

## **CORE-PAPER PHILOSOPHY**

### **SEMESTER IV**

## **CONTEMPORARY WESTERN PHILOSOPHY**

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### **Course Introduction**

What does contemporary philosophy refer?

I think our first “online intellectual engagement” requires a brief overview of what we have studied in previous classes/years/semesters. I think, to recapitulate general classification of philosophy such as, Greek philosophy, medieval philosophy and modern philosophy is important to understand clearly the philosophