive science, sociology, anthropology, etc.

Self-Assessment

1. Describe the peculiarities of the objective thought framework.
2. Give a brief account of phenomenology as conceived by Merleau-Ponty.
3. Discuss the problems with the traditional view of perception.
4. Briefly comment upon Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body-subject.

Assignments

1. What are the limitations of the objective thought framework?
2. Discuss the primacy of perception as advocated by Merleau-Ponty.
3. Compare and contrast Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodied consciousness with other theories of self.
4. The subject of thought, action, emotion, etc. is embodied. Explain in light of Merleau-Ponty's views.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.
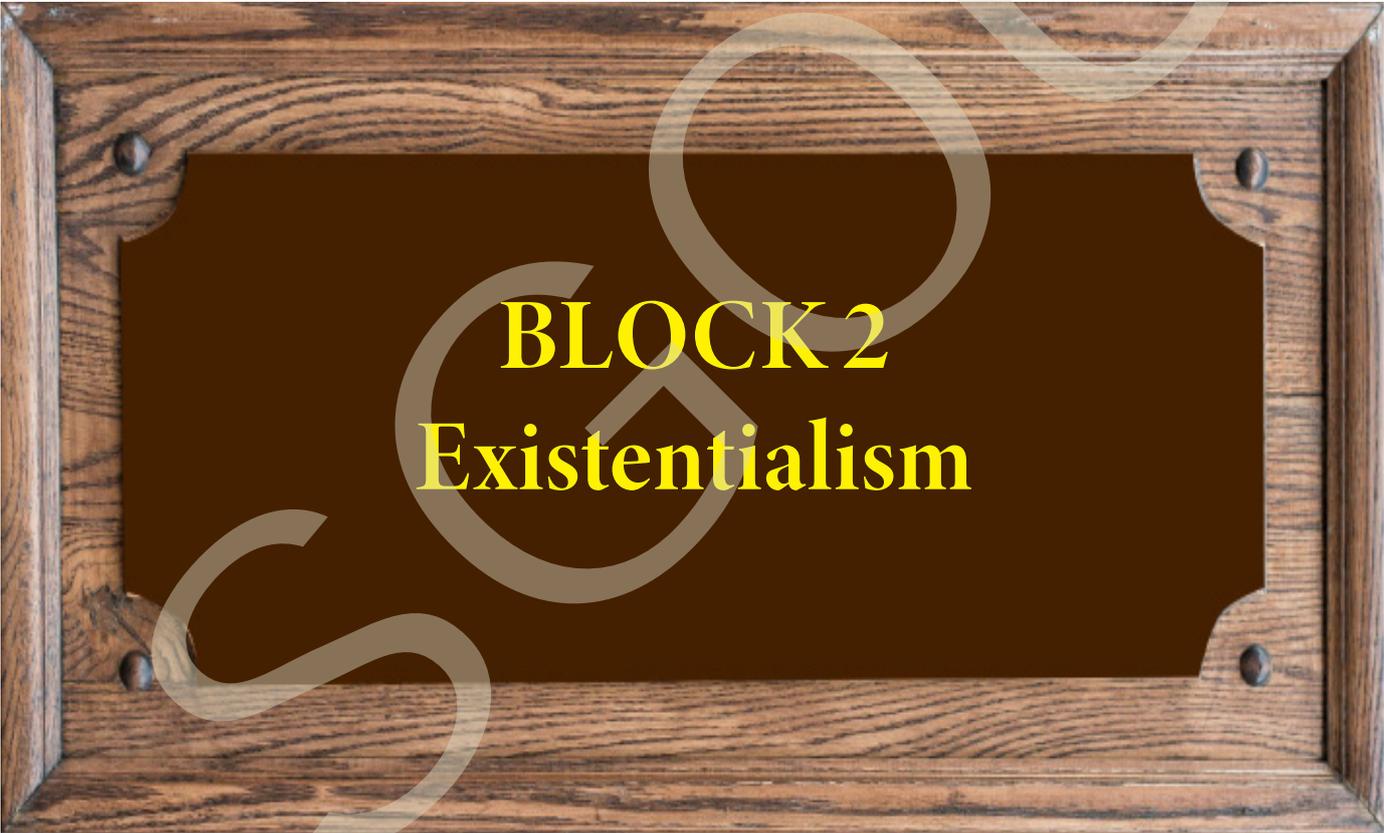
BLOCK 2
Existentialism

UNIT 1
A General Introduction to Existentialism

Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of this unit, the learner will be able to;

- analyse the factors that led to the rise of existentialism
- examine the core principles of existentialism in contrast with essentialism
- understand the major themes discussed in existentialism
- appreciate the importance of free and responsible decision-making in life situations

Background

Existentialism is a philosophical trend that focuses not on any abstract set of theoretical truths but on the very concrete dimensions of individual existence. It problematises the individual's experience of being in the world and offers several impactful ideas that enrich our understanding of the human condition. Traces of existentialist thought are found in several episodes of the ancient, medieval, and modern eras of Western philosophy. However, existentialism emerged as a philosophic trend in the 19th and 20th centuries. Existentialism advocates for the significance of individual existence as a free being over and above all kinds of essence that science, philosophy, religion, politics, etc. assign to it. Individuals shape their lives through conscious choices. Existentialist thinkers share a common emphasis on themes like nothingness, absurdity, authenticity, anxiety, death, etc. This unit introduces the characteristics of existentialism as a philosophical trend .

Keywords

Existentialism, Essentialism, Nothingness, Freedom, Responsibility

2.1.1 Introduction

Does human existence have a pre-established definition? What is the purpose of human existence? Is human life absurd? Are individuals completely free to make choices in their lives? Does society shape the identity of an individual? How can one live an authentic and responsible life? Why do individuals experience anxiety and guilt?What role do these emotions play in their lives? How should one confront death? Questions like these have not been discussed much or have only been tangentially met with in the Western philosophical tradition until the last two centuries. The major systems of philosophy paid little attention to the personal concerns of individuals. They were too academic and hence remote from life.

This unit discusses a recent trend in philosophy that is a way of living rather than a detached speculation. Existentialism is the term used to refer to the philosophical trend that focuses not on any abstract set of theoretical truths but on the very concrete dimensions of individual existence. The term 'existentialism' was first coined by Gabriel Marcel in the mid-1940s. We would find no single characteristic common among all those who are called existentialists, and an attempt to define existentialism in such a manner would be futile. Existentialism is not a body of philosophical doctrines but a style of philosophising. Existentialism explores the meaning and purpose of human existence. It problematises the individual's experience of being in the world and offers several impactful ideas that enrich our understanding of the human condition. The sole focus of existentialism is human existence. It has no philosophy of nature or philosophy of history. It is a philosophy of concrete human existence, a philosophy of man as conscious being.

Ancient, medieval, and modern periods of Western philosophy witnessed several episodes of existentialist thinking. Among the ancient Greek thinkers, we could see that Heraclitus believed in constant change, which pointed towards the impermanence and unpredictability of life. The sophists questioned the objectivity of truth and argued for subjective meanings, proclaiming that man is the measure of all things. Socrates considered all thought as a means to know oneself and stressed the importance of self-examination and self-improvement. Stoicism advocated for the cultivation of virtues that enable an individual to accept and overcome the

- Major systems of philosophy were less concerned about the personal life of a human being

- Existentialism is a style of philosophising that problematises the individual's experience of being in the world

- Traces of existentialist thought are found in several episodes of the ancient, medieval, and modern eras of Western philosophy

constraints of external circumstances. Greek tragedies like the Oedipus Rex of Sophocles explored the notions of fate, suffering, and the absurdity of human life. The medieval period saw St. Augustine undertaking profound introspective psychological analysis in order to discover the source of personal insecurity and anxiety experienced by human beings. At the beginning of the modern era, 17th-century thinker Blaise Pascal reflected deeply on the uncertainty that pervades human life. According to him, reason is not capable of understanding the core of human existence and solving the deepest questions therein. The intuitive and emotional grasp humans have of reality is as important as rational thought. He also stressed the role of subjective experience in cultivating belief and realising truth. German Romanticism in the early 19th century also encouraged the understanding of philosophy as care of the self.

However, the seeds of existentialism as a philosophic trend were sown by the mid-nineteenth-century works of Søren Kierkegaard(1813 – 1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900). Later, in the twentieth century that witnessed the two world-wars, existentialism emerged as one of the most influential and powerful philosophical movements through the works of Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976), Karl Jaspers (1883 – 1969), Gabriel Marcel (1889 – 1973), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980),Albert Camus (1913 – 1960), and Simone de Beauvoir (1908 – 1986).

- Existentialism emerged as a philosophic trend in the 19th and 20th centuries

The thinkers who have been called existentialists do not commonly share any idea. They indeed agree with the primacy of existence over all sorts of essences, even though each of them describes the nature of individual existence in different ways. Their writings in the form of novels, stories, dramas etc., discuss a certain set of existentialist themes but in idiosyncratic ways. In fact, most of these thinkers refuse to be labelled as existentialists. We, therefore, should keep in mind that whenever we use the term existentialists, we do not refer to the group of thinkers who belong to a particular school of philosophy called existentialism. Instead, we only use the term to refer to those thinkers who have explored the concrete dimensions of individual existence and discussed various related themes.

- Existentialists do not form a school that shares common views

However, the existentialists are often classified as theistic or atheistic. The theistic existentialists integrate the belief in a Divine being with the concerns of human existence like meaning, purpose, freedom, and responsibility. They proclaim that the

purposelessness, uncertainty, and anxiety that one confronts in one's life can be overcome through faith in the Divine being. Faith, according to them, is a subjective experience and not the acceptance of any institutionalised doctrines. Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel are theistic existentialists in this respect. Atheistic existentialists reject the idea of a Divine being. Individuals are radically free to choose and burdened with the responsibility of the consequences. They should find a meaning and purpose for their life on their own. There is no aid from any divine source. Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus are atheistic existentialists in this regard. It should be noted that this is not an exhaustive classification as there are thinkers who cannot be grouped satisfactorily under any of these divisions.

2.1.2 The Development of Existentialism

Existentialism as a philosophic current arose as a product of the intellectual and cultural atmosphere of the 19th and 20th centuries.The 19th century was marked by the rationalist and systematic philosophy of Hegel, in which concrete individuals were interpreted through abstract categories. Kierkegaard challenged those philosophies that give primary significance to groups or categories rather than individuals. He stressed the primacy of individual existence over and above all pre-established definitions. He emphasised the subjective experience of human beings and wrote intensely about individual responsibility and freedom of choice. Kierkegaard is considered the father of modern existentialism for the shift he brought in philosophy.

From the end of the Middle Ages to the modern era, we could see a decline in the influence of religion over human life. Religion was more than a theological system to the medieval man. It was a psychological matrix surrounding his life from birth to death. It penetrated the deepest strata of an individual's psychic life. It gave meaning to and defined the purpose of human life. However, with the advent of science, religion gradually lost its place as the uncontested centre that determines various aspects of human life.In the 19th century, Nietzsche used the dictum "God is dead" to describe the decline of religion.The rejection of religious authority made the individual feel homeless in a world which suddenly stopped responding to the needs of his spirit. Although science continued to reveal more secrets of nature, it could not enthrone itself as the moral arbiter or lifeguide for humanity. A sense of nothingness prevailed. Life suddenly seemed to be absurd.

Man felt as if there was no purpose worthy to be strived for in life. There was no specific reason to live other than to die.

The Age of Reason, or the Enlightenment era, as the modern period was known, proclaimed reason as the highest faculty that grasps truth in its completeness and promises to solve all problems of humanity. Human reason was considered entirely flawless. Science grounded in rationality became the source of reliable knowledge and gave humans great power over nature. But lacking any ethical component in itself, science proved to be incapable of saving humanity from the catastrophic destruction caused by the two World Wars in the twentieth century. The belief in the continuing progress of civilisation was shattered, and the promises of truth, freedom, peace, and prosperity made by the Enlightenment were broken.Moreover, the Communist Revolution destroyed the confidence in the political stability of democratic liberalism. The truth of classical economics and the survival of capitalism were also subjected to doubt due to the Great Depression of the late 1920s and 1930s. The individuals soon got striped of their humane features in the new industrialised and urbanised society.

As all the external structures of authority (intellectual, moral, economic, and political) weakened or collapsed, the lack of an all-encompassing belief system that could guide human judgement and action prevailed. Some thinkers responded to this by looking for a legitimating authority within. This resulted in the emergence of existentialism as an anti-rationalist revolt against the Enlightenment, with the subjective concerns of the conscious individual as its true centre for philosophising

Edmund Husserl's phenomenology had a great role in the development of existentialism. Phenomenology, as we discussed in the previous block, offers an in-depth description of our conscious experience. It removes hindrances in the form of preconceptions and prejudices and helps us to notice features that we usually fail to notice. Phenomenology had a direct influence on several existentialist thinkers. It allowed them to explore the inner dimensions of human existence that are not revealed via superficial studies. We have already seen how Heidegger employed the phenomenological method to solve his question of Being.Sartre was influenced by the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger's employment of the same. However, it should be noted that the existentialists did not endorse the eidetic nature of Husserlian phenomenology, i.e., its focus

- Human reason failed to solve the problems of humanity, and the promises of the Enlightenment were broken

- Existentialism emerged as an anti-rationalist revolt focusing on the subjective concerns of the conscious individual

- Phenomenology had a direct influence on several existentialist thinkers

on essential features. Instead, they prioritised individual existence over all essences and definitions. This major tenet of existentialism is discussed in the next section.

2.1.3 Basic Tenets of Existentialism

A widely accepted definition of existentialism is that it is a philosophical standpoint that stands against essentialism. The latter is the mode of thought according to which individual existence is subsidiary to the essence, concept, or system that defines and explains it. From the Platonic forms to the Hegelian categories, we see this mode of thinking being popularised in the Western philosophical tradition. Rationalist and other systematic philosophies endorse certain self-evident essences, ideas, or concepts as having primacy over the individual entities. The realm of individual entities is often considered as having less reality than the essences. Reason turns away from the contingent and changeable realm of individuals and looks for unchanging universal essences. It is claimed that the individual things gain their reality and meaning only through the essence. No individual existence is conceivable in an isolated manner devoid of the essential features. Quantification in the sciences and abstraction in socio-political theories are also prominent kinds of essentialist thought in the contemporary era.

On the other hand, existentialism points out that the concrete existence of the individual as a conscious being has long been unseen or neglected. It thus gives priority to existence over essence. This view is expressed by the famous existentialist dictum "existence precedes essence," attributed to Sartre. An individual exists as a free and conscious being and cannot be determined by any sort of definition, essence, generalisation, etc. The existentialist would say that the individual exists prior to all attempts of the various systems to define him. He does not exist as a thinking being as Descartes asserted. He exists first, and then he thinks.

Another major tenet of existentialism is that of individual freedom. Existentialists consider freedom and responsibility as constitutive of the core of individual existence. The individual is endowed with the freedom to choose and thus has the ability to shape the future. He is responsible for the consequences of the choices he makes. This is what distinguishes a human being from other creatures. Whereas the traditional schools of Western philosophy concentrated upon the individual self as

- Essentialism considers individual existence as subsidiary to the essence, concept, or system that defines and explains it

- Existentialism stands for the significance of individual existence over and above all kinds of essence

- Freedom and responsibility are the core aspects of individual existence

a thinking subject, existentialism conceives of the self as an agent. The self is no more a spectator, but an actor.

Existentialism gives due importance to the choices an individual has in their life. The life of an individual is described as one that proceeds through choices. The individual always chooses between the alternatives available to him in a particular situation. The place where we live, the food we eat, the people we talk to, the courses we study, the job we do etc., are what we have chosen. Even though certain factors,which are beyond our control,like the conditions of our birth, natural calamities, etc., might impose restraints on the range of choices we have, it can still be declared that we have chosen the way of our living from the possibilities we are provided with. The existentialists even say that the fact that a person is alive is itself an act of choice, as he could have chosen to die and is capable of doing so. The main concern of the existentialists is that although we have different possibilities in front of us, we hesitate to explore them and constantly try to remain satisfied,often in a disguised manner,in whatever situations we are living in at the moment. They call for a shift from such an inauthentic life to the authentic way of living,where we consider all alternatives with due weight and consciously exercise our freedom to choose what we want.

- The life of an individual proceeds through choices

Leading figures of existentialism have discussed and expressed the nature of existence and its precedence against essence in different ways. Their ideas about the freedom and responsibility of the individual also differ accordingly.

2.1.4 Key Issues Discussed in Existentialism

Although the main figures associated with existentialism have different views on the nature of human existence, they share a common emphasis on certain problems. They investigate matters that seem directly related to concrete human existence rather than abstract and speculative themes. The following themes discussed in existentialism do not constitutea strict definition of existentialism,but nevertheless depict a family resemblance among the existentialist philosophers. It can be seen that the existentialists have discussed several themes that have hitherto scarcely been regarded as appropriate themes for philosophising.

- Existentialists share a common emphasis on certain problems

1. Nothingness

Nothingness or void is a major issue addressed in existentialism. The rejection of all philosophies, sciences, socio-political theories, and religions that define and structure human existence leads to a sense of nothingness. With no authority for knowledge, morality, and human relationships, the individual feels as if there is nothing to structure his being and his relationship with the world. Existence seems to be a mere nothingness or void.

2. Absurdity and Contingency

Existentialists write about the absurdity of human existence. We are born on a particular day at a particular place with some particular characteristics. But why were we born on that day and not any other day? Why at that place and not another? There is no reason. Human life is an absurd fact. It has no meaning. It has no purpose. Moreover, individual existence is contingent. Our life is not a necessary phenomenon. It could end the very next moment.

3. Alienation

It can be said that the philosophy of existentialism becomes relevant mainly because of the alienation man suffers in the modern world. With the decline of religion, man is alienated from God. He is alienated from the meaningless and purposeless life. Man feels alienated from the scientific world that sees him as an object that showcases certain properties. The scientific theories in mathematical language stand between man and nature. The industrial and urbanised society, where everyone competes with others and focuses only on material gains, alienates man from his fellow beings. And most seriously, by conforming to the conceptions and norms of the masses and living a passive life, man gets alienated from his true, authentic existence.

4. Authenticity

It is through free and responsible decision-making that an individual lives an authentic life. While conforming to the norms and values of the public world, the individual gets estranged from their true self and lives an inauthentic life. To be authentic, one needs to be resolute.The existentialists have discussed a lot about these two modes of living. They point to

the different ways in which an individual becomes conscious of his authentic existence and strives to realise the same.

5. Anxiety and guilt

Man's freedom and the quest for authentic existence always meet with resistance. It often leads to frustration. Man feels guilty for not exercising the freedom to choose in everyday life and for being passively influenced by the conceptions of the masses. The uncertainty in the consequences of one's decisions against the norms of the masses also piles up anxiety. The analysis of the emotional life of man is one of the standout features of existentialism.Philosophy in general emphasised rationality in man. All major philosophies have neglected the changing moods, feelings, and affects that arise in the human mind. These even got labelled as hindrances to the ideal of objective knowledge. Considered as mental states that are irrelevant to the task of philosophy, these were included in the subject matter of psychology. The prominent figures of existentialism offer excellent philosophical accounts of these humane emotions.

- Existentialism offers excellent philosophical accounts of humane emotions like anxiety, guilt, boredom, etc.

6. Death

Death has been a prominent theme in the writings of major existentialists. It sheds light on the finitude and contingency of individual existence. It marks the end of all freedom. Death is studied not only as an observable fact at the end of life. It is also considered as the supreme possibility of human existence that evokes awareness in an individual that his being is a being-towards-death and paves the way to realise his authentic mode.

- Death points to the finitude and contingency of individual existence

2.1.5 Existentialism: Response and Criticism

The major tenets of existentialism have greatly influenced the contemporary understanding of civic life. Existentialism has called upon artists, scientists, theologians, health practitioners, and administrators to be concerned about the unique existence of each individual rather than following the hitherto established standards that analyse, predict, and shape human beings. The subjective feelings and perceptions of the individual cannot be overlooked. Existentialism thus emerges as the defender of a human subject against the oppressive features of mass society, science, politics, and institutionalised religion. It is considered to stand against the Marxian historical materialism according to which the individual is determined by the means and forces of production. It also opposes the communist view wherein

- Existentialism defends the human subject against the oppressive features of mass society, science, politics, and institutionalised religion

the individual's longings get sacrificed for the community. Positivist thought that undermines subjective experiences of human beings while advocating for objectivity in truth and meaning is also rejected by existentialism.

Existentialism has had its impact in diverse fields. The existentialist emphasis on freedom and self-creation contributed to the radical and emancipatory politics of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. The writings of Black intellectuals such as Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and W.E.B. Du Bois have also been influenced by the existentialist notions. The existentialist views on faith and freedom and the status of God ignited theological debates through the writings of Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, and others. In the work of a wide range of theorists that includingR.D. Laing, Rollo May, Viktor Frankl, and Irvin Yalom, we see the profound impact made by the existentialist movement in the development of humanistic and existential approaches to psychotherapy. Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean-Luc Godard, Akira Kurosawa, and Terrence Malick have captured existentialist ideas in their films.Existentialist moods are expressed in the paintings of Edvard Munch, Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, Paul Cézanne, and Edward Hopper. Existentialism as a literary theory is employed as a framework in the analysis of literary works.

Existentialism has also been subjected to several criticisms. It has been convicted of an irrational outlook that gives space to passions and emotions, contrary to the prominent conception of philosophy as guided by reason. The rejection of all moral authorities and the entitlement of individuals to the freedom to create and exercise their values have been questioned rigorously. It is argued that the existentialist approach to ethics, if not accompanied by a heightened sense of responsibility,might encourage conduct that finally turns out to be destructive for humanity.Existentialism has also been charged with an undesirable degree of individualism and subjectivism capable of developing strong bias in the treatment of problems related to various forms of human collectives like society, nation, international bodies, etc. The humanistic approach of existentialism,in terms of its focus on the well-being of individuals, is beyond doubt. However, the man-centred philosophy of existentialism is recognised by many as narrowly humanistic in the sense that it makes man the measure of all things and attempts to explain everything in anthropomorphic terms. Finally, existentialism is considered pessimistic, and

- Existentialism has had its impact in diverse fields, including psychology, literature, art, politics, and education

- Existentialism has had its impact in diverse fields, including psychology, literature, art, politics, and education

its adherents are criticised for focusing exclusively on the "nightside of life". It is said to be blind towards the promises of the contemporary world. It is labelled anti-democratic and anti-technological, with hardly any sympathy for the aims and achievements of modern society.

The existentialist movement was later challenged by two successive schools of thought, namely structuralism and post-structuralism,whose presence continues to be felt in our day. Structuralism stresses impersonal and universal structures that give meaning to individual entities. Post-structuralism destabilises such structures and emphasises the fluid, fragmented, and ever-changing nature of meaning and identity.

> - Structuralism and post-structuralism challenged the existentialist trend

Summarized Overview

Major philosophies in the Western tradition showed less concern for the personal life of a human being. Existentialism is a style of philosophising that problematises the individual's experience of being in the world. Even though traces of existentialist thought are found in several episodes of the ancient, medieval, and modern eras of Western philosophy, existentialism emerged as a philosophic trend in the intellectual and cultural atmosphere of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that marked the decline of religion and failure of human reason in fulfilling the promises of Enlightenment. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche became the forerunners of existentialism through their works in the nineteenth century. Later, in the twentieth century, with the advent of Husserl's phenomenology, Heidegger and Sartre developed existentialism to new heights. Existentialists are classified into theistic and atheistic. The former group includes Kierkegaard. Sartre and Camus are prominent atheistic existentialists.

Existentialism stands for the significance of individual existence over and above all kinds of essence and is thus opposed to essentialism. It endorses freedom and responsibility as the core aspects of individual existence. The life of an individual is described as one that proceeds through conscious choices. Although the main figures associated with existentialism have different views on the nature of human existence, they share a common emphasis on certain problems that seem directly related to concrete human existence rather than abstract and speculative themes. The existentialists discuss several themes that have hitherto scarcely been regarded as appropriate themes for philosophising, namely, nothingness, absurdity and contingency, alienation, anxiety and guilt, death, etc. They stress that free and responsible decision-making constitutes an authentic life. While conforming to the norms and values of the public world, the individual gets estranged from their true self and lives an inauthentic life.

Existentialism has had a great influence on the contemporary understanding of civic

life. It defends the human subject against the oppressive features of mass society, science, politics, and institutionalised religion. Existentialism has been subjected to several criticisms. But still, its influence spans diverse fields including psychology, literature, art, politics, and education.

Self-Assessment

1. How does existentialism differ from the earlier philosophies?
2. Distinguish between essentialism and existentialism.
3. List out a few important themes discussed in existentialism.
4. Differentiate between theistic and atheistic existentialism.

Assignments

1. Outline the development of existentialism as a philosophic trend.
2. Explain the basic tenets of existentialism.
3. Discuss the common issues addressed by the existentialists.
4. Give a brief account of the prominent figures of existentialism.
5. Comment upon the response and criticism to existentialism.

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UNIT 2
Kierkegaard

Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of this unit, the learner will be able to;

- analyse Kierkegaard's criticism of rational thought
- understand the main features of Kierkegaard's notion of existence
- analyze the concept of subjective truth and critically assess its role in shaping individual experience, belief systems, and ethical decision-making.
- critically reflect on the three stages involved in the progressive actualisation of individual existence

Background

Søren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) is known as the father of existentialism. He criticised the belief systems prevalent in the 19th century – the established church and the systematic philosophy of Hegel – for overlooking the concrete aspects of individual existence. For Kierkegaard, to exist means to be an individual who strives, considers alternatives, experiences anxiety and guilt, chooses, decides, and shows commitment. Kierkegaard described three stages in life that mark the gradual development of individual existence toward its most authentic form through conscious choice. His writings contain the first expression of many of the themes of contemporary existentialism. This unit discusses the major existentialist ideas expressed by Kierkegaard.

Keywords

Existence, Spectator, Actor, Subjectivity, Stages of life, Leap of faith

- Søren Kierkegaard is the father of existentialism

2.2.1 Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) is generally recognised as the father of existentialism. He brought a shift in the way philosophy is carried out. He undertook a campaign against the belief systems prevalent in the 19th century – the established church and the systematic philosophy of Hegel. Contrary to the thought that advocated for objectivity and prioritised the system over the individual, Kierkegaard emphasised the importance of individual existence.

Though Kierkegaard lived only for forty-two years, his writings spanned many categories – theology, philosophy, devotional literature, psychology, literary criticism, and fiction. He developed his existential thought not through abstract arguments but artistically in the form of personal dialogues and discussions. His major works include Fear & Trembling, Either/Or: A Fragment of Life, and The Sickness unto Death. Kierkegaard's writings were soon forgotten after his death. But they were later rediscovered and made popular by some German scholars in the early decades of the twentieth century. It can be said that Kierkegaard's writings outlined the main issues that became the grounds of existentialism.

- Kierkegaard's writings outlined the main issues that became the grounds of existentialism

2.2.2 Limitations of Rational Thought

Kierkegaard's career was a revolt against abstract thought and systematisation. Hegel's philosophywhich was popular in the 19th century, seemed to be a comic for Kierkegaard. The former attempted to capture the whole reality in his system but missed the most important element, existence. According to Kierkegaard, existence is always that of the individual human being. He remarked that human beings always find themselves in an existential situation. They constantly deal with personal experiences wherein they have to address the problem of alternatives and choices. However, Hegel's philosophy shifted the attention from the concrete individual to the concept of universals. It asked the individuals to contemplate upon the Absolute of which they are mere moments, rather than being involved in decisions and commitments. For Kierkegaard, to exist means to be an individual who strives, considers alternatives, experiences anxiety and guilt, chooses, decides, and shows commitment. Kierkegaard convicted Hegelian philosophy of ignoring these aspects of existence.

- Hegel's philosophy attempted to capture the whole reality in his system, but missed the most important element - existence

Kierkegaard severely criticised the rational emphasis prevalent in the Western tradition beginning from the Greek era. He rejected the assumption that the frameworks modelled on mathematics and natural science are useful to understand only the general or the universal, and not the individual human being. Rationalist philosophy assumes that it is possible to construct a system that gives due place to all aspects of life and reality.A rational system of thought is founded on axioms, postulates, and definitions from which every knowledge can be derived and proved using rules of logic. But such a system always presupposes a finality. Given the set of axioms, the set of derivable knowledge is also given. There is no scope to add new truths or alter the existing axioms. However, existence is the opposite of finality.As long as an individual lives, they have to choose between alternatives. Their existence is not something finished. The rational system only presents one possibility among the many that the individual confronts.

Kierkegaard hence contended that mathematics, science, metaphysics, and ethics developed systematically on rational grounds might solve many general and universal problems.But such abstract thought cannot help an individual in situations that require them to make decisions by choosing between alternatives. It considers only the objective characteristics shared with others, overlooking the uniqueness of individual existence, which lies in subjectivity. It is in moments of self-awareness, when a person recognises themselves as a conscious subject, that they truly realise their own existence. Rational thought alone cannot lead one to this awareness of subjectivity.

2.2.3 Kierkegaard's Notion of Existence

Kierkegaard's notion of existence is better described in the distinction he made between a spectator and an actor. He argues that only the actor is involved in existence. The spectator is compared to inert and inactive things for whom the term existence does not suit. Kierkegaard illustrated this distinction by making a comparison between two different persons in a wagon. One among them is depicted as holding the reins while asleep. The other one is fully awake. In both cases, the horse and the wagon move along. However, Kierkegaard pointed out that in the former case, the horse goes along its familiar road without any direction from the person asleep. In the latter, the fully awakened person actually drives the wagon by consciously directing the horse to move along the roads of the person's choice. According to Kierkegaard, an individual is

- Kierkegaard severely criticised the rational emphasis prevalent in the Western tradition

- Rational thought is incapable of guiding a person to this awareness of subjectivity

- An existing individual is not a mere spectator but an actor

said to be involved in existence only when they consciously participate in an act. Both the actor and the spectator exist in some sense, but only the former is involved in existence. We are actors when we guide our lives by considering the choices available in each situation and consciously choosing the one, we wish to proceed with.

2.2.4 Subjectivity of Truth

Kierkegaard made a distinction between objective truth and subjective truth. The former is the kind of truth that can be verified by external sources. There exist objective criteria for determining their truth value. For example, the assertions in mathematics, science, and history can be judged as true or false based on recognised standards. However, Kierkegaard noted that such objective truths are existentially neutral, i.e., the acknowledgement of their truth or falsehood does not change the kind of being one is. An individual might be surprised to know such truths, but the person would not become a different person thereby. According to Kierkegaard, there is no pre-established objective truth that affects an existing individual who strives, decides, and exists. He argued that the onlypregiven truth an existing individual gets concerned with is the objective uncertainty that the individual faces in the most passionate personal experiences in their life.

- Objective truths are existentially neutral

Kierkegaard asserted that the highest truth is subjectivity. Whatever one does, be it the search for objective truths like that of mathematics, gets its value as it is willed and decided by oneself. He argued that the most important truths that we as existing individuals get concerned with in our lives are subjective truths. They cannot be verified by external sources. But they are not existentially indifferent like the objective truths. They change our way of being. Ethical and religious claims are subjective truths. We act according to the values whose truths we have subjectively ascertained through faith.

- For an existing individual, truth is subjectivity

Kierkegaard also pointed out other subjective truths, like death and the fragility of individual existence. He wrote about the story of a man who, when invited for a dinner, promised to attend the same but suddenly got killed by a tile that fell from the roof. Even though the incident evokes humour at the first instance, Kierkegaard wanted us, the readers, to realise that our existence is so fragile and contingent that each moment of our life might possibly be the last one. If one could clearly

- Discovery of our subjective truths concretises and intensifies our existence

accept with due intensity that he might be dead in the next moment, then he has grasped the subjective truth of his death. Kierkegaard thus states that the discovery of our subjective truths concretises and intensifies our existence. The hitherto invisible dimensions of our existence get revealed thereby. It thus helps us to prioritise matters and recover ourselves from being alienated into the norms of the masses.

2.2.5 Three Stages in Life

Kierkegaard resorted to an analysis of three stages in life which mark the movement of an individual from one level of existence to another. The three stages described by Kierkegaard are namely, aesthetic, ethical, and religious. It is in sharp contrast with the gradual development of a person's self-consciousness expounded in the Hegelian philosophy. Whereas Hegel explained the dialectical movement of mind from one level of intellectual awareness to another through the process of thinking, Kierkegaard described the progressive actualisation of the individual's existence as an act of will, an act of choice. For Kierkegaard, the movement from one level to another is not a conceptual act as in Hegel but is an act of personal commitment.

2.2.5.1 The Aesthetic Stage

The first stage, as described by Kierkegaard, is the aesthetic stage. In this stage, a person follows impulses and emotions, being largely guided by sensory experiences. There is little concern for universal moral standards or commitment to any particular religious belief. The individual is motivated by the desire to enjoy the widest variety of sensual pleasures. The only principle that could limit a person is their own taste. They resent everything that would restrict their freedom to choose.

According to Kierkegaard, every person faces two possibilities: one of sensuousness and the other of spirit. Sensuousness is compared to a cellar, and spirit to a building. The aesthetic individual prefers to dwell in the cellar. However, when the individual becomes aware of these two possibilities and realises that they are living in the cellar rather than the building, an inner conflict arises. The person then recognises that they have, until now, been rejecting their authentic or true existence. As a result, a sense of anxiety and despair develops. The individual now faces an either/or situation: either remain at the aesthetic level or move to the next stage. Kierkegaard pointed out that this transition occurs not through thought alone,

- Kierkegaard explained three stages in life which mark the movement of an individual from one level of existence to another

- In the aesthetic stage, an individual follows theirimpulses and emotions

- Despair in the aesthetic stage leads to the ethical stage

but through a decision - an act of will. The change takes place in the form of a commitment.

2.2.5.2 The Ethical Stage

The second stage is the ethical stage. As opposed to the aesthetic, individual who recognises no universal standards but only follows their taste, the ethical individual acknowledges and accepts certain rules of conduct formulated by human reason. The ethical individual's life is given form and consistency by the moral rules they accept. The individual welcomes the limitations imposed on their life with the responsibility demanded by the rules. Kierkegaard distinguished between the aesthetic level and the ethical level by pointing out the difference in the attitude towards sexual behaviour. The aesthetic individual yields to their impulses whenever and wherever they feel an attraction.On the other hand, the ethical individual accepts the obligations of marriage prescribed by human reason. An individual at the ethical level considers the failure to meet moral obligations as the product of ignorance or weakness.

However, the ethical individual gradually realises that they are incapable of fulfilling the moral obligations. They violate the laws and experience the sense of guilt. This sense of sin or guilt places before the individual a new either/or. The situation is that they should either remain at the ethical level or try hard to fulfil the obligations or respond to the new awareness. Kierkegaard defined this awareness as the awareness of human finitude. The individual becomes aware of their limitations as a human being and resorts to faith in God as the source of their strength.

2.2.5.3 The Religious Stage

The third stage is the religious stage. The transition from the ethical to the religious is different as compared to the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical. In the latter case, the movement is towards certain moral laws that are clearly present to the individual as the expressions of human reason. However, in the former, there is no such rational clarity about the destination. God is not an object of human reason. There is no objective, rational knowledge about the relationship between the individual and God. As mentioned earlier, the individual realises their finitude and wants to transform themselves to the

- In the ethical stage, an individual accepts moral laws and obligations

- Failure to meet the obligations leads to the realisation of the limitations of human existence

- Transition from the ethical level to the religious level is possible only through a leap of faith

next level. But they are not offered with a clear picture of the next level. The individual feels as if they are standing on one side of an abyss. The individual is not satisfied staying there. They should take a leap to the other side. But what is there on the other side is not clearly visible to the individual, and thus they become reluctant to take the leap. Kierkegaard stated that with the absence of rational knowledge about one's personal relation to God, the only thing to rely upon is faith. Our relation to God becomes evident only in our subjectivity. The truth or knowledge that motivates the individual confronting objective uncertainty at the wedge of the ethical level to take the leap is the inner truth or subjective knowledge. Hence, the transition from the ethical level to the religious level happens through a leap of faith.

Kierkegaard pointed to the Biblical story of Abraham to explain the leap of faith. God ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son. Abraham thus got into a situation where he had to choose either to sacrifice his own son against the moral laws set by reason so that he could obey God, or to refrain from fulfilling God's order by not killing his son. Abraham did not have an objective certainty about the consequences of obeying God's order. But still, he chose to perform the act by resorting to his subjectivity, his inner faith in the relationship with God. For Kierkegaard, to relate oneself to God is of higher value than to relate oneself to any other law or the collectives like race, church, etc. that work on such laws.

- Kierkegaard pointed to the Biblical story of Abraham to explain the leap of faith

Kierkegaard found that the Christian theology of his time was permeated by rational thought. He felt that the doctrines and rituals of institutionalised Christianity meant to be followed or observed by every so-called Christian believer actually alienate one further from his true self. Kierkegaard claimed that being immersed in a crowd weakens the individual's sense of responsibility by reducing it to a mere fraction. It dilutes the self of an individual. Thus, contrary to the Christian faith that following the guidelines of the established church could help an individual to derive meaning and purpose for their existence, Kierkegaard argued that it actually deprives an individual of their genuine existence. Kierkegaard stressed that God cannot be discovered by rational inquiry and abstract demonstration but through a leap of faith. Religion is not in what one reasons about, but in how one lives it. It is a matter of inward choice. One becomes a true Christian not by following the conventional system of habits centred around the church, but through constant

- Kierkegaard criticised the then-prevalent practices of institutionalised Christianity

and conscious inner striving. The truth is an individual matter, not a collective one.

Hence, in Kierkegaard's view, an individual arrives at his authentic existence (which connects themselves with God) not through intellectual transformations, but through a continuous process of choice and subjective faith in the existential situations that present him a variety of either/or.

Summarized Overview

Søren Kierkegaard is recognised as the father of existentialism. He undertook a campaign against the belief systems prevalent in the 19th century – the established church and the systematic philosophy of Hegel. Contrary to the thought that advocated for objectivity and prioritised the system over the individual, Kierkegaard emphasised the importance of individual existence. Kierkegaard's writings outlined the main issues that became the grounds of existentialism.

Kierkegaard's notion of existence is better described in the distinction he made between a spectator and an actor. He argues that only the actor is involved in existence. The spectator is compared to inert and inactive things for whom the term existence does not suit. Kierkegaard asserted that the highest truth is subjectivity. The discovery of our subjective truths concretises and intensifies our existence. Kierkegaard explained three stages in life which mark the movement of an individual from one level of existence to another. The three stages are aesthetic, ethical, and religious. In the aesthetic stage, an individual follows their impulses and emotions. Despair in the aesthetic stage leads to the ethical stage. The ethical stage is characterised by the acceptance of moral laws and obligations. However, the failure to meet the obligations leads to the realisation of the limitations of human existence and the individual resorts to faith in God as the source of his strength. This marks the religious stage. Transition from the ethical level to the religious level is possible only through a leap of faith over the abyss of objective uncertainty. Kierkegaard described the progressive actualisation of the individual existence as an act of will, an act of choice.

Self-Assessment

1. Outline the features of Kierkegaard's notion of existence.

2. Shed light on the subjectivity of truth.

3. Give a brief account of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious stages in life.

4. What do you mean by the leap of faith?

Assignments

1. How does Kierkegaard object to the rational systems of thought?
2. The existing individual, according to Kierkegaard, is an actor and not a mere spectator. Explain.
3. Comment upon the subjectivity of truth endorsed by Kierkegaard.
4. Describe the three stages in life envisaged by Kierkegaard.

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UNIT 3
Nietzsche

Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of this unit, the learner will be able to :

- examine the central claims of moral nihilism and assess their implications for ethical theory and moral judgment
- analyse Nietzsche's notion of the Will to Power
- differentiate between master morality and slave morality
- evaluate Nietzsche's conception of the over man

Background

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) is considered one of the forerunners of existentialism along with Kierkegaard. He believed that a philosopher must pay more attention to the questions of human values and address immediate human problems rather than focusing on abstract systems. The nature of values that guide human beings was the core problem of all his works. He challenged the grounds of the morality dominant in the Western tradition. Nietzsche is considered an existentialist for his emphasis on the individual over the herd. He criticised all belief systems that make man a weak soul who laments and cries for support. Nietzsche's conception of the over man who affirms and embraces life with the Will to Power, is a model for the authentic existence of a human being. This unit briefly discusses a few of the notable ideas shared by Nietzsche.

Keywords

Nihilism, Master morality, Slave morality, Revaluation of values, Overman

2.3.1 Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) was a German philosopher from the later half of the nineteenth century. He is considered one of the forerunners of existentialism along with Kierkegaard.

An outline of Nietzsche's attitude can be given using the following views he adhered to. Nietzsche argued that all systematic philosophies presuppose some self-evident truths upon which the system is built. Thus, such philosophies are not honest and lack integrity. Nietzsche believed that honest thought must challenge everything without fear and reluctance. The primary business of a philosopher is to question all the so-called self-evident propositions. The philosopher should be willing to declare himself against his own previous opinions if needed. Hence, all errors should be understood as resulting from the fear of questioning too far. Nietzsche also believed that a philosopher must pay more attention to the questions of human values and address immediate human problems rather than focusing on abstract systems. The philosopher should have the attitude of fresh experimentation. He should be free from the dominant values of his culture. Nietzsche was thus against system building. He questioned all hitherto developed thought systems without any sympathy.

The nature of values was the core problem of all works of Nietzsche. He challenged the foundations of traditional morality and aimed at a new level of spiritual redemption for the Western civilisation that got ripped off its value sources. He advocated for the importance of the individual against the herd. He endorsed the idea of the affirmation of life against all theories that drained the expansive energies of human nature. Nietzsche's thinking and writing influenced a broad range of fields, including psychology, literature, spirituality, art, and music. It is said that even the Nazis appropriated and twisted some of his ideas to suit their purposes.

A few of the major works of Nietzsche are The Gay Science (also known as The Joyful Wisdom, 1882), Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1883), Beyond Good and Evil (1886), and On the Genealogy of Morality (1887). This unit covers a few of the important ideas of Nietzsche.

- Nietzsche is considered one of the forerunners of existentialism

- Nietzsche was against system building, and he questioned all systems of thought

- The nature of values was the core problem for Nietzsche

2.3.2 Nihilism

Nihilism, as made famous by Nietzsche, is the thesis that there is nothing of ultimate value. In its broader version, it accounts for an epistemological nihilism,which states that all sorts of beliefs lack ultimate justification. For Nietzsche, it is a mistaken view that philosophy is the search for truth. There is no truth as such. It is that something is held to be true for practical concerns. Accordingly, Nietzsche argues that there are no facts but interpretations, and truth is that interpretation without which we could not live. There is a variety of errors among which some are found productive in life and thus labelled as truths. According to Nietzsche, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics consist of interpretations whose value is in their practicality. We see Nietzsche attacking the distinction between the world of appearance and the real world held by a long tradition of philosophers. In Nietzsche's words, "the apparent world is the only one; the 'real world' is merely added by a lie". He pointed out that even philosophers like Kant, who sought to arrive at certainty through the method of critique, failed to question far enough and resorted to certain self-evident propositions or postulates.

Moral nihilism is a narrow version of nihilism proper, that there is no moral principle that can be ultimately justified. It is the rejection of a long tradition of thought in which certain principles were thought to be universally valid and binding on all rational beings. Thus, according to Nietzsche, there are no moral facts, and the acceptance of a moral principle is based on its relevance to our lives. Dishonesty is no less valuable than honesty. The Ten Commandments have no more validity than their opposites. The tradition just upheld certain values which it found useful.

2.3.3 Death of God

We have seen how Kierkegaard rejected objective values grounded in rationality. He criticised the established norms of the church. But he resorted to the importance of subjective truths and inner faith towards God. However, what we see in Nietzsche is the death of God. In his work titled *The Gay Science* (also known as The Joyful Wisdom), Nietzsche wrote "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him", as the words spoken by a madman at the marketplace. The same idea is mentioned by Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, too. The phrase "God is dead" does not mean the death or non-

- Nihilism is the thesis that there is nothing of ultimate value

- Moral nihilism holds that no moral principle can be ultimately justified

- By "death of God", Nietzsche implied the decline in the belief in God

existence of a kind of being called God that existed before. The argument is not about atheism either. What Nietzsche meant was the decline in the belief in God with the advent of science and the attack on religion. Nietzsche just wanted to point out that the belief in God has become irrelevant. It is no longer possible to ground morality in God.

2.3.4 Will to Power

According to Nietzsche, it is unrealistic to assume that human nature is of only one kind and to establish one set of norms to guide humanity. However, there is one thing that characterises all human beings – the drive to dominate, namely the Will to Power. It is not merely the will to survive under the Darwinian theory. It is an inner drive to express and affirm all of one's powers. In Nietzsche's words, "the strongest and highest Will to Life does not find expression in a miserable struggle for existence, but in a Will to War, a Will to Power, a Will to Overpower!"This implies that the proposal of a universal value to be sought is a denial of the fullest expression of individuals. It is, in fact, Nietzsche's grand hypothesis that the Will to Power is expressing itself everywhere and in everything. His entire moral philosophy is centred upon this hypothesis.Nietzsche's distinction between master morality and slave morality, his criticism of Christian beliefs, his proposal for are valuation of values, and his concept of the overman, which we will discuss briefly in the following sections, are all based on the Will to Power.

- Will to Power is the inner principle that guides human beings

2.3.5 Master Morality and Slave Morality

Nietzsche claimed that there has been a twofold history of good and evil. Two versions of morality have developed accordingly – master morality and slave morality. In the master morality, "good" means "noble" or being related to a soul of high calibre. Noble people do not look for external sources for values but create and determine the values themselves. They act out of the feeling of power. They help those who are suffering, not out of pity but out of an impulse generated by an abundance of power. They have high regard for all forms of power and take pleasure in subjecting themselves to rigour and toughness. Whatever is severe and hard is revered by them. This version of morality is that of the masters, said Nietzsche.

- Master morality is the morality of strong souls

On the other hand, slave morality originates with the individuals who are weak, i.e., the oppressed and the abused.

According to it, "good" stands for all those qualities that serve the problems of the suffering people. It endorses qualities such as sympathy, a warm heart, patience, kindness, humility, friendliness, etc. The slave morality refers to whatever is beneficial to the weak and powerless people. It is the morality of the slaves.

- Slave morality is the morality of the weak souls

Nietzsche remarked that the deep resentment experienced by weak people made them look at the virtues of the masters, the noble persons, as evil. The morality of the slaves or the herd mentality overcame the master morality by succeeding in describing the values of the noble and powerful people as vices and that of the weak people as virtues. The positive affirmation of life that characterises master morality was made to appear as evil. The noble people had immense psychic strength. But their natural impulse to exert aggression is undermined by the weak people through psychic defences. Exercising and expressing one's own power becomes evil in slave morality, whereas the same is considered good in master morality. Exploitation, according to Nietzsche, is not some depraved act. It does not belong to an imperfect society. It is the consequence of the intrinsic Will to Power. It is the truest expression of the inner strength of human beings. The slave morality, however, was represented the same as evil, a symbol of imperfection.

- Herd mentality of the weak souls misrepresented the virtues of the strong souls as vices

The weak people, in a way, introduced new values and new ideals like peace and equality as fundamental principles of the society. However, cruelty is not an evil when viewed from the position of master morality, said Nietzsche. It refers simply to the basic Will to Power. It is the natural expression of strength. Equality is impossible when people actually have different sets of qualities. Enforcing equality would thus only mean the levelling down of all qualities to the level of the herd or the weak. Nietzsche hence convicted slave morality of developing a negative attitude towards the most natural drives of humanity. The slave morality symbolises the will to deny life.

- Weak souls introduced new values and ideals that bear a negative attitude towards life

Nietzsche criticised the dominant moral views in the Western tradition. He felt that Western morality has always exalted the mediocre values of the slaves, the "herd", as something high and capable of being the normative standard for all individuals. Nietzsche held that Christianity and Judaism played a huge role in structuring a dishonest morality in Europe. It is dishonest in the sense that it goes against the natural impulses rooted in the Will to Power. Nietzsche argued that Christianity contradicts

- The slave morality of Christianity and Judaism dominated the Western tradition

nature when it endorses love for the enemy, whereas the natural impulse is to hate the enemy. Also, making a person place the love for God before the love for everything else is another form of life-denial. All the vital energies of a person get diluted in their thinking of God.Nietzsche contends that Christianity made people hate all earthly things.

2.3.6 Revaluation of Values

Nietzsche advocated for a revaluation of values. By this, he did not mean the creation of a new set of values. He demanded a rejection of the dominant values developed on the grounds of slave morality. He wanted to reverse the value system in favour of humanity's original and deepest nature – the Will to Power. Whatever the modern man considers as good is just a disguised form of weakness. Once the disguise is removed, true values would emerge. Nietzsche is of the opinion that modern morality is the result of a revaluation of values that happened long ago, whereby the noble qualities were labelled as vices and the weak qualities became the good ones. Nietzsche called for a further revaluation of values to go back to the level where values are built on the truest nature of humanity. Nietzsche envisioned a day when individuals would go beyond good and evil in the sense of rising above the dominant herd morality of their times.

- Nietzsche advocated for the revaluation of values to embrace the true nature of humanity

2.3.7 The Overman

One of the prominent assertions of Nietzsche is that man is something to be surpassed. He conceived of a higher kind of being named Overman or Übermensch,for whom man would be a laughing-stock or painful embarrassment as the ape was to man. Nietzsche declared that "Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman-a rope over an abyss". It would be through the revaluation of values that the emergence of the new kind of individual happens.It should be noted that Nietzsche did not believe in the collective development of humanity to a higher level. What would happen, according to him, is the emergence of some exceptional men who show the courage to go beyond all existing values and respond freely to their true and honest nature.

- Nietzsche conceived of the overman as a higher stage in the evolution of man

Nietzsche's conception of the overman is also based on his views on the Will to Power. The sole guiding principle for the overman will be the Will to Power. The overman would remain faithful to the world he lives in. There would be no doubt

about the reality of the present world. There would be no belief in other worldly notions like the soul, God, immortality, and heaven. Such beliefs are symptoms of suffering and sickness in life. The overman would stand for the spontaneous affirmation of life. According to the principle of eternal recurrence that Nietzsche conceived of, this very world and the life situations would endlessly recur. It would not be easy for an ordinary man to think about experiencing all those moments of despair and pain again and again. But the overman would say a big, joyous Yes to the endless experiencing of this very life.

The overman would represent the highest level of development. He would be an embodiment of the fullest expression of physical, intellectual, and emotional strength. He would create his own values. He would be the poet of his life. The overman would love himself than anything else. This selfishness, as Nietzsche conceived, is a healthy selfishness that develops in a powerful soul. For Nietzsche, the self-enjoyment of such powerful men is itself a virtue. The overman would not be a tyrant. He would be the passionate person who has the passions under his control. Finally,the overman would be conscious of his worth. He would understand how he is different from other individuals.

Summarized Overview

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) is considered one of the forerunners of existentialism along with Kierkegaard. He was against system building, and he questioned all systems of thought. He advocated a nihilist standpoint as he believed that no proposition could be universally justified. Nietzsche argued that metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics consist of interpretations whose value is in their practicality. He applied the same attitude to morality and asserted that nomoral principle can be ultimately justified. The acceptance of a moral principle is based on its relevance to our lives. Nietzsche wrote about the death of God, by which he meant the decline in the belief in God with the advent of science and the attack on religion.

According to Nietzsche, the Will to Power is what guides human nature. Master morality is the morality of strong souls who endorse the Will to Power. Slave morality is that of the weak souls for whom the expression of power is evil. Nietzsche claimed that the dominant morality in the Western tradition,grounded in Christianity and Judaism,is that of the weak mentality. He advocated for a revaluation of values that would embrace the true nature of humanity. Nietzsche conceived of the overman who belongs to a higher stage in the evolution of humanity. The overman is guided by the Will to Power and showcases a life-affirming attitude.

Self-Assessment

1. Elaborate upon Nietzsche's assertion that God is dead.

2. Comment upon the negative attitude towards life expressed in slave morality.

3. Why did Nietzsche feel the need for a revaluation of values?

4. How does an overman differ from an ordinary man?

Assignments

1. Discuss the standpoint of moral nihilism as endorsed by Nietzsche.

2. What did Nietzsche mean by the death of God?

3. Define the principle of Will to Power.

4. Distinguish between master morality and slave morality.

5. Describe the characteristics of the overman as conceived by Nietzsche.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

UNIT 4
Sartre

Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of this unit, the learner will be able to;

- understand the problem of essence and existence
- differentiate between the existence of unconscious things and conscious beings
- evaluate Sartre's conception of freedom and responsibility
- recognise instances of self-deception in life situations

Background

Jean-Paul Sartre was a French philosopher and playwright who popularised existentialism in the twentieth century. We see in Sartre the ideas of several Continental philosophers like Descartes, Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger being reinterpreted and reworked to develop a philosophy of existentialism. "Existence precedes essence," "Man is condemned to be free," and "A man is always free to be a traitor or not" are some of Sartre's notable claims. Sartre argued that man first exists and only then becomes something. Man is endowed with total freedom to make choices according to his will, independent of any influence from religion or societal norms. Sartre was against all kinds of determinism. He is known for his claim that the unlimited freedom with which an individual is endowed seems like a burden for oneself. He pointed out that individuals often try to escape the dreadful freedom and relieve themselves from the burden of responsibility by resorting to a bad faith with which they pretend themselves as satisfied in their life situations as if they are destined to be so. This unit provides an overview of the major contributions of Sartre, which embody the framework of modern existentialist thought.

Keywords

Existence, Essence, Being-in-itself, Being-for-itself, Nothingness, Freedom, Bad Faith

2.4.1 Introduction

Even though existentialism draws upon a tradition that dates back to the contributions of Kierkegaard in the 19th century, it was with the French philosopher and playwright Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980) that existentialism gained its recognition as a movement in the twentieth century. Sartre lucidly explained with popular appeal the ideas in the technical writings of thinkers like Martin Heidegger. He wrote novels and short stories in a captivating style to convey existential ideas to the common people.

Sartre was influenced by Descartes' insistence that philosophy should begin with the absolute certainty of one's own consciousness. However, he endorsed Husserl's denial of the Cartesian definition of the cogito as a substance with the essential property of thought. From Husserl's phenomenology, Sartre took the notion of intentionality that explains consciousness as always consciousness of something. Heidegger was the major source for Sartre. The findings of Heidegger's existential analytic, such as being-in-the-world, thrownness, facticity, projection, anxiety, nothingness, authentic and inauthentic existence, etc.,played a huge role in shaping Sartre's views. Hegel's distinction between being-in-itself and being-for-itself, and the concept of alienation, also attracted the attention of Sartre. Moreover, the forerunners of existentialism, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, had an impact on Sartre. Kierkegaard's emphasis on the individual existence against the Hegelian essence and Nietzsche's concept of the death of God provided fruitful insights for Sartre. All the above ideas drawn from the Continental tradition converged in reinterpreted, revised, and reworked forms in Sartre's philosophy.

Sartre shared his initial reflections on existence in the novel *Nausea*, published in 1938. Through a first-person account in the form of a diary of the principal character in the novel, Sartre described a feeling of nausea that one experiences when his mind slips from the normal states and apprehends the world in a new way, where even the bare existence of a stone confronts him. Sartre's major work,in which he systematically expressed his philosophical viewpoint,is the essay *Being and Nothingness* published in 1943. He employed in it the method of phenomenology to study being as it appears to human

- Sartre popularised existentialism in the twentieth century

- Sartre was influenced by the ideas of his predecessors in the Continental tradition

- Sartre shared his existential insights initially through the novel *Nausea* and later through the work *Being and Nothingness*

consciousness. Sartre later published a sequel to this in the name of *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in 1960. Sartre was deeply influenced by Marx's call upon philosophers to change the world rather than merely attempting to understand it. He endorsed Marxism and was a political activist. But he never actually became a member of the Communist Party.

It is said that Sartre was the first self-proclaimed existentialist who proudly imparted existentialist ideas to the world. He argued that man first exists and only then becomes something. Sartre rejected all sorts of determinism and argued that man is endowed with total freedom to make choices according to his will, independent of any influence from religion or societal norms. Man feels as if thrown into this world but is capable of making situations meaningful as he wishes. Man can shape his life on his own within the web of possibilities. Sartre is known for his claim that the unlimited freedom with which an individual is endowed seems like a burden for oneself. He pointed out that individuals often try to escape the dreadful freedom and relieve themselves from the burden of responsibility by resorting to a bad faith with which they pretend themselves as satisfied in their life situations as if they are destined to be so.

- Sartre was the first self-proclaimed existentialist who proudly imparted existentialist ideas to the world

2.4.2 Existence Precedes Essence

'Existence precedes essence' is a prominent dictum attributed to Sartre. Sartre argues that we cannot explain the nature of human existence as essentially occupying certain properties or destined to be something. We can do so about things like a manufactured table. We know that a table is made by a carpenter who already has the conception of the table in his mind, which includes how it should be made and for what purpose it is made. This implies that even before the table is made or comes into its actual existence, we can conceive of it as being the product of a definite process and as having definite properties and purpose. In this manner, the essence of the table precedes its existence. However, Sartre points out that with respect to a human being, we cannot conceive of such essences that precede his existence.

- The essence of a thing like a table precedes its existence

There have been religions that believed in a creator God who has the conception of humanity in his mind and knows what He is creating before creating an individual human being. According to such views, each human being is the actualisation or realisation of the pre-existing conception in God's mind.

However, with the decline of religion, these views have been questioned. There have also been philosophers who endorsed a universal conception of human nature without resorting to religion. For them, all humans, irrespective of their geographical, physical, and psychological differences, share some common essence and purpose that precedes their concrete existence. Sartre takes up an atheistic position and denies both the religious and non-religious views on the essence of human existence. Any such definition of human existence cannot be given, as there is no way it could be thought out in advance as a conception in some mind (as the existence of God is also rejected). Sartre thus declares that human beings first of all exist and then gain some essence in the process of existing. We exist first, confront ourselves with various experiences in the world, and define ourselves afterwards in the process of living. We are what we make of ourselves. No essence precedes human existence.

- Human beings exist first and then define themselves in the process of living

2.4.3 Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself

Sartre distinguishes between two modes of existence, which he calls being-in-itself and being-for-itself.

Being-in-itself (en-soi) is the nature of things like stones, trees, etc. Such things are subject to causal laws. They are determined to be what they are. They lack consciousness and are never aware of other things. They simply exist solidly as themselves, nothing more, nothing less. They have some fixed essence that precedes their existence. They cannot go beyond their essential nature.

- Being-in-itself is determined to be what they are

On the other hand, being-for-itself (pour-soi) is a being that is conscious of other things as well as of itself as conscious of them. It is always a conscious subject and never an object. There is no fixed essence for such a being. It is free to choose its essence. It's being is its freedom. It can stop being what it is now and explore new possibilities. It is responsible for its becoming. Sartre considers human existence as being-for-itself. But in many situations, a human being lives his life like that of a being-in-itself, as if his life is pre-defined and fixed. He does not exercise his freedom to become what he is not. He finds excuses to state that his life has already been somehow destined to be in a certain way and evades responsibility. Sartre calls this bad faith. We will discuss it later in this unit.

- Being-for-itself is free to choose its way of being

2.4.4 Nothingness

Sartre brings to light the concept of nothingness, which he relates to the being-for-itself or the conscious beings. This characteristic of nothingness makes a conscious being different from the causally determined unconscious things.

In the realm of being-in-itself, Sartre claims that there is no awareness of gaps or possibilities. There are no questions or doubts. A stone does not feel a gap in itself. It does not raise any doubt or ask any question. It is not capable of exploring other possibilities of existing. However, a human being is a conscious subject that can separate itself from its objects. He is aware of his difference from the unconscious entities. He can sense gaps or the absence of something in his existence. He can raise doubt and ask questions. He is able to negate what he is now and become what he is not.

Sartre remarks that all these distinctive characteristics of the conscious being point towards a nothingness. When we are aware of some gaps in us or of something that we lack, Sartre says that we are conscious of what is not present, what is not the case, and what is not actual. When we change our way of living to explore new dimensions, we negate what is at present and embrace what we are not at present. When we ask questions like "Is Socrates in the house?", we are conscious of the possibility of his not being there. Sartre even says that the basis of all sorts of questioning, all philosophical and scientific inquiries, is negation or nothingness. The questioner detaches or withdraws himself from the world of things and introduces a void or gap between his consciousness and the realm of things. Sartre hence concludes that human beings as conscious subjects are conscious of the negation of what is and thus bring negation or nothingness to the world. In his words, "Man presents himself as a being who causes nothingness to arise in the world". Man secretes his own nothingness.

2.4.5 Freedom and Responsibility

The capacity of conscious subjects to raise doubts, to sense absence, to say No to what is the case, to imagine possibilities which are not present etc.,implies that they are free to do so. Sartre claims that we are free to think of what we are not now, our future possibilities. We have the freedom to think of moving to a new profession that we are not engaged in now, and of changing our personality or appearance to some other form.

- Nothingness is exclusively related to conscious subjects

- A human being is capable of sensing gaps, asking questions, and negating what he is

- Human beings as conscious subjects cause negation or nothingness to arise

- Power to negate implies freedom

According to Sartre, to be a conscious being is to be free. He says, "there is no difference between the being of a man and his being-free."

Let us now look at some implications of the realisation that consciousness is totally free, undetermined, and spontaneous, as emphasised by Sartre. Since we are all conscious beings and thus free, we are not determined by our past. What we are now is not determined by what we were in the past. Between our present and past versions, there is a gap, there is a void, there is nothingness. We are free from our past. Sartre gives the example of a gambler who one day takes a resolution that he will not gamble any more. But the very next day, when he is at the gambling place, he is still free to choose to gamble or not. His past resolution does not determine what he could do at the moment. We can think of other examples as well. We all might have some addictions towards something. We might decide one day that we will not resort to it again. However, we see that each day when we confront the same thing, we are free to fall for the temptation or to stay away from the same. We are free from our past decisions and thoughts. We must choose our way at each moment.

Sartre rejects popular forms of determinism. He is against the Freudian view that our present states are determined by the unconscious forces of previous psychological experiences. He is against the Marxian view that an individual is determined by the mode of production and class conflicts. Sartre even rejects the scientific view that human beings are causally determined like the being-in-itself. However, we should carefully understand what Sartre means by this. He in fact, says that various contingent circumstances in our life,which he terms facticity, might be determined biologically, psychologically, socially or economically. But as free conscious beings, we can choose the meaning that each of such circumstances has for us. We can transform our facticity into a certain meaningful situation as per our choice. For example, a handicapped person who has biological constraints is still free to accept the condition and construct from it a new situation for himself with the meanings he chooses.According to Sartre, we all live in the situations we structure.

Now, it is implied that as we are totally free conscious beings, we alone are responsible for the way we live. We cannot say that the circumstances in which we were born and brought

- Consciousness is totally free, undetermined, and spontaneous

- Conscious beings choose what meaning each circumstance has for them

up made us the way we are now. Our life is our responsibility. There is nothing else to depend on or blame upon – no God, no religious doctrines, no philosophical theories or scientific laws. There is nothingness in life and the world. We are the ones who give meaning to the facts around us. It is a stunning realisation that we are totally responsible for our choices – the way we are, and we act.

A famous assertion of Sartre is thus: "A man is always free to be a traitor or not". Such unlimited freedom to shape our lives no more seems a boon. It is dreadful. It is a burden. We realise that we are actually condemned to be free and cannot cease to be so. This results in anguish and dizziness.

2.4.6 Bad Faith

Sartre describes that we might experience anxiety when we realise that we are solely responsible for our life. We might find it hard to endure such a total responsibility. We might try to escape from this endless choosing of the way we act. We might wish not to get dissatisfied in the present state, not to be aware of what we lack, not to pursue other possibilities, but to become mere being-in-itself, like stones or trees. The escape from freedom and responsibility by pretending that circumstances are unavoidable or necessary and thus out of our control is what Sartre terms bad faith (mauvaisefoi).

Sartre gives several examples of bad faith. Consider a woman on her first date with a man. She decides to stay indifferent when the man makes a move to take her hand. She avoids making a decision and remains as if she has not noticed his act. Sartre points out that the woman now pretends that her hand is a thing separate from her, and that she is not responsible for what is going on. A stone might not be able to decide whether or not to stay touched by a person. But the woman is not so. However, she pretends to be a thing like stone in this case. Think about a waiter in the café who escapes from exploring other possibilities in his life as a conscious being. He strives every day to behave in a way that gets appreciated by society. He pretends as if he is destined to be a waiter and finds excuses for not choosing otherwise. According to Sartre, the woman and the waiter are in bad faith, and so is a homosexual who thinks that he became so by nature and is destined to live like that.

- Human beings are totally responsible for the choices they make

- Human beings are condemned to be free

- Bad faith is the escape from the freedom and responsibility of one's thoughts and actions

- Sartre explains bad faith with examples where individuals pretend like things with no control over the situations

Sartre remarks that this running away from responsibility and pretending to look at oneself as a being-in-itself is self-deception. It is the lie one tells oneself. In Sartre's words, it is a "lie in the soul". One allows oneself to be alienated from the true self as a free conscious subject. It is an inauthentic way of existence.

Summarized Overview

Jean-Paul Sartre was a French philosopher and playwright who popularised existentialism in the twentieth century. We see in Sartre the ideas of several Continental philosophers like Descartes, Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger being reinterpreted and reworked to develop a philosophy of existentialism.

'Existence precedes essence' is a prominent dictum attributed to Sartre. Sartre argues that we cannot explain the nature of human existence as essentially occupying certain properties or destined to be something. We exist first, confront ourselves with various experiences in the world, and define ourselves afterwards in the process of living. We are what we make of ourselves. No essence precedes human existence. Sartre distinguishes between two modes of existence, which he calls being-in-itself and being-for-itself. Being-in-itself is determined to be what they are. Being-for-itself is the being of a conscious subject that is free to choose its way of being.

Human beings are capable of sensing gaps, asking questions, and negating what they are at present. As conscious subjects, they cause negation or nothingness to arise. The capacity of conscious subjects to raise doubts, to sense absence, to say No to what is the case, to imagine possibilities which are not present etc., implies that they are free to do so. Consciousness is totally free, undetermined, and spontaneous. Since we are all conscious beings and thus free, we are not determined by our past. What we are now is not determined by what we were in the past. Sartre rejects all sorts of determinism. Various contingent circumstances in our life, which he terms facticity, might be determined biologically, psychologically, socially or economically. But as free conscious beings, we transform our facticity into a certain meaningful situation as per our choice. Sartre is known for his claim that the unlimited freedom with which an individual is endowed seems like a burden for oneself. He pointed out that individuals often try to escape the dreadful freedom and relieve themselves from the burden of responsibility by resorting to a bad faith with which they pretend themselves as satisfied in their life situations as if they are destined to be so.

Self-Assessment

1. Explain the dictum "existence precedes essence".
2. How does being-for-itself differ from being-in-itself?
3. What does Sartre mean by nothingness?
4. Give a brief account of Sartre's views on freedom and responsibility.
5. What is bad faith according to Sartre?

Assignments

1. Elaborate upon Sartre's assertion that existence precedes essence.
2. Differentiate between being-in-itself and being-for-itself.
3. Explain nothingness as discussed by Sartre.
4. Man is condemned to be free. Comment.
5. Analyse bad faith with examples.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

BLOCK 3
Post-Structuralism

UNIT 1
Structuralism of Saussure and Deconstructionism of Derrida

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand Ferdinand de Saussure's revolutionary approach to the study of language

- evaluate the emergence and development of structuralism

- comprehend Jacques Derrida's method of deconstruction

- apply the method of deconstruction and to analyze implicit assumptions within various social institutions

Background

Structuralism and post-structuralism successively flourished in the second half of the twentieth century. Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics which demonstrates language as a system of differences, effects a shift in the perception of social and cultural phenomena. The resulting structuralist movement uncovers the deep, universal structures underlying language, culture, and social systems, and replaces existentialism as the chief current in European philosophy in the 1950s and 1960s. Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, etc., are the major figures in the movement. Later, post-structuralism emerges as a response to and a critique of structuralism. While the structuralist approach attempts to locate stable patterns, the post-structuralist method challenges this assumption of stability. It emphasises the fluid, fragmented, and ever-changing nature of meaning and identity and, as a result, revolutionises the study of language, subjectivity, power, and society. Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004) and Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984) are two important figures in the post-structuralist trend that this block covers. The first unit of this block introduces structuralism through a brief account of Saussure's contribution to the study of language. Later, Derrida's deconstruction which exposes the flaws in the hierarchical model of traditional thought, will be discussed.

Discussion

3.1.1 Introduction to Structuralism

Structuralism is fundamentally a worldview that is concerned with the perception and description of structures. It is the result of a momentous historic shift in the nature of perception, which finally crystallised in the early 20th century in the field of physical sciences. It emerges as a mode of thought which stands against the atomistic, empiricist, and behaviouristic modes of thought that preceded it. It advocates that the world is not made up of independently existing objects with concrete features that can be perceived clearly and individually. Rather, reality is made up of relationships. The nature of any element in a given situation has no significance by itself. It is the relationship to all other elements involved in that situation which determines the nature of the element. The value of an entity cannot be understood unless and until it is viewed within the structure of which it forms a part.

- Structuralism advocates that the world is not made up of independently existing objects, but relationships

This shift in perception spreads to other fields, and we see the development of structuralism in France in the 1950s and the 1960s as a new approach to the study of social phenomena. Structuralism is concerned with the permanent structures behind or beneath what appear to us as isolated things. We would thus see the disappearance of the subject, which gets absorbed into the general structure. Structuralism is, in many respects, opposed to the existentialism of Sartre that preceded it in the intellectual scene of Europe. It also stands against any other form of humanism that emphasises the individual.

- Structuralism developed in France in the 1950s and the 1960s as a new approach to the study of social phenomena

The insights for the structuralist movement were first formulated in the field of linguistics (the science of the systematic study of languages) when Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913) introduced a new way of studying languages. He discussed his ideas in a course in general linguistics that he gave in Geneva in the first decade of the 20th century. However, those ideas were not published in his lifetime. Later, some of the students who attended his lectures as part of the course

- Insights for the structuralist movement were first formulated in the field of linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure

published his ideas together as a book titled *Course in General Linguistics.* Saussure's ideas were revolutionary not only in the study of languages but also in the study of various other fields, which is evident through the efforts of Claude Levi-Strauss (1908 – 2009), Roland Barthes (1915 – 1980), Jacques Lacan (1901 – 1981), and others.

The first part of this unit will familiarise the learners with a brief account of the contributions of Saussure and the main tenets of the broader version of structuralism that emerged therefrom.

3.1.2 Ferdinand de Saussure and Structural Linguistics

Ferdinand de Saussure was a Swiss linguist, semiotician, and philosopher. His ideas made a major impact on the development of linguistics (the science of the study of languages) in the first half of the 20th century. His notions regarding the structural nature of language were later adopted by thinkers like Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes in the study of cultural phenomena and literature. Saussure's major work that is available to us is the *Cours de Linguistique Générale* published posthumously in 1916. The translation of the same done by Wade Baskin is titled *Course in General Linguistics* and was published in 1959. Saussure's revolutionary contribution to the study of language is that he replaced the traditional 'substantive' view of language with a 'relational' one. According to the traditional view, language is an aggregate of separate units called 'words', each of which has a separate meaning attached to it. Saussure insisted that language should be studied not only in terms of its individual parts but also in terms of the relationships between those parts. The main ideas put forward by Saussure with respect to his structuralist view of language are as follows.

- Saussure insisted that language should be studied in terms of the relationships between its constituent parts

3.1.2.1 Synchronic Study of Languages

Languages can be studied along two axes – temporal and spatial. Before the 20th century, linguistics followed a diachronic approach. The term "diachronic" means "through time" (*dia* – through; *khronos* – time). A diachronic approach studies the development or evolution of a phenomenon over time. It examines the changes and processes that the phenomenon undergoes across different periods of time. The diachronic approach in linguistics thus focuses on the historical

- Diachronic approach in linguistics focuses on the historical development and evolution of a language.

development and evolution of a language. It attempts to map the shifts in and the mutations of the language over centuries. For example, tracing the development of the English language from the Old English period to the 21st century is a diachronic study.

However, Saussure insists on a synchronic study of language. A synchronic approach studies a phenomenon as it exists at a given point in time. The synchronic study of language, as Saussure envisages, studies a language statically in its given state at a particular moment of time. It is not about denying the relevance of history, but to overcome the dominance of historical and genetic research in linguistics. The feature of a language that is prone to continuous change is set aside in order to study its permanent constitution. The synchronic analysis, hence, helps to uncover the internal relations among the elements of the language.

- Synchronic approach studies a language statically in its given state at a particular moment of time

A system or structure is formed of elements that co-exist and not of elements that are successive. According to Saussure, a language should be studied as a system, and the linguistic facts should be comprehended as elements in a single system rather than as a temporal accumulation. We might feel it trivial in the 21st-century to demand that a language be studied synchronically as a system. It is because we have been so accustomed to this approach. However, in Saussure's time, this approach went against the prevalent practice of studying language.

- Saussure proposes that language be studied synchronically as a system

3.1.2.2 Langue and Parole

Saussure makes a distinction between *langue* and *parole.* By langue, Saussure means the underlying system – the system of rules – of a language. Langue contains a full catalogue of the elements of a language together with the rules of their combination. The grammar, vocabulary, and lexicon of the language are part of langue. In Saussure's words, langue is "a storehouse filled by the members of a given community through their active use of speaking, a grammatical system that has a potential existence in each brain, or, more specifically, in the brains of a group of individuals". Parole is the actual utterance in speech or in writing. It consists of the individual uses of language at particular times to make statements, ask questions, issue commands, etc.

- Langue is the system of rules of a language

- Parole stands for the individual uses of language at particular times

Langue is the "collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty" . It is passively assimilated by speakers or writers in their individual acts of speech or writing. It makes these individual acts possible, intelligible, and meaningful. Parole is analysed in terms of langue. If parole is the small part of the iceberg that appears above the water, langue is the larger mass that supports it. Saussure compares parole to the individual moves in the game of chess and langue to the rules of the game within which the individual move is understood.

- Parole is analysed in terms of langue

Language, when viewed from the standpoint of parole, would make individual creativity and intention seem important. But when we shift our focus to the implicit rules or langue, then the individual acts are just vehicles for the implementation of the rules. Through langue, a language becomes collective and impersonal as it is not created or altered by any one person. Even if a particular person proposes changes within langue, they must be accepted, acknowledged, and eventually used by other persons in order to become part of the system.

- Langue preserves the impersonal and collective nature of language

3.1.2.3 Sign, Signifier, Signified

According to Saussure, signs are the basic elements of a language system. They are not simple elements, though. As language is always a correlation of sounds with meanings, a sign in a language has two aspects or faces – a phonetic aspect (sound) and a semantic one (meaning). The two aspects depend on each other, and thus the linguistic sign is a unity. Saussure terms the two aspects as *signifier* and *signified*. For example, 'cat' is a sign. The sound produced and heard when we pronounce 'cat' is the signifier. The signified in this context is the concept of a particular domesticated animal (Felis domestica), which is a member of the family Felidae. The sign is always *of* something in the world. The object to which the sign refers is known as *referent*. The actual animal cat is the referent of the sign 'cat.'

- Signifier and signified are the two aspects of a linguistic sign

One important principle that Saussure lays down regarding a linguistic sign is that it is arbitrary. This means that the form of a sign is not determined or inspired by the object or referent of which it is the sign. There is nothing in nature or logic that necessitates the use of the word 'cat' for cats in the English language. The relation between a word and its meaning in a particular language is conventional only. In the various languages of the world, we see various signs that refer to the

- The relation between a sign and what it stands for is arbitrary

same referent. This proves that the signs could have taken any other form than the existing one. However, the arbitrariness of the signs of a language does not in fact allow us to change them freely. The signs are fixed by a consensus that has been gained over the centuries in the history of a language, and individuals are powerless to change them.

- The value of a sign is determined by its position within the system

Structuralism thus remarks that a language is a system in which signs are the constituent elements. Each linguistic sign is essentially a form and not a substance. The forms taken by the linguistic signs are not determined by their referents, but by their position within the system. Signs determine one another as fellow members of one integral system. The value of each sign depends on the multiple internal relations the sign has with other signs of the language.

3.1.2.4 Language as a System of Differences

- Language is a system characterised by differences

Saussure holds that "In the language itself, there are only differences. Even more important than that is the fact that, although in general a difference presupposes positive terms between which the difference holds, in a language there are only differences and no positive terms". There is no idea existing prior to the linguistic system. The system only has phonetic and conceptual differences within it. Thus, a sign is not self-sufficient. It is what it is by virtue of what it is not. It cannot be positively described. It is differential in nature and is thus a negative entity. The word 'bat' is what it is by not being the words 'bad', 'bet', 'but', 'bit', etc.

- The value of each element depends on being different from other elements

Saussure adopts an analogy between language as a system and the game of chess, as games are ideal examples of rule-bound structures. A piece in chess falls under the category of pawn, bishop, horse, or rook not by virtue of what it is independently of the game, i.e., it does not matter whether it is a carved bit of wood, ivory, or something else. The value invested in the piece depends on the rules of the chess game. The piece is entitled to certain powers based on its differentiation from other pieces. A pawn becomes a pawn because of its differences from a bishop or the queen. It is clear that the substantiality of the piece is not important for someone playing chess. We can replace a queen with anything else as long as we do not confuse the object with the other pieces. What matters is the value each piece acquires and the powers it is entitled to. However, this in turn is dependent on the rules of the game, in which the differences

between the pieces, like the pawn, bishop, horse, rook, king, and queen, play a significant role.

The signs of a language are subject to the "play of differences." As mere forms, signs do not have complete stability or complete identity. The changes in one sign, whether it be in the phonetic aspect or the meaning aspect, entail changes in other signs with which it has internal relations within the system. For example, in the English language, we have words like 'tiger,' 'leopard,' 'jaguar, ' and 'cheetah, ' each of which refers to different animal groups. If any of the words are removed or their meaning changed, the others also would change in order to incorporate the references to multiple animal groups.

Saussure talks about two kinds of differences – syntagmatic and paradigmatic (associative). Syntagmatic relation refers to the relationship a word has with the words that precede or follow it horizontally within a sentenceConsider the sentence "Sam moves the pawn". The differential relations that the word 'moves' has with the other two words in the sentence are syntagmatic, i.e., the word 'moves' has a syntagmatic difference from the words 'Sam' and 'pawn.' The differential relations that the word 'moves' has with other words like 'takes,' 'sees,' 'throws', etc., which belong to the same grammatical category of 'moves' and can be substituted, are called associative or paradigmatic relations. Saussure's structuralism claims that language can be displayed as a system of syntagmatic and paradigmatic negative relations of difference.

A sign's value is different from its signification. This can be understood with an example that Saussure provides. The English word *sheep* and the French word *mouton* are two words that are used alike to refer to the same animal. Even though this shows they are identical in what they signify, they are not so in their values. The English language has another word, *mutton,* which is a sign that refers to sheep in the eaten form. However, the French language does not have any such special word. *Mouton* in French is used to refer to both the living animal and its meat. Any sign hence has its value by virtue of its belonging to a particular system wherein the number and forms of other signs become the crucial factors. Structuralism proposes that it is not the world that determines the order of a language. Rather, the language determines the order of the world. No two languages order the world in the same way. There would always be a disparity in translating from one language to another. Two

- Change in any word entails change in other words

- Differences can be syntagmatic and paradigmatic

- The value of a sign is different from its signification

- Translation from one language to another always contains disparity

language communities cannot understand the world in the same manner.

3.1.3 The Structuralist Movement after Saussure

Saussure expresses his idea of the development of a new science of the study of signs known as semiology in the introduction of the *Course in General Linguistics.* Linguistics would become a part of such a science which extends to other fields as well. The social institutions could be treated as systems of signs through this approach. Later, we see that Claude Levi-Strauss takes up the task of treating cultural phenomena as signs and develops what is known as structural anthropology.

According to Levi-Strauss, the structural analysis of language suggests an appropriate model for the analysis of culture at large. He attempts to perceive the constituents of myths, cultural behaviour, kinship relations, ceremonies, rites and rituals, marriage laws, and totemic systems, not as discrete entities but in terms of the relationships they have with each other, which make their structures analogous to the structure of a language. Levi-Strauss conceives kinship terms as elements of meaning that acquire meaning only if they are integrated into systems. He shakes the Western prejudices about myths, primitive culture, incest taboo, etc. Roland Barthes is another thinker who applies the structuralist approach to literary texts and cultural artefacts like fashion, advertisement, and wrestling. Jacques Lacan is said to have applied the notions of Saussurean structural linguistics to the study of mental activity and pathological behaviour.

In a way, Structuralism, as a school of thought that sought to uncover the deep, universal structures underlying language, culture, and social systems, replaced existentialism as the chief current in European philosophy in the 1950s and 1960s.

3.1.4 Introduction to Post-structuralism

Post-structuralism emerges in the latter half of the twentieth century as a response to and a critique of structuralism. It is said that while structuralism attempts to locate stable patterns or structures, the post-structuralist method challenges this assumption of stability. Post-structuralism advocates for the fluid, fragmented, and ever-changing nature of meaning and

identity. We could always locate ambiguities, contradictions, and other tensions within the structural categorisation. Post-structuralism resists and works against settled truths and oppositions, and thus revolutionises the study of language, identity, history, society, etc.

According to post-structuralism, language and culture are never perfectly closed systems. Post-structuralists endorse the structuralist insight that meaning is produced through signs. However, they deny any fixed centre or stable ground with respect to which the signs can be definitively interpreted. The meaning of everything depends on context, speaker, and historical moment. Instead of a single and secure structure underpinning social life, what we see are competing discourses – complex webs of meaning. Post-structuralism is thus both an extension of and a departure from structuralism.

Post-structuralism critically analyses our understanding of identity. It overturns our assumptions about essences in terms of race, gender, and backgrounds. Post-structuralism has thus contributed to the struggles against discrimination based on sex or gender. It has provided the momentum to protest the various kinds of inclusions and exclusions based on race, class, wealth, etc. Post-structuralism re-examines the established notions of purity and lawfulness and has ignited awareness of the hidden violence of established values in the form of moral codes of conduct, legal frameworks, etc.

Post-structuralism questions the supremacy of philosophical systems. It also questions the dominance of scientific models in validating knowledge. Instead of blindly denying any status for science, it undertakes a deeper assessment of the scope and limits of the scientific method. It exposes the values presumed in the claim that the scientific method is pure and objective. It rejects the false image of science as capable of being an arbiter of morality. Post-structuralism is not anti-science or anti-technology. The post-structuralist thinkers observe important dimensions that cannot be accounted for from within science. In short, "post-structuralism is a set of experiments on texts, ideas, and concepts that show how the limits of knowledge can be crossed and turned into disruptive relations" .

Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004) and Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984) are two important figures in the post-structuralist trend. We will discuss the main ideas of Derrida in this unit. Foucault

would be the subject matter of the next unit.

3.1.5 Jacques Derrida and Deconstruction

Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004) is one of the leading figures in the French poststructuralist philosophy. Derrida's prolific writings treat both philosophy and literature. His initial inclination was towards the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Ferdinand de Saussure, Emmanuel Levinas, and Sigmund Freud are other famous thinkers whose ideas have inspired Derrida. Derrida gained the attention of the philosophy community in 1967 with the publication of three momentous texts – *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena*. Derrida distances himself from the philosophical currents like phenomenology, existentialism, and structuralism that preceded him in the French intellectual scene. He undertakes an explicit attack on the limitations of traditional philosophy through the analysis of philosophical texts. He develops a method of deconstruction which exposes the various binary oppositions that underpin the dominant ways of thinking in Western tradition – presence/absence, speech/writing, etc. – and then subverts and undermines them. Deconstruction has had an enormous influence on literary theory, linguistics, cultural studies, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and feminism. This section provides a brief account of the main ideas discussed by Derrida.

- Derrida develops deconstruction as a method to expose the limitations of traditional philosophy

3.1.5.1 Against Logocentrism

According to Derrida, the Western philosophical tradition has hitherto been grounded in the assumption that there is some undeniable self-evident truth which is immediately present to our consciousness. We can think, express, and speak that truth. The truth reveals itself, and we can signify its nature through our language. For example, Plato's allegory of the cave shows that the man who gets out of the cave eventually sees the Forms or Ideas – the truth. Plato takes for granted that the truth is already there, and it becomes present to the philosopher at a certain point. Descartes, through his "I think, therefore I am" principle, asserts something that cannot be doubted and is clearly and distinctly present to the thinking mind. It is the first certainty on which everything can be built. The existential phenomenology of Heidegger takes for granted that there is something about Dasein's Being which is revealed via several

- Logocentrism assumes the existence of some undeniable self-evident truth immediately present to our consciousness

existential concepts when we proceed phenomenologically. Human existence as a phenomenon is a bare, self-evident, undeniable presence that can be recognised and described. Derrida labels this assumption as *logocentrism* (logos in Greek stands for the supreme reason, truth, law, etc.) or the "metaphysics of presence". He says that the Western tradition is characterised by the desire to posit a 'central' presence as the foundation for everything.

Derrida uses the term 'metaphysical' to refer to all systems of thought that depend on a foundation, a ground, or a first principle like the Idea, Matter, the World Spirit, God, etc. He claims that these so-called first principles are often defined by what they exclude, i.e., a sort of 'binary opposition' is prevalent. Matter/spirit, subject/object, body/soul, appearance/essence, speech/writing, etc., are a few of those binaries. In each of them, priority is given to one principle which is entitled as the pure and normal, and the other principle is seen only as a derivation or deterioration of the former. The dominant term in the dichotomy expresses something positive, complete, simple, independent, and fundamental, i.e., some kind of presence. The other term stands for something negative, incomplete, complex, dependent, and derivative, i.e., some kind of absence. The former always gets privileged, whereas the other is marginalised.

- Logocentrism creates binaries of opposition

In other words, metaphysics creates several dualisms and installs hierarchies and orders of subordination in them. Derrida argues that "All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent" (1988, Afterword). In short, metaphysical thought always creates oppositions, privileges one side of the opposition, and ignores or marginalises the alternative side.

- One side of the opposition gets privileged, whereas the other is marginalised

Derrida points out that we have been accustomed to thinking based on these hierarchies. But he also suggests that we can subvert these oppositions and show that one term relies on the other, or that their distinction relies on unstable grounds.

3.1.5.2 Speech and Writing

Derrida deals with the opposition between speech and writing prevalent in the Western tradition. According to Derrida, speech and writing are the two forms taken by language. It has been generally maintained that speaking has a kind of priority over writing. While speaking, one simply expresses one's thoughts that are immediately present to the consciousness. There is no gap between thought and speech, as speaking is a direct expression of the thought. There is no confusion regarding the unquestionable and fully present meaning of the spoken word. Writing, however, is considered a derived, secondary, insecure, and bad form of language. Whereas speech is associated with the expression of certainty of what is present to consciousness, writing lacks the immediate certification in consciousness. While spoken words symbolise mental experience, written words symbolise the already existing symbols. Writing is a mere representation of speech and thus doubly derivative and doubly far from a unity with one's own thought. Writing is also characterised by the absence of the reader at the time of writing, whereas in speech the listener is present at the moment. This tendency of prioritising speech over writing is what Derrida terms *phonocentrism*. It is one of the versions in which logocentrism appears.

However, Derrida deconstructs the traditional binary opposition between speech and writing. He shows that the demerits attributed to writing (the secondary, the derivative) can well be attributed to speech (the primary, the basic) as well. He also conceives a deeper sense of writing, which in a way stands more perfect than speech. Derrida's intention is not to subvert the traditional hierarchy between speech and writing so that writing is prioritised over speech. He wants to point out that the grounds on which the distinction or opposition between the two and the prioritisation of one among them are constructed, behave as unstable under in-depth analysis.

One of the ways in which Derrida destabilises the speech/writing binary is by developing the Saussurean claims that language is a system of differences and the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. As the words of one's language are not constituted by absolute and naturally given meanings but by the differential relationships with other words, we can never determine with certainty the meaning of what one says. The meaning of what one says is

- Phonocentrism prioritises speech over writing

- Derrida deconstructs the traditional binary opposition between speech and writing

- Derrida builds upon the Saussurean ideas to destabilise the speech/writing binary

dependent not only on what is said, but on what is not said. Speech is unstable and has an unbridgeable gap from what it is about. Any attempt to adequately express one's own thoughts or feelings through linguistic formulation is prevented by the gap between one's own experience and language. Speech is subject to various possible interpretations and is in no way better off than writing. The defects of writing are in fact present in all thought, all expression, and all reality.

3.1.5.3 Differance

- Differance means that a word's meaning depends on its difference from other words

- Differance also stands for the indispensable deferring of a word's meaning

'Différence' pronounced as 'dee-fer-ahnz' is the French word for the English word 'difference.' Derrida creates a technical term by changing the second 'e' in the French word. The term thus formed – *'differance'* – has two meanings according to Derrida: (1) to differ (to be other than) and (2) to defer (to postpone, to put off). A word has its meaning in virtue of differing from other words. Moreover, a word's meaning is never absolutely comprehended at the time of its use. Its meaning is deferred, delayed, put off to interpretations. There is no unveiling of truth but only incessant deciphering. Derrida contends that as understanding is necessarily expressed in language and language is built on difference and arbitrariness, undecidability infects everything we could possibly understand.

3.1.5.4 What Exactly is Deconstruction?

- Deconstruction sheds light on the binary oppositions inherent in a text and shows their baselessness

Derrida's approach to a text reveals the binary oppositions inherent in it and shows that such divisions are undermined by the very words that are used to express them. This approach, known as deconstruction, is the strategy that aims to reverse the dichotomies and eventually destroy them. The strategy also aims to show that there are 'undecidables' which cannot conform to either side of the dichotomy or opposition. Deconstruction does not espouse another grand narrative, or a theory about the world we are part of. It only distorts the already existing narratives.

- Deconstruction exposes the instability of many texts that seem well-grounded and consistent in the first look

Reading a text can be compared to observing a building under construction. At first glance, it looks good – solid, well-grounded, and consistent. But under further close looks, several cracks in the walls are revealed. Some parts do not fit with other parts, and some aspects undermine others. The inconsistency tends to show up in what Derrida calls 'margins' or things that do not seem central to the arguments or theses. The building does not look secure anymore, and it trembles.

> • Social institutions, political structures, etc., behave as texts and are subject to deconstruction

For Derrida, the notion of 'text' is widely applicable. All social institutions and political structures are texts to be read, interpreted, and understood, as all our understandings are structured by language. This implies that all such institutions and structures are subject to deconstruction. Deconstruction checks whether everything is as cheery and solid as it is made out to be by looking for signs of instability and slip.

Summarized Overview

Structuralism and post-structuralism are two major trends in the twentieth-century Western philosophy. Structuralism is concerned with the permanent structures behind or beneath what appear to us as isolated things. The insights for the structuralist movement were first formulated in the field of linguistics when Ferdinand de Saussure introduced a new way of studying languages. Saussure undertakes a synchronic study of language to discover the relations within rather than the temporal changes. He distinguishes between the system of rules in a language called *langue*, and the individual uses of language at particular times called *parole*. Saussure advocates that each linguistic sign comprises two components – the *signifier* and the *signified*. The relation between a sign and what it stands for is arbitrary. Each sign has its value in virtue of its differences from other signs. Language, hence, becomes a system of differences. Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and others applied Saussure's ideas to other fields like anthropology, literature, psychology, etc., and structuralism emerged as a chief current in Western philosophy.

Post-structuralism emerges in the second half of the twentieth century as a response to and a critique of structuralism. While the structuralist approach attempts to locate stable patterns, post-structuralism challenges this assumption of stability. Post-structuralism resists and works against settled truths and oppositions, and thus revolutionises the study of language, identity, history, society, etc. It disrupts our secure sense of meaning and reference in language and culture. It re-examines the established notions of identity, morality, lawfulness, etc. It also questions the supremacy of philosophical systems and the scientific method.

Jacques Derrida is an important figure in the post-structuralist movement. According to Derrida, the Western philosophical tradition has hitherto been grounded in the assumption that there is some undeniable self-evident truth which is immediately present to our consciousness. Derrida terms this assumption as *logocentrism*. Such a metaphysics of presence always creates oppositions, privileges one side of the opposition, and ignores or marginalises the alternative side. Derrida thus develops a method of deconstruction which analyses philosophical texts, exposes the various binary oppositions that underpin the dominant ways of thinking in Western tradition – presence/absence, speech/writing, etc. – and then subverts and undermines them.

However, for Derrida, all social institutions and political structures are texts to be read, interpreted, and understood, and hence are subject to deconstruction. Deconstruction checks whether everything is as solid and secure as it seems by looking for signs of instability. The method has had an enormous influence on literary theory, linguistics, cultural studies, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and feminism.

Self-Assessment

1. According to Saussure, a linguistic system is not composed of meaningful individual words, but relations. Explain.

2. Differentiate between synchronic and diachronic studies of language.

3. What is meant by the arbitrariness of a linguistic sign?

4. Discuss Derrida's views on the binaries of opposition prevalent in Western philosophy.

5. What is the aim of deconstruction?

Assignments

1. Language is a system of differences. Explain.

2. Distinguish between langue and parole.

3. Give a brief account of sign, signifier, and signified.

4. What do you mean by logocentrism?

5. How does Derrida undermine the speech/writing binary of opposition?

6. Elaborate the method of deconstruction as conceived by Derrida.

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

UNIT 2
Foucault

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- understand and critically discuss Michel Foucault's archaeological and genealogical analyses of knowledge
- reflect on the multifaceted operations of power within society
- comprehend the concept of 'discourse' as formulated by Foucault
- analyze the interrelation between knowledge and power
- critically appraise Foucault's genealogy of the self

Background

Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984) is a French philosopher and historian of ideas who is considered one of the most influential and controversial scholars in the second half of the twentieth century. He adopts an archaeological approach to knowledge and aims to excavate the conceptual frameworks on which the current knowledge practices are founded. Through what is termed genealogy, he also traces the multifarious power relations that run throughout a society and determine the subject, object, domains, and value of knowledge in the society. Foucault also brings in a shift in the analysis of knowledge by claiming that power and knowledge are interdependent. Through his 'genealogy of the self', Foucault critically examines how human subjectivity is historically constructed through intricate systems of power/knowledge. Foucault's influence is not limited to philosophy but extends to a wide range of social sciences and humanistic studies. This unit covers the major ideas of Foucault.

Keywords

Knowledge, Archaeology, Episteme, Genealogy, Power, Discourse, Knowledge

3.2.1 Introduction

Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984) is a French philosopher as well as historian of ideas. Almost all of his works are histories – history of punishment, madness, sexuality, etc. – and hence it can be said that his post-structuralist contributions develop through a series of such historical studies. Foucault even chooses the title of his chair at the Collège de France as 'Professor of the History of Systems of Thought'. He provides new ways for understanding the past and redefines the ways of writing histories.

However, Foucault's historical approach is different from that of the popular works on the history of ideas. Hence, he terms his approach first as 'archaeology of thought' and later as 'genealogy,' both of which will be discussed in the following sections. Foucault's analysis of various kinds of knowledge shows that he is not so interested in the examination of the truth of knowledge claims. He stresses the examination of the conditions that led to the assumption of various truth claims and the effect that assumption has on human life. Foucault's findings transform our understanding of the relation between individuals and social structures. He also brings new light to our ideas about what an individual is by discussing the multifarious functioning of power. His thought has influenced psychology, criminology, feminist studies, anthropology, sociology, and literary theory.

We will familiarise ourselves with the major contributions of Foucault in this unit.

3.2.2 Archaeology of Knowledge

We know that archaeology generally proceeds through excavation and other activities to recover and then analyse material remains, including artefacts, architecture, and cultural landscapes for the study of past societies and cultures. Now, what does Foucault do with archaeology in his philosophy? The archaeological approach to knowledge is a critical analysis of the systems of knowledge. It reveals the conditions that make knowledge possible. As traditional archaeologists attempt to discover the daily lifestyle of people from the previous eras, Foucault focuses on their knowledge-style. He attempts to bring to light the assumptions that guide and operate all assertions

- Foucault considers himself a historian of the systems of thought

- Foucault brings new light to our understanding of the individual, society, knowledge, power, etc.

- Foucault adopts an archaeological approach in the analysis knowledge

recognised as knowledge in the current scenario. He examines the deep and sudden shifts in the knowledge styles that bring about the current style. A detailed formulation of archaeology as a historiographic method is provided by Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). But even before that, the three histories written by him in the 1960s: *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), and *The Order of Things* (1966), exemplified the archaeological approach to knowledge.

Foucault aims to discover the underpinnings of the current knowledge practices in past forms of thought. He wants to know what is taken for granted, perhaps even unconsciously, in the present systems of knowledge. In his words, this new way of analysis does not actually belong to history or science. This mode of enquiry, as Foucault envisages, uncovers the bases on which all sciences and philosophies are established, or all rationalities are formed. To make it clear, the archaeology of knowledge, for example, does not wish to reflect upon the meaning of the ideas put forward by Descartes in his *Meditations*. Rather, the approach makes use of the writings of Descartes or any such thinker as clues to understand the general structure of the setting in which they think and write. The concern is not in comprehending the meaning of the particular object (text) studied but in throwing light on the overall configuration of the site from which the object was excavated.

Recall the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. His critique sought the a priori structures that validate mathematical and scientific knowledge, as well as make morality possible. Kant found certain universal and necessary features present in every rational mind – space, time, categories, the categorical imperative, etc. However, Foucault does not believe that there is one common knowledge-style for all humans. There is a multiplicity of knowledge styles that vary depending on space and time. So, instead of the timeless a priori features explained by Kant, Foucault speaks of certain historical a priori features that condition and limit what people can think in a given historical era. Such features mostly function in the background, are not explicitly formulated, and often lie unconscious.

Foucault does not aim to trace the historical progress of some knowledge towards perfection. He wants to know the history of the conditions that determine the scope and limit of what is considered knowledge. Foucault offers an example of his archaeological method in *Madness and Civilization.* He

- Archaeological analysis aims to discover the underpinnings of the current knowledge practices

- Foucault speaks about historical *aprioris* instead of the timeless *aprioris* of Kant

- Foucault analyses the history of the conception of madness

observes that till the end of the Middle Ages, the mad people were believed to be possessed by Gods or demons. Such people were believed to be endowed with different sensory powers and a distinct rationality and were often regarded with fear and awe. The Renaissance brought about a shift in the view. The concept of folly was introduced, and mad people were considered to be possessed by crazy foolishness. Later, when leprosy - that had evaded humanity for centuries - disappeared from the Western world and several institutions set up for the care of the diseased became vacant, the idle, the unemployed, the vagabonds, and the beggars were ordered to be housed in the empty buildings. The mad people also belonged to what Foucault calls 'the great confinement.' After the French Revolution, criminals and mad people were put together in prisons. However, the mad people created chaos in the prisons and were a source of danger when released outside the prisons. This led to the birth of asylums.

- Foucault points out how authorities dictated standards of morality and isolated those who failed to meet the standards

Foucault draws our attention to the scenario where authorities dictated the standards of morality, and the deviant people were shut away accordingly to be confined in isolated buildings and work for their own moral improvement and the benefit of the society as a whole. Insane individuals are isolated from so-called normal society and placed in asylums as patients, where - through strict rules, close observation, rewards, and punishments - they are expected to internalise the norms and work toward their improvement. In Foucault's words, the asylum "is not a free realm of observation, diagnosis, and therapeutics; it is a juridical space where one is accused, judged, and condemned, and from which one is never released…" except by endless trials in psychological depth. Foucault describes the strange state thus: in a world that considered itself moral and autonomous, mad people were imprisoned.

- Archaeological analysis does not evaluate knowledge but only exposes its underpinnings

Foucault does not wish to find out or explain which of these conceptions of madness is true. He wants to show that each society has its regime of truth: its own accepted knowledge that it puts into practice. The shifts in the conceptions of madness have finally reached the current stage where psychiatry announces that the mad people are just ill, mentally. The archaeological method only examines whether this new conception is a product of the ethical and social commitments which may not necessarily be explicit.

3.2.3 Genealogy of Knowledge

Whereas archaeology describes the conceptual system that underlies certain practices, it does not focus on the effects of the practice. It comprises a structural and synchronic mode of analysis. Foucault says that in archaeology, he has restricted himself to the description of systems of thought with hardly any attempt to explain the changes from one system to another. The traditional explanations, like the spirit of the time, various social influences and technological influences, etc., do not seem effective to him. In the first half of the 1970s, Foucault thus brought a shift in his emphasis following the genealogical method of Nietzsche. Nietzsche's genealogy of morality attempted to find the historical and psychological roots of human morality in the pride and ambition of the strong masters and the weakness and resentment of the slaves. Following the same, Foucault introduces his genealogical approach in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) that discusses the history of the prison.

To provide a genealogy is to focus on the accidental and minute deviations, or the errors, false appraisals and faulty calculations that gave birth to and established value for many of our current practices. Foucault aims to undertake a genealogy of the current knowledge-styles, which, does not of explain everything in terms of the progress to the accomplishment of certain grand purposes or goals. Rather it, provides accounts based on multiple little causes that operate independently with out overall outcome in view. This method, as Foucault calls it, is a 'history of the present,' that examines the claimed origins of many institutions and practices that enjoy the mark of necessity and reveals their contingency. Foucault believes that genealogy would be an adequate method of causal and diachronic explanation that could complement archaeology.

Foucault observes through the genealogical analysis of knowledge that there is an intimate relationship between power and knowledge. Power transforms the fundamental knowledge frameworks that underlie our practices. Let us see what Foucault's findings are.

3.2.3.1 Power

Foucault contends that the then-prevalent conceptions of power are mistaken, inadequate or misleading. According to him, power is not just a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state.

- Foucault introduces a genealogical approach in the analysis of knowledge

- Genealogy provides causal explanations for the origins and effects of knowledge practices

Power cannot not rather be defined as a mode of subjugation in the form of rule by law. Moreover, according to Foucault, power does not always stand for a system of domination exerted by one group over the other, like class oppression, which gradually entails derivations in various forms and pervades the entire social body. It should be noted that Foucault does not remark on these analyses of power as completely false and useless. He wishes to show that these analyses often misunderstand an accidental feature of power in a particular context as an essential feature of power in general. In Foucault's view, the sovereignty of the state, the rule by law, and the domination of a class over others are not the fundamental characteristics of power; they are just the terminal forms that power takes. Foucault aims to discover the basic molecules of power relations that develop into more complex forms.

Foucault criticises the view that power stands for the capacity of certain agents to realise their will over the will of others or the ability of the former to force the latter to do things they do not themselves wish to do. Power is not something to be possessed—neither by the so-called powerful nor something the powerless can simply seize from them. According to Foucault, power is not a commodity or a fixed resource that one holds; rather, it is something that is exercised. Power should be understood as a verb rather than a noun—something that *does*, not something that *is*. It is not located in institutions, structures, or individuals per se, but operates through networks of relations. For Foucault, power is the name given to a complex strategic situation within a particular society.

For Foucault, power is not denoted by a single capital P that dominates and imposes its rationality upon the totality. There are, in fact, power relations dispersed throughout the society in multiple forms. The Foucauldian conception of power explains it as a dynamic network of diverse, overlapping, sometimes conflicting, and sometimes mutually supporting social forces. Power is not considered as being located exclusively within particular institutions like the State or the government, rather it functions in different forms even in the relations between parents and children, between lovers, between employers and employees, etc., where power is negotiated in one or the other way and a certain hierarchy is established. In Foucault's words, power is employed and exercised in the form of a network of relations where individuals become the vehicles of power and not merely its points of application. Foucault also advocates

- Foucault looks beyond the popular conceptions of power

- Power is not some static possession

- Power is a dynamic network of diverse, overlapping, conflicting, and supporting social forces

that power is omnipresent. It is present as interwoven in all relations, even in the most intimate and egalitarian relations. He also adds that nobody can ever be outside of power. All of us are always enmeshed in specific power relations.

Marxist theories, such as those of Louis Althusser, conceive power in the form of the State's oppression of the people and the way in which ideological pressures mould individuals. However, instead of such one-way traffic of power from top to bottom, Foucault's conception of power focuses on the manner in which power permeates all relations within a society. This enables us to reflect upon the mundane ways in which power is enacted and contested in everyday life. Foucault remarks that power relations are often hidden in the social body and hence are not easily observed. His approach to studying power relations, as not located in a centralised impersonal institution like the army or the police, but as hidden in the local level where individuals and other agencies exercise and negotiate them, has influenced many feminist thinkers also. Judith Butler is one such figure. She tries to understand the relations between power and gender without assuming that power is merely located in certain institutions.

- Power does not confine itself to a centralised institution but permeates all relations within a society

Moreover, Foucault's conception of power stands against the conventional Marxist notion of power and the early feminist model of power, which sees power as a form of repression or oppression. For Foucault, power is often productive, i.e., it also brings into effect new forms of behaviour and events rather than merely censoring freedom and restricting or prohibiting individuals from doing something. Foucault asks, "if power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we should manage to obey it?" . He sees that apart from repression, there is something in power that makes people conform to it.

- Foucault denies the early Marxist and feminist notions of repressive power

Foucault speaks about the way in which soldiers were made in the late eighteenth century as an example of social disciplinary power. In times before the eighteenth century, a person with certain qualities such as a strong body, agility, etc., which were considered natural, was recognised as best suited to be a soldier. Later, this view changed, and people happened to be seen as objects that could be manipulated, shaped, trained, transformed, and improved. Practices of soldier-making thus became popular. Anyone could be trained to be a soldier. Foucault argues that such shaping of mentalities and behaviour

- Disciplinary power is an example of the productive version of power

happens in prisons and even in the educational systems.

In short, Foucault conceives power as positive, relational, and non-subjective in character. Power is positive in the sense that it does not repress or censor. It creates and shapes the behaviour of individuals. Power comes into play only when people happen to be in relations with one another. Hence, power is relational. Moreover, power is non-subjective as it is not the result of the action of an individual. It functions in the form of actions modifying further actions.

- Power is positive, relational, and non-subjective

Another aspect of power, as conceived by Foucault, is that it is always confronted and resisted. Even though it exists in multiple forms everywhere in society, power is not something unconquerable that individuals always have to kneel before. The analysis of power also exposes its weak points and paves the way for the attack against it. According to Foucault, wherever there is power, there is resistance. The points of resistance are present everywhere in the complex network of power relations.

- Power is always confronted and resisted in one way or the other

For Foucault, power controls the knowledge formation and circulation in a society by the regulation of what he terms discourse.

3.2.3.2 Discourse

Foucault uses the term 'discourse' to refer to the structured systems of language, symbols, and practices that produce and regulate knowledge within specific historical contexts. Discourse enables as well as constrains us to speak, write, and think in specific ways. It is embodied in an abstract and anonymous system which exceeds individuals. Discourse determines and structures who can speak, what sort of statements are spoken of, and which statements are considered appropriate and certified as truth. It decides which knowledge is more productive than the others.

- Discourse enables as well as constrains us to speak, write, and think in specific ways

Foucault points to the practice of distributing and circulating a particular set of statements instead of others. Whereas some statements are widely circulated, others have restricted circulation. How is this possible? Foucault argues that discourse is associated with relations of power. It is nothing but power that maintains the circulation of a particular set of statements and deliberately neglects other statements. Discourse is thus

- Discourse functions as a mechanism through which power operates

not mere communication but a mechanism through which power operates and shapes the way people perceive reality, and construct identities.

Foucault's insights on discourse and power force us to think about how we know what we know – i.e., where the information comes from, how and under what circumstances it gets produced, whose interests are served by adopting certain information as true, and so on. He asks us to trace the way through which the information that we accept as truth at the present has been kept in such a privileged position. The notion of objective or universal truth thus gets challenged. We find that truth is constructed within discursive formations, influenced by institutional and societal forces. The specific knowledge produced by the medical, legal, or scientific institutions that get popularised and accepted as truth are hence understood as inherently tied to power dynamics.

- Truth is constructed within discourses that are influenced by power dynamics

Even though discourse operates as a medium through which power is exercised and challenged, it can also be a hindrance or a point of resistance to power, i.e., discourse can render power fragile and make it possible to thwart it. While dominant discourses reinforce existing power structures by regulating knowledge and social practices, alternative or marginalised discourses can disrupt these norms, exposing contradictions or limitations in the prevailing systems. In essence, discourse can thwart power by serving as a vehicle for critique, transformation, and the assertion of alternative forms of knowledge and identity.

- Discourse can also thwart power by serving as a vehicle for critique

3.2.3.3 Power/Knowledge

We might feel that the information shown on television channels and newspapers is true and factual. But are we generally aware of the complex and lengthy process of editing, censoring, and exclusion to which the information is subjected before it reaches us? In the genealogical period of his work, Foucault explicitly introduces 'power/knowledge' as a composite term and describes knowledge as a conjunction of power relations and information seeking. He argues that the processing of information and the subsequent labelling of something as a fact is regulated by power. It is the ratification by those in the position of authority that entitles something as a fact.

- Foucault introduces 'power/knowledge' as a composite term

According to Foucault, without knowledge, it is not possible to exercise power. He emphasises that knowledge is

never dispassionate and is always an integral part of the power struggles. He also observes that there is no knowledge that does not generate power: i.e., in producing or acquiring knowledge, a person is also making a claim for power. Imbalances of power relations existing between groups of people or between institutions or states regulate the production of knowledge. Knowledge is not exclusively the effort and activity of the subject. It is the complex network of power relations that determines the forms, scope, and limits of knowledge. The subject (who knows), the object (what is known), the domains, and the modalities of knowledge are determined by the fundamental implications of power relations. Thus, Foucault thinks that power/knowledge should be accurately used as a composite term to stress their interdependence.

- The complex network of power relations determines the forms, scope, and limits of knowledge

The functioning of the power/knowledge complex, illuminated by the genealogy, is better illustrated by Foucault in the form of an ideal prison called 'panopticon.' The term was coined earlier by Jeremy Bentham. Foucault develops the same in light of his vision of the power/knowledge relation. The picture given is of a prison whose cells are arranged in a circle around a central tower. A guard who stands in the tower could see what was happening in each cell. However, the inhabitants of the cells could not see each other or into the tower wherefrom the guard watches them. As the prisoners are not sure every moment whether they are being observed or not, the effect produced within such a setting is equivalent to that of constant observation. To know that we are being observed is itself imposing a powerful means of control over us, isn't it?

- The panopticon exemplifies the way in which power/ knowledge functions

Foucault intends to say that power determines what all conceptions are accepted as true knowledge and sets the standards of normal behaviour. All social institutions function like prisons where docile individuals are manufactured and the delinquent ones are transformed and improved according to some preset standards. Panopticism, with its all-seeing gaze and the subtle and minute punishments against deviations from established norms, is widely in practice in various social institutions like factories, schools, hospitals, etc. In Foucault's words, "The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor- judge, the "social worker"-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements" . Foucault points

- Power establishes norms and builds a carceral society

out the carceral character of modern society, which supports the normalising power.

Foucault has written heavily about the interconnectedness of power and knowledge. He concludes that knowledge does not simply emerge from scholarly activity but is produced and maintained in circulation through different institutions and practices that embody power relations. Foucault's analysis reveals that knowledge is not objective and dispassionate. Rather, it always works in the interests of particular groups.

3.2.4 Genealogy of the Self

We have already familiarised ourselves with the genealogical method of Foucault, which investigates the contingent and often contradictory processes behind the development of knowledge practices. Genealogy of the self is what Foucault undertakes to examine how the human self gets historically constructed through intricate systems of power/knowledge. Foucault does not want to state that the self is an illusion or an ideological effect. According to him, the self exists. However, he rejects the traditional notion of a "true self" that exists independently of social and historical contexts. Foucault argues that selfhood is dynamically shaped within the multifarious power relations evolved in the cultural, social, and political domains.

Foucault traces how institutionalised mechanisms, such as religion, the educational system, government, and medicine, have produced norms governing selfhood. These norms often operate through disciplinary power, which we have briefly discussed earlier. Disciplinary power functions not through explicit force but through subtle processes of surveillance, normalisation, and internalisation. The institutions and the authorities instil in the individuals a picture of their true selves and train them to discover and express the same. The individuals come to monitor their own behaviours, aligning themselves with societal expectations while believing that they are being autonomous. This interplay between external control and internal discipline reveals the intricacy at the heart of self-formation. The self is thus not born out of sin and subject to punishment. Rather, it is born out of the methods of supervision, constraint, and punishment. Foucault says, "The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body."

Although Foucault's earlier genealogical studies investigated the ways in which power/knowledge networks constituted the subject, his late work emphasises the subject's own role in this process. The focus shifts to the forms of understanding that subjects create about themselves and the practices by which they transform their mode of being. It therefore offers a more complex understanding of the subject. Subjects are not simply constructed by power; they themselves partake in that construction and modify themselves through self-practices. They are not just docile bodies. They actively refuse, adopt and alter the forms of being a subject. By understanding how power operates and how we are shaped by it, individuals can potentially resist and transform power relations, creating new possibilities for self-expression and self-determination.

- Individuals themselves partake in the construction of their selfhood

Foucault's later works explore how practices of self-care might offer pathways to resist the effects of disciplinary power. He insists that individuals should take control of their self-configuration by setting goals, habits, and self-shaping practices. Foucault stresses that individuals have the maturity to undertake introspection and reflection to understand the normalisation processes carried out by the power structures. A critique of the institutional practices that dominate themselves and the re-evaluation of the established norms are needed. This paves the way for creatively exploring opportunities for new ways of being. A transformation of the self-hood hence becomes possible by following rules and routines to achieve personal goals, actively working to change aspects of oneself, and cultivating distinct pleasures and relationships. Foucault undertakes a study of the practices that span diverse historical epochs, from ancient philosophical traditions that emphasised ethical self-care to modern frameworks rooted in psychiatry, psychology, and moral education. Foucault calls these self-care practices 'technologies of self' or the 'art of self-care'.

- Foucault talks about various self-care practices that transform selfhood

To sum up, Foucault does not portray the self as purely passive in its construction. He emphasises the potential for resistance and creativity within the process of self-formation. By critically examining and challenging the norms imposed by societal structures, individuals can reclaim their agency and redefine their identities. The implications of Foucault's genealogy are profound, extending across disciplines such as ethics, politics, sociology, and identity studies. His analysis evokes in us an urge to interrogate the forces that shape our understanding of the self. It demands a reconsideration of our autonomy, freedom, and agency.

- Foucault's genealogy of the self helps us to reconsider our understanding of the self

Summarized Overview

Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984) is a French philosopher and historian of ideas who is considered one of the most influential and controversial scholars in the second half of the twentieth century. Foucault suspects all the then-prevalent claims in the disciplines like psychology, psychiatry, medicine, and economics. He adopts an archaeological approach to knowledge and aims to excavate the conceptual frameworks on which the current knowledge practices are founded. Through what is termed genealogy, he also traces the multifarious power relations that run throughout a society and determine the subject, object, domains, and value of knowledge in the society. Foucault brings in a shift in the analysis of knowledge by claiming that power and knowledge are interdependent. Knowledge is never dispassionate and is always produced, circulated, and appropriated according to the interests of groups of people. Through his 'genealogy of the self,' Foucault critically examines how human subjectivity is historically constructed through intricate systems of power/knowledge. He also advocates that by understanding how power operates and how we are shaped by it, individuals can potentially resist and transform power relations, creating new possibilities for self-expression and self-determination. Foucault's influence is not limited to philosophy but extends to a wide range of social sciences and humanistic studies.

Self-Assessment

1. How does the archaeological analysis differ from the historical analysis of knowledge?

2. What is the genealogical method followed by Foucault?

3. What does Foucault mean by 'discourse'?

4. How do power and knowledge relate to each other?

5. How do individuals partake in constructing their own identities?

Assignments

1. Why does Foucault adopt the archaeological method for the analysis of knowledge?

2. Explain the multifarious functioning of power in a society as discussed by Foucault.

3. Give a brief account of the Foucauldian conception of 'power/knowledge'.

4. Shed light on Foucault's views on 'panopticism'.

5. Write a short note on Foucault's genealogy of the self.

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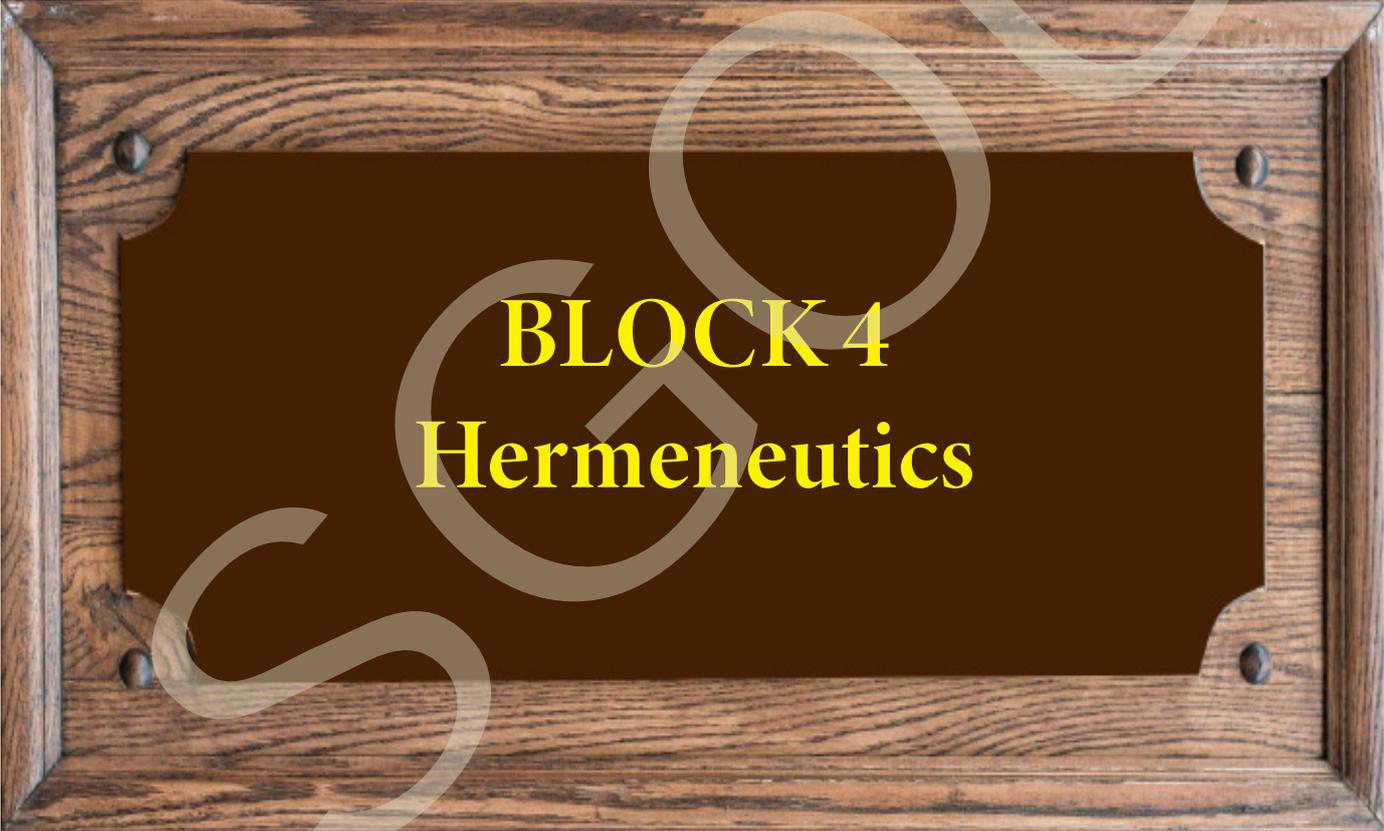
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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

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BLOCK 4
Hermeneutics

UNIT 1
Origin of Hermeneutics

Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, learners will be able to:

- identify and describe the historical development of modern hermeneutics
- understand the transformation of hermeneutics from a methodological tool for interpreting ancient texts to a broader ontological framework
- discuss the key thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey and their contributions to the evolution of hermeneutical theory
- differentiate between earlier and contemporary understandings of hermeneutics
- analyze the principle of interpretation and explain how hermeneutics aims to bridge the gap between the author and the reader

Background

To some of you, the term "hermeneutics" might sound strange. And even if some of you are familiar with the term, it is likely to be in association with the Bible. But "hermeneutics," both as a term and as an academic discipline, has tremendous philosophical importance and implications. Though hermeneutics has immense and far-reaching philosophical significance, for several years it was not given due importance in the worldwide philosophical curricula. In other words, hermeneutics was forgotten or left unnoticed or sidelined for centuries. Just like the highly metaphysically flavoured western philosophy was vehemently criticised by Martin Heidegger for its forgetfulness of being, the entire philosophical tradition must also be criticised for its neglect of hermeneutics.

Keywords

Text, Understanding, Interpretation, Author, History

4.1.1 The Origin of Modern Hermeneutics
4.1.1.1 Etymology of The Term 'Hermeneutics'

The term 'hermeneutics' is derived from the Greek verb *hermēneuein* ("to interpret"), and the noun *hermēneia* ("interpretation"). Both these words occur in their various forms in a considerable number of ancient Greek texts. The terms *hermēneuein* and *hermēneia* have three basic directions of meaning in ancient Greek usage: to express/expression, to explain/explanation and to translate/translation. Therefore, *hermēneuein* and *hermēneia* can refer to (1) an oral recitation, (2) a reasonable explanation of a situation, and (3) a translation from another language. And, all these three meanings may be inherent in the English term "interpretation."

- *Hermēneuein* and *hermēneia* have three basic directions of meaning in ancient Greek usage

This verb and noun point back to Hermes, the Greek wing-footed messenger-God. Hermes is said to be the God of language and communication, who taught the mortals how to speak. Hence, generally Hermes is associated with the function of transmuting what is beyond human understanding into a form that human intelligence can grasp. The Greeks credited Hermes with the discovery of language and writing - the tools which human understanding employs to grasp meaning and to convey it to others. In this respect, we can assume that the term 'hermeneutics' is etymologically related to the Greek mythological God Hermes.

- The Greeks credited Hermes with the discovery of language and writing

Traced back to their earliest known root words in Greek, the etymological meaning of the modern word 'hermeneutics' would refer to the process of "bringing to understanding" or more concretely, "bringing a text or a thing or a situation from unintelligibility to intelligibility/understanding." The term "hermeneutics," with scientific flavour, appeared only in the 17th century. From then onwards, exegetes, philologists, exponents of human sciences, and so on began to employ the term quite frequently. However, the hermeneutical question gained prominence only in the 19th century, and this was mainly due to the efforts of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey.

- Bringing a text to understanding

4.1.1.2 History of Modern Hermeneutics

Both geographically and with respect to the subject matter, hermeneutics has a dynamic, rich, varied, and progressive history. That is to say, hermeneutics or the theory of interpretation, which was

originally regarded as a subsidiary aspect of European philosophy, especially that of German, has now become prevalent in the entire English-speaking world. Thereby, it became one of the most widely debated topics in the contemporary philosophical scenario, irrespective of any geographical barrier. From the standpoint of its subject matter, hermeneutics has evolved significantly, from the interpretation of obscure or ambiguous texts to a more reflective inquiry into the very process of understanding itself. How is our understanding shaped? While the geographical spread of hermeneutics is now well established and does not require detailed elaboration here, we shall briefly trace its development in terms of thematic focus and conceptual depth.

We shall attempt this task through a selective survey of various conceptions of hermeneutics that have prevailed across different historical periods. These conceptions reflect distinct and significant moments or approaches to the problems of interpretation. In fact, the diverse directions in the development of hermeneutics can be seen as responses to the questions raised by interpreters themselves. At the same time, we should notice that hermeneutics is not a well-defined field. There exist strong controversies regarding the very conception of the term *hermeneutics*. In other words, the conceptions and descriptions of hermeneutics are continually being expanded and refined. In its broadest sense, hermeneutics means interpretation, but there is no unified or widely agreed-upon criterion for interpretation. For this reason, conflicting views persist within the field of hermeneutics.

4.1.1.3 *Principle of Interpretation*

Hermeneutics has been traditionally conceived as the *study of the locus and principle of interpretation*, particularly as it is applied to the interpretation of religious or sacred texts(scriptures)**.** But gradually, the interpretative methods applied to the scriptures were applied to other books also. In other words, the hermeneutical thinkers insisted that there should be no difference in the principles of interpretation for religious texts and for secular texts.

Conventionally, hermeneutics has also been conceived as the body of principles of interpretation that are to be applied in the interpretation of ancient texts. Here, the preoccupation is to *hear* what an ancient text has to say. From this perspective,

hermeneutics is the science that reflects on how a text from a past time and culture may be understood and become clear to the reader/interpreter in the present situation. The hermeneutical thinkers of the earlier period contended that hermeneutics is necessary to understand the ancient texts, for the reader/interpreter is far from the ancient authors and their culture. In other words, hermeneutics has to attempt to bridge the gap between past and present - a gap which is not only temporal but also a cultural one that deals with worldviews and ways of thinking. But as the science of hermeneutics developed, it has been asserted that not only the ancient texts need hermeneutics but also the texts of any period and culture. And this assertion is valid, since every reader/interpreter is distanced or is away from an author and her cultural constraints, irrespective of the period, while the degree of the distance might vary.

Hermeneutics, in its earliest phase, was considered as the methodology or the body of some techniques or a system employed by the interpreter to extract the hidden meaning of various texts, for the meaning of the texts was obscure to the readers. In this sense, hermeneutics was described as the process of deciphering, which goes from the manifest content and meaning to the latent or hidden meaning of the texts (particularly, the mythological and symbolical texts). In other words, for years, the main preoccupation of hermeneutics was to find out the meaning behind the text. Now, thanks to the development occurred in the realm of hermeneutics, the prime concern of the reader/interpreter is to understand the meaning that lies in front of the text.

Originally, the scientific hermeneutics was construed as the methodology for the interpretation of written texts or records. In this sense, the scope of hermeneutics was confined to the written texts alone. Nowadays, this conception of hermeneutics is counted as naive, for the scope of hermeneutics is extended enormously. At present, the process of interpretation/understanding is more universally viewed as the ontological mode of existence. The object of interpretation/understanding is the whole of life experience and action in the world. Consequently, hermeneutics is no longer solely a theory about the exposition and interpretation of written texts, but *anything that exists* comes under the purview of hermeneutics.

Having done encyclopedic studies on hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur, one of the most prominent contemporary

hermeneutical thinkers of our times, has presented the entire history of hermeneutics based on the significant shifts in perspectives taken place in the domain. Accordingly, there are two movements in the history of hermeneutics: (1) The movement from regional hermeneutics to general hermeneutics and (2) the movement from epistemology to Ontology.

4.1.2 Schleiermacher's Theory of Interpretation

Schleiermacher, a renowned German Protestant thinker, has rendered valuable contributions to theology, philosophy, and especially to the science of hermeneutics. Unfortunately, he could not publish his ideas on hermeneutics in their entirety. The majority of his notes on hermeneutics remained in the form of manuscripts until 1958, when Heinz Kimmerle did the exhaustive publication of Schleiermacher's manuscripts.

Schleiermacher initiated the movement from *regional hermeneutics to general hermeneutics*. Paul Ricoeur would call this movement *deregionalisation* and thus laid the foundation for a new or modern hermeneutics that has genuine philosophical characteristics. For Schleiermacher, hermeneutics was neither a set of specific guidelines for meeting and clarifying the definite problems of interpretation nor a body of particular rules and recipes for the understanding of texts. Instead, he conceived hermeneutics as the art of understanding, and for him, the very act of understanding itself was the foundational act of all hermeneutics. This conception is considered his lasting contribution to the history of hermeneutical theory. Since Schleiermacher, understanding remains the central concern of hermeneutics. In this way, Schleiermacher's thought effected a 'watershed' or a 'paradigm shift' in the history of hermeneutics. And, because of this, he is hailed as the 'founder' or 'father' of modern hermeneutics. Schleiermacher is also known as the *Hermeneutic of Knowing,* for he was preoccupied with the epistemological concerns, which consider understanding as a simple mode of *knowing.*

Schleiermacher was thrown into an intellectual scenario that was marked by Kantian and Romantic philosophical insights. Consequently, his hermeneutical theory has Kantian and Romantic overtones. Thanks to this, Schleiermacher's hermeneutical programme is critical as well as romantic. It is critical in so far as it tries to elaborate the universally valid rules for understanding to struggle against misunderstanding and is

romantic by its appeal to a living relation with the process of creation or by its proposal to place the interpreter "inside" the author whereby 'understanding an author better than he understands himself' becomes possible.

4.1.2.1 Interpretation of Grammatical and Technical

Schleiermacher outlined the study of hermeneutics at two distinct levels of interpretation, namely grammatical and technical. The grammatical interpretation bases itself "on the characteristics of discourse which are common to a culture," or on "the meaningful connections within language," whereas the technical interpretation addresses the singularity or the creative individuality of the writer or the speaker. For Schleiermacher, though these two levels of interpretation have equal footing or equal status, each of these interpretations demands distinctive talents.

- Two levels of interpretation, each of which demands distinctive talents

The grammatical interpretation is 'objective' as it is concerned with linguistic characteristics and general laws distinct from the author, while the technical or psychological interpretation is 'subjective' since it aims at the subjectivity or the individuality of the one who speaks. Again, the grammatical interpretation is considered as essentially 'negative,' because "it merely indicates the limits of understanding" or sets boundaries for thought; and the technical or psychological interpretation is called 'positive,' since it "is not a boundary-setting operation" and "it reaches the act of thought which produced the discourse."

- Objective and subjective levels of interpretation

For Schleiermacher, every speech or writing of a person or every text has double character, namely, the grammatical and the technical or psychological. Hence, understanding involves an integration of these two aspects. If so, understanding presupposes two talents, knowledge of language (grammatical) and knowledge of the individual (technical or psychological). Therefore, the overemphasis on one the aspect is not desirable. In Schleiermacher, the "grammatical interpretation balances psychological interpretation." Schleiermacher made it clear that the excessive meddling with the grammatical or the literary side and the psychological or the subjective side gives rise to *hermeneutical pedantry* and *hermeneutical nebulosity,* respectively.

- Understanding presupposes two talents: knowledge of the langue and knowledge of the individual

While developing his theory of hermeneutics, Schleiermacher introduced a second pair of opposites, namely, the divinatory and comparative methods, alongside the first pair: grammatical and technical (or psychological) methods. In the divinatory method, the interpreter attempts to transform themselves into the author in order to grasp the author's mental processes in their full immediacy. In other words, it involves an effort to re-experience what the author experienced. However, this re-experiencing is neither a form of psychoanalysis, nor an act of establishing affinity with the author, nor a matter of aesthetic pleasure in reflection. Rather, it is an art of reconstructing the author's thinking, an attempt to sense the "seminal decision" made by the author. The comparative method, by contrast, holds that we never directly grasp an individuality; instead, we understand it only through its differences from others and from ourselves.

- The comparative method asserts that we never directly grasp an individuality

Moreover, Schleiermacher asserted that the two types of understanding, the grammatical-psychological and the comparative-divinatory, are related to one another as cross-wire. The understanding that is sought in hermeneutics, according to Schleiermacher, is to be found at the precise point where the two groups intersect. The following diagram paints Schleiermacher's exposition of understanding.

- Divinatory
  Grammatical
  Psychological
  Comparative

Schleiermacher has been generally criticised for his psychologism. But it is interesting to note that there are scholars who consider Schleiermacher's unique contribution to hermeneutics neither psychological nor grammatical, but as an artful movement between the two.

- Artful movement between psychological and grammatical levels of understanding

4.1.3 Dilthey's Notion of Human Science

Dilthey is another eminent German thinker descended from a family of Reformed ministers. He has contributed significantly to a number of intellectual disciplines, such as ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, psychology, and so on, and is widely known for his scholarship in the philosophy of history. It is obvious that Dilthey's contributions are to be accounted for, first and foremost, in the sphere of humanities and social sciences *(Geisteswissenschaften)*. Nevertheless, his contributions to hermeneutics are not of less significance. According to Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, almost all of Dilthey's writings are of interest to students of hermeneutics

- Dilthey's contributions to the philosophy of history.

Dilthey elucidated the possibility of historical knowledge through the phenomenon of interconnection. According to him, human beings learn about themselves only through their acts, the exteriorisations of their lives and the effect they produce on others. And, the life of others can be discerned and identified in its manifestations. Hence, hermeneutics is the rise of the individual to the knowledge of universal history, the universalisation of the individual. Following this line of thought, Dilthey earnestly situated the problem of interpretation within the domain of historical Knowledge. He did so because he discovered that the subject matter of both the history and the hermeneutics is one and the same.

4.1.3.1 Hermeneut of Historical Knowing

According to Dilthey, the two human sciences, namely history and hermeneutics, try to interpret expressions of the inner life of humans irrespective of the kind of expressions. And, this is counted as one of the outstanding contributions of Dilthey to the field of hermeneutics. It is on this ground, Dilthey is called the *Hermeneut of Historical Knowing.*

Dilthey was born into the neo-Kantian intellectual climate of the late nineteenth century. The development of Diltheyan hermeneutics is to be seen from the following two cultural facts that he had encountered, namely, (1) the rise of history as a science of the first order and (2) the ascent of positivism as a philosophy. Dilthey observed that, owing to the efforts of great German historians - particularly Leopold von Ranke and Johann Gustav Droysen- history attained a scientific character in nineteenth-century Germanic culture. As a result, he came to the conviction that textual interpretation is deeply connected to the broader field of history, which he regarded as the greatest document of humankind and the most fundamental expression of life. In other words, he realised that understanding a text from the past requires grasping its historical context. Therefore, according to Dilthey, one must first ask, "How is historical connection to be understood?" before asking, "How is a text to be understood?" In this way, he affirmed the intrinsic link between history and hermeneutics.

In his intellectual journey, Dilthey acknowledged the rise of positivism, which insisted that all knowledge must be acquired through empirical explanation, as practised in the natural sciences. In response, he brought the fundamental problem of the intelligibility of historical understanding into

philosophical reflection, seeking to address it within the realm of epistemology. His goal was to secure for historical knowledge a scientific status comparable to that of the natural sciences. In other words, as a metatheoretician, Dilthey aimed to provide the human sciences with a methodology and epistemological foundation as rigorous and respectable as those of the natural sciences.

However, Dilthey acknowledged a fundamental difference between the goals of the natural sciences and the human sciences. The natural sciences aim to explain natural phenomena, whereas the human sciences seek to understand human beings, who alone are capable of entering into the inner lives of others. In fact, by drawing on psychology, Dilthey attempted to build a bridge between the objectivity of explanation (characteristic of the natural sciences) and the subjectivity of understanding (characteristic of the human sciences). According to Dilthey, life, understood as creative dynamism, expresses itself in signs and works, which, in turn, manifest structural characteristics. Hence, to study the individual, one must study the patterns that an individual's life reveals. Studying structures constitutes explanation, but reaching the individual through them constitutes understanding. Thus, explanation culminates in understanding, and understanding necessarily presupposes explanation. Therefore, explanation and understanding are not oppositional, as they might initially seem.

Dilthey, following the path of Schleiermacher, gave weight to the question of understanding. He maintained that in order to understand, one has to interpret. Thus, for him, hermeneutics is both the art and science of understanding and interpretation. Since human thoughts and inwardness are expressed in language, literature is very important for understanding. Hence, the art of understanding centres on the interpretation of the written records of human existence. The interpretation of the written records needs a methodology based on certain norms and rules and for Dilthey, at least in this context, hermeneutics is the methodology of the interpretation of the written records.

We shall conclude our discussion on Dilthey by enumerating his focal ideas. Firstly, according to Dilthey, the natural sciences study outer appearances that are given to the senses, while the human sciences focus on expressions of inner reality directly experienced in all its complexity. Secondly, he asserted that the process of understanding has common characteristics in all its

diverse settings. This means that the process of understanding is common to the young, aged, educated, uneducated, rich, poor, Indians, non-Indians, etc. Thirdly, Dilthey maintained that understanding is possible because of two central conditions of life: (i) the *common nature* of humans as historical and expressive beings, and (ii) *language* as the abode of the expressed human thoughts.

Summarized Overview

Hermeneutics, often subject to criticism for its perceived relativism or subjectivism, in fact serves a crucial philosophical purpose: it refines the process of interpretation by making it more reflective, rigorous, and self-aware. Rather than creating confusion, hermeneutics clarifies the conditions under which understanding takes place, drawing attention to the prejudices, contexts, and historical situatedness that shape interpretation. Scientific approaches to hermeneutics help identify and correct interpretive errors, while their ethical impulse lies in fostering mutual respect, openness to the other, and dialogical engagement. Reinstated into the heart of philosophical inquiry, hermeneutics offers a counterbalance to both the extremes of pure objectivism and unchecked subjectivism, urging instead a nuanced middle path grounded in the co-existence of perspectives.

Self-Assessment

1. Explain the origin of modern hermeneutics.
2. Explain Schleiermacher's theory of interpretation.
3. Explain Dilthey's notion of human science.
4. The reader is away from the author – Explain

Assignments

1. Explain the differential views on modern hermeneutics.
2. Explain the theory of interpretation.
3. Critically examine Dilthey's notion of human science.

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Suggested Reading

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

UNIT 2
Gadamer: Philosophical Hermeneutics

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, learners should be able to:

• understand the historical and philosophical context of Gadamer's hermeneutics

• analyze Gadamer's critique of traditional notions of truth and his innovative conception of understanding

• appreciate Gadamer's reinterpretation of concepts such as prejudice, tradition, and authority within the framework of philosophical hermeneutics

• recognize the central role of language and historical consciousness in Gadamer's thought

• explore the concept of the *fusion of horizons* and its implications for interpretation and understanding

Background

Hans George Gadamer, the "grand old man" of German philosophy, has intensified the hermeneutical discussion for the past few decades. With him, hermeneutics has carried one step further into the linguistic phase. He made an assertion that "Being that can be understood is language" and construed hermeneutics as an encounter with being through language. His works, *Truth and Method* (1975) and *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (1976), are probably the most influential works on hermeneutics in the twentieth century, following the lead of Heidegger, Gadamer primarily viewed hermeneutical questions and problems as **philosophical** questions and problems. It is obvious that Gadamer's reflections on hermeneutics added philosophical and systematic flavours to it.

Keywords

History, Prejudice, Pre-understanding, Tradition, Authority, Belongingness, Distanciation.

4.2.1 The Historical Context and Philosophical Background

Gadamer's work emerges from a rich philosophical tradition, particularly influenced by his mentor Martin Heidegger and the phenomenological movement initiated by Edmund Husserl. However, Gadamer's unique contribution lies in his ability to synthesise these influences with insights from classical philosophy, particularly ancient Greek thought, while addressing contemporary philosophical problems. His work represents a response to the increasing dominance of scientific methodology in all spheres of knowledge and the corresponding crisis in the humanities' self-understanding.

- Gadamer's response to the increasing dominance of scientific methodology

The historical context of Gadamer's work is crucial for understanding its significance. Writing in the aftermath of World War II, during a period of intense questioning of traditional values and methodologies, Gadamer sought to rehabilitate forms of truth and knowledge that had been marginalised by the scientific revolution and Enlightenment rationalism. His project can be understood as an attempt to legitimate the truth claims of art, history, and the humanities without subordinating them to the methodological standards of the natural sciences.

- Attempt to legitimise the truth claims of art, history and humanities

4.2.2 Philosophical Hermeneutics

Gadamer was fully convinced of the implications of Heidegger's contribution to hermeneutics. As a result, he plunged into the current discussion about the human sciences from the perspective of Heidegger's ontology. More precisely, Gadamer's treatise on the problematic of hermeneutics is to be seen in terms of the reorientation of Heideggerian ontology and Dilthey's concerns on method in reference to human sciences. In this sense, his hermeneutical philosophy is the synthesis of the two movements in the history of hermeneutics, namely the movement from regional hermeneutics towards general hermeneutics, and the movement from the epistemology of the human sciences towards ontology. Furthermore, we can say that Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy is the commonplace where Dilthey and Heidegger meet each other.

- Gadamer's synthesis of two movements in the history of hermeneutics

Gadamer becomes a point of convergence between Dilthey and Heidegger, who are often seen as holding opposing views.

Two key concepts in this regard are *alienating distanciation* (*Verfremdung*) and *belongingness* (*Zugehörigkeit*). Alienating distanciation refers to the necessary detachment underlying the human sciences - it is not just a subjective feeling but an ontological condition that makes objective inquiry possible. In contrast, belongingness is a more fundamental, pre-reflective experience; it precedes conscious intention and action. Like Dilthey, Gadamer recognised that the methodology of the human sciences presupposes a critical distance from one's own culture, which disrupts this primordial sense of belonging. However, unlike Dilthey, Gadamer did not view this distanciation as final. Drawing on Heidegger's notion of belongingness, he offered a hermeneutical remedy that reestablishes connection without losing critical perspective. In doing so, Gadamer bridged the methodological gap between Dilthey's distanciation and Heidegger's existential grounding.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer demonstrates how the more primordial hermeneutical experience of belonging is deeply embedded in the domains of aesthetics, history, and language. In aesthetics, a beautiful object first affects us it seizes or moves us before we step back to evaluate or interpret it. Likewise, we belong to history, in the form of tradition, long before we consciously reflect upon it. Similarly, we inhabit language prior to any deliberate use, study, or analysis of it. This emphasis on belonging, however, does not negate the presence of alienating distanciation within these domains. While we are fundamentally connected to art, history, and language, we are not identical with them. Thus, a certain degree of distanciation remains operative in all forms of human understanding.

Insofar as Gadamer's idea of hermeneutics is concerned, the concept of historical consciousness, or more precisely, consciousness of effective history that marks the summit of his reflection on the foundation of the human sciences, is very significant. The historical consciousness is the consciousness of being exposed to history and its action. The historical consciousness is the same as the human consciousness. Human consciousness is said to be the product of different meanings that appear in history. Its essential characteristic is a tension between proximity and distance. Anchoring himself on the concept of historical consciousness, Gadamer tried to rehabilitate the notions of prejudice, tradition, and authority. It seems that in order to balance the overtones of Enlightenment philosophy, Gadamer came up with a renewed understanding of

- Gadamer reconciles Dilthey's methodological distanciation with Heidegger's existential belongingness.

- While we primordially belong to art, history, and language, some level of critical distance always remains.

- Human consciousness is the product of different meanings that appear in history

the aforesaid three notions.

4.2.2.1 Gadamer's Hermeneutical Theory

In Gadamer's hermeneutical theory, prejudice is not something negative. He never approached prejudice pejoratively, but always positively. For Gadamer, prejudice is not the opposite pole of a reason without presupposition; it is a component of understanding, linked to the finite historical character of human beings. Thus, he maintains that prejudice is a necessary condition of all historical (and other) understanding.

It is important to note that the concept of authority is often hastily equated with negative connotations such as domination and violence. Enlightenment philosophy, in particular, tends to associate authority with blind obedience to commands. However, Gadamer challenges this view, arguing that authority should not be conflated with coercion or irrational submission. For him, genuine authority is grounded in reason and recognition (*Anerkennung*), not in force or unquestioning compliance.

However, it is not the concept of authority that Gadamer emphasises ultimately, but he tries to link authority to tradition. His perspective carries Romantic overtones, suggesting that what holds true authority is tradition itself. For Gadamer, tradition forms the foundation that validates our attitudes and behaviours. Belonging to a tradition is indispensable for hermeneutics, since tradition passes through the interpretation of the signs, works and texts in which cultural heritages are inscribed and offer themselves to be deciphered. We do not enter into life with a blank slate *(tabula rasa),* but we come into existence by sharing a tradition. In this way, Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy treated tradition very positively.

The following brief description of the characteristics of tradition may shed more light on Gadamer's notion of tradition. Firstly, tradition is dynamic. This indicates that tradition is not something that is static, but it is an ongoing process. It is not merely the residue or debris of the past. Tradition is never a finished product, instead, it is always new and afresh. Secondly, tradition is societal or communitarian. To speak of an individual tradition is something absurd, because everyone is already and always a part of a larger tradition in which he or she lives, moves, and has his or her being. In other words, the individual exists in the society or community, and the individual's history

- Prejudice is not negative and is not the opposite pole of reason

- Gadamer redefines authority as grounded in reason and recognition, rather than domination or blind obedience.

- Tradition is the true authority and a necessary foundation for understanding in hermeneutics.

- Our understanding stems from tradition. There is nothing outside the tradition

goes hand in hand with the history of the society or community. Thirdly, tradition is the locus of understanding. This refers to the fact that every understanding happens within a tradition. In other words, we understand something only when something confirms with our tradition. In short, understanding stems from tradition. Finally, tradition is all-pervading, but it is neither tangible nor concrete. This means that tradition is present everywhere and it subsumes everything. There is nothing outside the tradition. However, one cannot point out something and say that it is my tradition. On the contrary, tradition is to be deciphered from the different manifestations of life, for tradition is a unified whole. What we can point out is only a part of our tradition, not the whole of it. Hence, tradition is neither tangible nor concrete.

4.2.2.2 The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem

- Hermeneutics is universal in scope, rooted in privileged human experiences, and fundamentally grounded in language.

Gadamer holds the universality of the hermeneutical problem, and his argument rests on three key assertions. First, hermeneutics has the same scope as science, meaning it encompasses the same domain of human enquiry. Second, hermeneutics has a peculiar universality which can be attained, paradoxically, only by starting from certain privileged experiences of universal significance. Third, the universal element, which generates the so-called privileged experience, is language itself. By language, Gadamer means the collection of things said, the summary of the most significant messages, transmitted not only by ordinary language but also by all of the eminent languages that have made us what we are.

- Hermeneutics is a practical art focused on mutual understanding, central to education

For Gadamer, hermeneutics is fundamentally a practice - the art of understanding and of making something understood by others. Mutual understanding, which connects human beings, is both the goal and the pathway of hermeneutics. From this perspective, hermeneutics can rightly be seen as the core of all education that aims to teach philosophical thinking. Interestingly, however, Gadamer did not attempt to formulate a fixed method or methodology for interpretation.

4.2.3 Critique of Traditional Notions of Truth

- Gadamer's criticism of the correspondence theory of truth

Gadamer's critique of traditional conceptions of truth operates on multiple levels. First, he challenges the correspondence theory of truth, which defines truth as the

correspondence between propositions and reality. This theory, dominant since Aristotle, assumes a simple subject-object relationship where a knowing subject confronts an objective reality. Gadamer argues that this model fails to account for the historical and linguistic nature of human understanding.

- Scientific obsession with method overlooks the deeper truths found in art, history, and human experience.

Furthermore, Gadamer critiques the methodological obsession of modern science and its assumption that truth can only be accessed through strict methodological procedures. He argues that this narrow conception of truth excludes essential aspects of human experience and understanding. The scientific method, while valuable in its domain, cannot account for the truth we encounter in art, history, and human interaction.

- Gadamer contrasts scientific and authentic human experience, valuing the latter's uniqueness and depth.

Central to Gadamer's critique is his analysis of the concept of experience (Erfahrung). He distinguishes between scientific experience, which aims at repeatability and verification, and genuine human experience, which is always unique and transformative. Scientific experience seeks to eliminate the historical and personal elements that Gadamer sees as essential to genuine understanding.

4.2.3.1 The Role of Prejudice and Tradition

- Prejudice, as pre-understanding, is essential for interpretation.

One of Gadamer's most controversial yet significant contributions is his rehabilitation of the concepts of prejudice and tradition. Contrary to the Enlightenment's wholesale rejection of prejudice, Gadamer contends that prejudices—understood as pre-understandings—are essential conditions for all understanding. We always engage with texts, artworks, and historical events through presuppositions shaped by our historical and cultural context.

- 'Fusion of horizons' blends our understanding with the past

This view leads to Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons" (Horizontverschmelzung). Understanding occurs when our horizon of meaning merges with the horizon of the text or artwork we are interpreting. This fusion is never complete or final but represents an ongoing dialogue between present and past, interpreter and interpreted. Tradition, for Gadamer, is not a dead weight of past opinions but a living force that shapes our understanding while being constantly reshaped by our interpretations. This dynamic view of tradition challenges both uncritical traditionalism and radical enlightenment rationalism.

4.2.3.2 The Aesthetic Dimension of Truth

Gadamer's conception of aesthetic truth represents one of his most original contributions to philosophy. Against the subjective understanding of aesthetic experience dominant since Kant, Gadamer argues that art presents us with genuine truth claims that cannot be reduced to subjective pleasure or emotional response. The artwork, for Gadamer, is not an object standing over against a subject but an event of truth in which we participate. When we encounter a genuine artwork, we don't merely contemplate it from a distance but are drawn into its world and transformed by it. This transformation is not merely subjective but involves a genuine disclosure of truth.

Gadamer develops this idea through his concept of "play" (Spiel). The experience of art, like play, involves being taken up into something larger than ourselves. The players in a game are not the subjects controlling the play but are rather caught up in the movement of the game itself. Similarly, in authentic aesthetic experience, we are caught up in the truth-event of the artwork. This understanding of aesthetic truth has several important implications. First, it challenges the modern tendency to reduce art to either entertainment or subjective expression. Second, it suggests that aesthetic experience has a cognitive dimension that cannot be separated from its sensuous aspects. Third, it implies that artistic truth is not propositional but experiential and transformative.

4.2.3.3 Language and Universal Hermeneutics

Gadamer's conception of truth is intimately connected to his understanding of language. Following Heidegger's famous dictum that "language is the house of being," Gadamer develops a universal hermeneutics based on the linguisticality (Sprachlichkeit) of all human experience and understanding. For Gadamer, language is not merely a tool we use to express pre-linguistic thoughts but is the medium in which we live and think. All understanding is linguistic in nature, even when it involves non-verbal phenomena like visual art or music. This does not mean that everything is reducible to language, but rather that our access to truth is always mediated by language.

This linguistic understanding of truth has important implications. First, it suggests that truth is always interpretive rather than immediate. Second, it implies that truth is dialogical

- Art reveals truth through active engagement and transforms us beyond subjective experience.

- Authentic aesthetic experience

- Language is a medium in which we live

- Linguistic understanding of truth suggests that truth is interpretive

rather than monological. Understanding occurs in conversation, whether with texts, artworks, or other people. Third, it means that truth is always historical and finite, shaped by the linguistic traditions in which we participate.

While Gadamer's work focuses primarily on questions of interpretation and understanding, his conception of truth has important ethical and political implications. His emphasis on dialogue and the fusion of horizons suggests an ethical stance based on openness to the other and willingness to put one's own prejudices at risk. Furthermore, Gadamer's critique of method and his rehabilitation of practical wisdom (phronesis) have important implications for ethical and political judgment. Against the tendency to reduce practical reasoning to the application of universal rules, Gadamer emphasises the role of judgment in concrete situations.

- Ethical and political implications of the linguistic understanding of truth

4.2.3 Contemporary Relevance and Critical Reception

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics has influenced various fields beyond philosophy, including literary theory, theology, and the social sciences. His critique of methodological thinking and his emphasis on dialogue and understanding remain relevant to contemporary debates about interpretation, knowledge, and truth. However, Gadamer's work has also faced significant criticism.

- Influence of hermeneutics on various fields

Jürgen Habermas, while acknowledging Gadamer's insights, argued that his emphasis on tradition could lead to conservatism and an inability to critique ideological distortions. Others have questioned whether Gadamer's conception of truth is too vague or whether his critique of method goes too far. Despite these criticisms, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics offers valuable resources for addressing contemporary philosophical problems. His critique of scientism and his defence of humanistic forms of knowledge remain relevant in an age dominated by technological thinking. His emphasis on dialogue and understanding offers important insights for addressing cultural and political conflicts.

- The problem of over-emphsis on tradition

4.2.4 Truth Beyond Method

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics represents a sophisticated attempt to conceptualise truth beyond the limitations of the scientific method while avoiding both

- Truth as emerging in dialogue, balancing objectivity and subjectivity

relativism and dogmatism. His work suggests that truth is neither purely objective nor purely subjective but emerges in the dialogue between interpreter and interpreted, present and past, self and other.

> • Truth is historical and context-dependent, but allows for universal claims through dialogue.

This conception of truth has several important characteristics. First, it is historical and finite. Truth is not timeless and absolute but emerges within specific historical and linguistic contexts. However, this does not mean that truth is merely relative. The historical nature of understanding makes universal claims possible precisely because we can transcend our initial horizons through dialogue with others.

> • Gadamer's truth is participatory and dialogical.

Second, it is participatory rather than observational. Truth is not something we merely observe from a distance but something we participate in and are transformed by. This is particularly evident in Gadamer's analysis of aesthetic experience, but it applies to all genuine understanding. Third, it is dialogical rather than monological. Truth emerges in conversation and requires openness to other perspectives and willingness to put our own prejudices at risk. This dialogical conception of truth has important implications for how we approach texts, traditions, and other cultures.

Summarized Overview

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics offers a profound meditation on the nature of truth, understanding, and human experience. His critique of traditional notions of truth and his development of an alternative conception based on dialogue and aesthetic experience remain highly relevant to contemporary philosophical discussions. His work suggests that truth is not simply a matter of correct method or correspondence to reality but involves genuine encounter and transformation. This insight has important implications for how we approach knowledge, art, and human understanding in general. Moreover, Gadamer's emphasis on dialogue and the fusion of horizons offers valuable resources for addressing contemporary challenges. In an age of increasing cultural conflict and technological dominance, his vision of truth as emerging through genuine dialogue and understanding provides important guidance for both theoretical and practical concerns.

While Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics may not resolve all questions about the nature of truth and understanding, it offers a sophisticated framework for thinking about these issues that avoids both scientific reductionism and postmodern relativism. His work continues to inspire new interpretations and applications, demonstrating the ongoing vitality of philosophical hermeneutics in contemporary thought.

Self-Assessment

1. Explain the notion of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics?

2. Explain Gadamer's notion of truth?

3. Elaborate aesthetic notion of truth.

4. How does Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons" contribute to understanding the relationship between the interpreter and the text?

5. How does Gadamer reinterpret the concepts such as prejudice, tradition, and authority? Do you think that reinterpretation is important?

Assignments

1. Interpret the notion of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics?

2. Differentiate Gadamer's notion of truth and the aesthetic of truth.

3. Analyze Gadamer's critique of modern scientific methodology in relation to his understanding of truth.

4. Discuss how Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics challenges Enlightenment views on objectivity and reason.

Reference

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2. Palmer, R. E. (1969). *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*. Northwestern University Press.

3. Putti, J. (1991). *Theology as Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur's Theory of Text Interpretation and Method in Theology*. Kristu Jyoti Publications.

Suggested Reading

1. Bleicher, J. (1993). *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique*. Routledge.

2. D'Sa, F. X. (1990/1995). *Introduction to Hermeneutics* (mimeographed notes). Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth.

3. Desbruslais, C. (1992). *Guidelines for the Study of Hermeneutics* (mimeographed notes). Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth.

Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

UNIT 3
Gadamer's Historicity of Understanding

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- explain the significance of dialogue in Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy
- understand the concept of the 'fusion of horizons' and its implications for the creation of shared understanding
- gain an understanding of Gadamer's reinterpretation of prejudices as the starting points of understanding
- apply Gadamer's philosophy of dialogue to cross-cultural communication and political discourse
- evaluate the challenges in the philosophy of dialogue

Background

Hans-Georg Gadamer, a towering figure in 20th-century hermeneutics, placed dialogue at the centre of his philosophical investigations into understanding and interpretation. His work, especially as outlined in *Truth and Method*, challenges the traditional notions of objectivity and highlights the transformative power of genuine engagement with others. For Gadamer, dialogue is not merely a tool for communication but the fundamental mode of human understanding. It is a process marked by openness, mutual respect, and the dynamic interplay of differing perspectives. This study explores Gadamer's philosophy of dialogue and fusion of horizons, delving into its conceptual foundations, practical applications, and broader implications across various fields of human interaction.

Discussion

4.3.1 The Nature of Dialogue in Gadamer's Thought

- Dialogue is an active engagement that allows one to question and be questioned

At the heart of Gadamer's philosophy is the idea that understanding is inherently dialogical. For Gadamer, dialogue transcends the boundaries of ordinary conversation; it is a profound interaction that fosters mutual transformation. Dialogue is a shared activity that demands both participants enter into it with openness and a willingness to listen. This openness, according to Gadamer, is not passive but an active engagement that allows one to question and be questioned.

- 'Fusion of horizons' is a transformative process through which new understanding emerges

The concept of the "horizon" is central to Gadamer's understanding of dialogue. A horizon, in Gadamerian terms, represents the range of vision that encompasses a person's perspective, shaped by their historical, cultural, and experiential background. Gadamer's innovation lies in his assertion that horizons are not fixed; they are constantly in motion, influenced by ongoing experiences and reflections. In dialogue, the interaction of different horizons leads to what Gadamer calls the "fusion of horizons," a transformative process through which new understanding emerges.

- Gandhi's moral and political adventures shaped his philosophy

Gadamer critiques the Enlightenment ideal of detached, objective knowledge, arguing that understanding is always situated within a specific historical and cultural context. This situatedness does not limit understanding but enriches it, as the situatedness enables individuals to bring their own experiences and prejudices into dialogue. Gadamer's use of the term "prejudice" is deliberate, seeking to reclaim it from its negative connotations. For him, prejudices understood as pre-judgments are the starting points of understanding. However, they must remain open to challenge and revision through the process of dialogue.

4.3.1.1 Dialogue and the Fusion of Horizons

- Fusion of horizons creates shared understanding through dialogue between differing perspectives

The fusion of horizons is Gadamer's term for the transformative interplay that occurs when differing perspectives encounter each other in dialogue. This concept emphasises that understanding is not about subsuming one perspective under another or erasing differences. Instead, it is about creating a shared space where both perspectives can interact and contribute to a new, enriched understanding.

- The fusion of horizons is an ongoing process that continually expands the boundaries of understanding

This process requires participants to approach dialogue with humility and a willingness to acknowledge the limits of their own knowledge. Gadamer argues that true dialogue occurs only when there is a genuine openness to the other's viewpoint. This openness does not mean abandoning one's perspective but being willing to revise it in light of new insights. The fusion of horizons is thus not a final state but an ongoing process that continually expands the boundaries of understanding.

4.3.1.2 Applications of Gadamer's Philosophy of Dialogue

a. Literature and Art

- The dialogical engagement allows the text to speak anew to each generation, creating a living tradition

In the realm of literature and art, Gadamer's philosophy of dialogue provides a framework for understanding how readers and viewers engage with works from different times and cultures. A reader approaching a Shakespearean play, for instance, brings their own contemporary horizon to bear on the text while also seeking to understand the historical and cultural context in which it was written. This dialogical engagement allows the text to speak anew to each generation, creating a living tradition.

- The interaction reveals new layers of meaning

Gadamer's insights also illuminate the interpretive process in the visual arts. When viewing a painting, the viewer enters into a silent dialogue with the work, allowing their own horizon to interact with the artist's. This interaction reveals new layers of meaning, enriching the viewer's understanding and deepening their appreciation of the work.

b. Historical Understanding

Historical understanding, for Gadamer, is inherently dialogical. Historians engage in a dialogue with the past,

> - Historical understanding is a dialogue between past and present horizons

interpreting historical events and experiences through the lens of their contemporary context. This process highlights the interplay between the historian's horizon and the horizons of the past, demonstrating that historical understanding is not about reconstructing the past as it "really was" but about engaging with it in a way that speaks to the present.

> - Challenging the positivist approach to history, which seeks to eliminate the historian's subjective perspective

Gadamer's philosophy challenges the positivist approach to history, which seeks to eliminate the historian's subjective perspective. Instead, he argues that the historian's situatedness is a strength, as it enables them to bring their own experiences and questions into dialogue with the past. This dialogical approach fosters a richer, more nuanced understanding of history.

c. Cross-Cultural Communication

> - Emphasis on openness and mutual respect provides a framework for overcoming these barriers

In an increasingly interconnected world, Gadamer's philosophy of dialogue offers valuable insights for navigating cross-cultural communication. When individuals from different cultural backgrounds engage in dialogue, they bring their distinct horizons into interaction. This process can be challenging, as cultural differences may create barriers to understanding. However, Gadamer's emphasis on openness and mutual respect provides a framework for overcoming these barriers.

> - Relevance of Gadamer's insights in addressing globalisation, migration, and intercultural conflict

By approaching cross-cultural dialogue with humility and a willingness to learn, individuals can foster mutual understanding and build bridges across cultural divides. This process requires acknowledging and valuing the other's perspective while remaining open to revising one's own assumptions. Gadamer's insights are particularly relevant in addressing contemporary challenges such as globalisation, migration, and intercultural conflict.

d. Political and Ethical Discourse

> - Philosophy of dialogue provides a framework for fostering constructive engagement with opposing viewpoints

Gadamer's philosophy of dialogue also has significant implications for political and ethical discourse. In a polarised world, where differing perspectives often lead to conflict and division, dialogue offers a way to navigate these challenges. Gadamer's emphasis on the fusion of horizons provides a framework for fostering constructive engagement with opposing viewpoints.

True dialogue in political and ethical contexts requires participants to approach each other with openness and a willingness to listen. This does not mean abandoning one's principles but being willing to question and refine them in light of new insights. By fostering genuine dialogue, communities can navigate differences and work toward shared solutions to complex problems.

4.3.1.3 Challenges

Despite its strengths, Gadamer's philosophy of dialogue is not without challenges. One significant concern is the potential for power imbalances in dialogical interactions. If one perspective dominates or silences the other, the dialogical process may be undermined, leading to superficial or coercive understanding. Addressing these challenges requires a commitment to equality and mutual respect in dialogue.

Another challenge is the difficulty of engaging in dialogue across deeply entrenched ideological divides. In such cases, achieving a fusion of horizons may require significant effort and a willingness to persist in the face of resistance. Gadamer's philosophy reminds us that dialogue is not a quick or easy process but one that demands patience, humility, and a commitment to ongoing engagement.

4.3.2 Understanding the Fusion of Horizon

The fusion of horizon lies at the heart of Gadamer's philosophical approach to understanding and interpretation, which emphasises the dynamic interplay between historical contexts, cultural frameworks, and individual perspectives. The fusion of horizons represents a process in which different viewpoints meet, interact, and merge, enabling the creation of new understanding.

The notion of 'horizon' is rooted in the metaphorical idea of a boundary that encompasses an individual's perspective. This horizon is shaped by one's historical, cultural, and experiential background, which provides the framework within which understanding takes place. Crucially, Gadamer argues that horizons are not static but are constantly in motion, influenced by new experiences and reflections. In this sense, every act of understanding is situated within a historically determined horizon, making it both subjective and context-dependent.

- The fusion of horizons creates a shared space where understanding emerges through a dynamic interplay of perspectives.

The fusion of horizons occurs when an individual encounters a different perspective, such as a historical text, a foreign culture, or another person's worldview. This encounter initiates a dialogical process in which the individual's horizon interacts with the other's, leading to mutual enrichment and transformation. Gadamer emphasises that this process is not about erasing differences or subsuming one horizon under another. Instead, it creates a shared space where understanding emerges through a dynamic interplay of perspectives.

- The prejudices or pre-judgments an inevitable and valuable part of the interpretive process.

In Gadamer's view, the fusion of horizons is inherently dialogical, requiring openness and a willingness to engage with the unfamiliar. He critiques the Enlightenment's emphasis on objectivity, arguing that understanding is always shaped by the interpreter's historical and cultural position. By acknowledging the situated nature of understanding, Gadamer seeks to rehabilitate the role of "prejudices" or pre-judgments, which he sees as an inevitable and valuable part of the interpretive process.

- The fusion of horizons allows the interpreter to move beyond their initial framework and genuinely engage with the other's perspective.

Gadamer's use of the term prejudice deviates from its modern pejorative sense. For him, prejudices are the preconditions of understanding, the assumptions and expectations that shape one's horizon. However, these prejudices must be critically examined and held open to revision in the face of new insights. The fusion of horizons requires this openness, as it allows the interpreter to move beyond their initial framework and genuinely engage with the other's perspective.

4.3.3 Applications of the Fusion of Horizons

- This interplay creates a new understanding that transcends both the reader's initial perspective and the original horizon of the text.

In the realm of literature and art, the fusion of horizons helps explain how readers and viewers engage with works from different times and cultures. For example, when interpreting a Shakespearean play, a modern reader brings their contemporary horizon to bear on the text while also seeking to understand the historical context in which it was written. This interplay creates a new understanding that transcends both the reader's initial perspective and the original horizon of the text.

In historical interpretation, the fusion of horizons enables historians to bridge the gap between the present and the past. By engaging with historical sources and contexts, historians seek to understand past events and experiences while inevitably interpreting them through their contemporary lens. This process

- Fusion of horizons offers a valuable framework for fostering mutual understanding

highlights the dialogical nature of history, where understanding is shaped by the interaction between the historian's horizon and the horizons of the past. In an increasingly globalised world, the fusion of horizons offers a valuable framework for fostering mutual understanding between cultures. When individuals from different cultural backgrounds engage in dialogue, they bring their distinct horizons into interaction. Through this process, they can overcome misunderstandings and develop a shared understanding that respects and integrates their differences.

- Need for a strong commitment to openness, equality, and mutual respect in the process of interpretation.

Despite its strengths, the concept of the fusion of horizons is not without challenges. One potential critique is whether true fusion is possible, given the deep divides that can exist between horizons. For instance, extreme cultural, historical, or ideological differences may resist reconciliation, raising questions about the limits of dialogue and understanding. Another concern is the risk of power imbalances in the dialogical process. If one horizon dominates or silences the other, the fusion may become skewed, leading to a superficial or coercive understanding rather than a genuine integration of perspectives. Addressing these challenges requires an ongoing commitment to openness, equality, and mutual respect in the process of interpretation.

Summarized Overview

Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons and dialogue provides a profound and dynamic framework for understanding and interpretation. By emphasising the dialogical nature of understanding and the interplay between historical and cultural contexts, Gadamer challenges the Enlightenment's ideal of objectivity and highlights the situatedness of human understanding. The fusion of horizons invites us to approach others with openness and humility, fostering dialogue that transcends boundaries and enriches our perspectives. In a world marked by diversity and complexity, Gadamer's ideas remain deeply relevant, offering a path toward deeper understanding and genuine engagement with the other. Dialogue, as Gadamer envisions it, is not merely a tool for communication but a way of being that fosters mutual enrichment and deeper understanding.

Self-Assessment

1. Explain the notion of Gadamer's historicity understanding?

2. Explain Gadamer's notion of dialogue?

3. Gadamer claims that understanding often begins with misunderstanding. Do you support this view? Discuss the above view in the context of philosophical hermeneutics.

Assignments

1. Interpret Gadamer's Historicity of Understanding.

2. Critically examine Gadamer's notion of dialogue.

3. Critically examine the fusion of horizons.

Reference

1. Dilthey, W. (1986). *The Development of Hermeneutics*. In D. E. Klemm (Ed.), *Hermeneutical Inquiry: Volume I – The Interpretation of Texts* (pp. 93–105). Scholars Press.

2. Ferguson, D. S. (1986). *Biblical Hermeneutics*. John Knox Press.

3. Karuvelil, G. (1996). *Hermeneutics and Post-Hermeneutics Epistemology* (mimeographed notes). JDV.

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1. Ricoeur, P. (1991). *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (K. Blamey & J. B. Thompson, Trans.). Northwestern University Press.

2. Roy, K. (1993). *Hermeneutics: East and West*. Allied Publishers in collaboration with Jadavpur University.

3. Schleiermacher, F. D. E. (1986). *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts* (H. Kimmerle, Ed.; J. Duke & J. Forstman, Trans.). Scholars Press.

MODEL QUESTION PAPER SETS

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

QP CODE: ………

Reg. No   : ....

Name   : ……...........

THIRD SEMESTER - MA PHILOSOPHY EXAMINATION

DISCIPLINE CORE - M23PH09DC - Continental Philosophy

(CBCS - PG)

MODEL QUESTION PAPER- SET- I

2023 -24 Admission Onwards

Time: 3 Hours

Max Marks: 70

SECTION A

Answer any ten of the following. Each question carries one mark

(10X1 = 10 Marks)

1. Who is considered the initiator of phenomenology?

2. What is the existentialist dictum associated with Sartre?

3. Define 'Langue' according to Saussure.

4. What does Derrida mean by 'logocentrism'?

5. Who introduced the concept of 'epoche'?

6. According to Merleau-Ponty, where is consciousness rooted?

7. Name the post-structuralist thinker who proposed the idea of 'power/ knowledge'?

8. What is Schleiermacher's two-fold model of interpretation?

9. What is meant by 'intentionality' in Husserl's phenomenology?

10. Name the philosopher associated with the phrase 'being-towards-death'.

11. What are the two aspects of a linguistic sign according to Saussure?

12. In existentialism, what term describes living according to societal expectations rather than one's true self?

13. Who said, 'Man is condemned to be free'?

14. What is the concept introduced by Hans-Georg Gadamer that describes the merging of the interpreter's perspective with that of the text or historical context during the process of understanding?

15. Name the thinker called the 'Hermeneutic of Knowing', who emphasizes understanding as a fundamental way of knowing.

SECTION B

Answer any five questions in two or three sentences each. Each question carries two marks.

(5X2 =10 Marks)

16. 'Existence precedes essence' Define.

17. What is the distinction between 'signifier' and 'signified'?

18. Define the concept of 'eidetic reduction.'

19. What is meant by 'deconstruction'?

20. How does Nietzsche's concept of the 'overman' relate to existentialism?

21. Mention any two key contributions of Schleiermacher to hermeneutics.

22. Explain Gadamer's notion of truth.

23. Define 'intentionality' in phenomenology.

24. What is 'bad faith' according to Sartre?

25. How does Nietzsche differentiate between master and slave morality?

SECTION C

Answer any five questions in a paragraph. Each question carries four marks.
(5X4 = 20 Marks)

26. Discuss the methodological significance of 'epoche' in phenomenology.

27. What is meant by 'authentic existence' in existentialism?

28. Explain Saussure's idea of language as a system of differences.

29. What is Nietzsche's concept of the 'Will to Power'?

30. Briefly explain the transformation of hermeneutics from text interpretation to ontology.

31. How does existentialism respond to the crisis of Enlightenment rationality?

32. Discuss Heidegger's concept of Dasein as Being-in-the-world.

33. According to Foucault, how do power and knowledge relate to each other?

SECTION D

Answer any three questions in two pages. Each question carries ten marks.

(3X10 =30 Marks)

34. Discuss Edmund Husserl's phenomenological methods in detail and explain how this leads to transcendental phenomenology.

35. Critically evaluate the basic tenets of existentialism with reference to Sartre and Kierkegaard.

36. Discuss the structuralist revolution introduced by Saussure and its implications for the study of culture.

37. Elaborate on Schleiermacher's model of interpretation, highlighting the psycho logical and grammatical dimensions.

38. Examine the critique of metaphysics in Derrida's deconstruction. How does it challenge traditional binaries in Western philosophy?

39. Give an account of Merleau-Ponty's conception of phenomenology, emphasizing his focus on perception and embodied experience.

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THIRD SEMESTER - MA PHILOSOPHY EXAMINATION

DISCIPLINE CORE - M23PH09DC - Continental Philosophy
(CBCS - PG)

MODEL QUESTION PAPER- SET- II

2023 -24 Admission Onwards

Time: 3 Hours   Max Marks: 70

SECTION A

Answer any ten of the following. Each question carries one mark

                                                   (10X1 = 10 Marks)

1. What does Husserl mean by 'Lebenswelt'?

2. Who is known as the father of modern existentialism?

3. Who famously declared, 'God is dead'?

4. Name the existentialist who spoke of 'the leap of faith'.

5. What is 'noesis' in Husserl's terminology?

6. What is the meaning of the term 'Differance'?

7. Who is the post-structuralist thinker associated with the archaeology of knowledge?

8. What are syntagmatic relations in structuralism?

9. According to Dilthey, what do history and hermeneutics both interpret?

10. Who introduced the comparative and divinatory methods of interpretation?

11. What does Gadamer consider the true authority in hermeneutics?

12. What does Heidegger mean by 'Being-in-the-world'?

13. What is the etymological origin of the term 'hermeneutics'?

14. What method does Foucault use to trace the historical construction of human subjectivity?

15. Name the structuralist thinker who applied Saussure's linguistic model to myths.

SECTION B

Answer any five questions in two or three sentences each. Each question carries two marks.

(5X2 =10 Marks)

16. Define the notion of 'phenomenological bracketing.'

17. What is the concept of 'bad faith' in Sartre's thought?

18. Describe the structuralist perspective on 'binary oppositions'.

19. Define the role of the interpreter in hermeneutics.

20. What are the three stages of life as described by Kierkegaard

21. Explain Derrida's critique logocentrism.

22. What does Heidegger mean by 'Being-towards-death'?

23. Define 'langue' in Saussure's structuralism.

24. What is the significance of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations in Saussure's structural linguistics?

25. Define 'arbitrary nature of the sign' in Saussurean linguistics.

SECTION C

Answer any five questions in a paragraph. Each question carries four marks.
(5X4 = 20 Marks)

26. Explain the concept of intentionality with a suitable example.

27. How does Nietzsche's proclamation 'God is dead' influence existentialist thought?

28. Differentiate between Saussure's ideas of langue and parole.

29. What does Foucault mean by 'power is everywhere'?

30. Describe Schleiermacher's distinction between grammatical and technical interpretation.

31. Write a short note on the transition from structuralism to post-structuralism.

32. Explain Gadamer's notion of dialogue.

33. How does Derrida's concept of 'deconstruction' challenge traditional metaphysical thinking?

SECTION D

Answer any three questions in two pages. Each question carries ten marks.

(3X10 =30 Marks)

34. Elaborate on the critique of naturalism and historicism in Husserl's *Philosophy as Rigorous Science*.

35. How did Schleiermacher and Gadamer shape hermeneutics, and what are the implications for interpretation and cross-cultural discourse?

36. Discuss Derrida's method of deconstruction. How does it expose the instability of meaning and challenge Western logocentric and phonocentric assumptions?

37. Analyse Heidegger's concept of Dasein as Being-in-the-world and Being-to wards-death.

38. Trace the evolution of hermeneutics from Schleiermacher to Paul Ricoeur, high lighting the shift from epistemology to ontology.

39. Examine the core characteristics of existentialism. Discuss the fundamental differences between theistic and atheistic existentialist thinkers, highlighting how their views on freedom, meaning, and faith shape their existential philosophies.

സർവ്വകലാശാലാഗീതം

വിദ്യയാൽ സ്വതന്ത്രരാകണം
വിശ്വപൗരരായി മാറണം
ഗ്രഹപ്രസാദമായ് വിളങ്ങണം
ഗുരുപ്രകാശമേ നയിക്കണേ

കൂരിരുട്ടിൽ നിന്നു ഞങ്ങളെ
സൂര്യവീഥിയിൽ തെളിക്കണം
സ്നേഹദീപ്തിയായ് വിളങ്ങണം
നീതിവൈജയന്തി പാറണം

ശാസ്ത്രവ്യാപ്തിയെന്നുമേകണം
ജാതിഭേദമാകെ മാറണം
ബോധരശ്മിയിൽ തിളങ്ങുവാൻ
ജ്ഞാനകേന്ദ്രമേ ജ്വലിക്കണേ

കുരീപ്പുഴ ശ്രീകുമാർ

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NO TO DRUGS

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CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

COURSE CODE: M23PH09DC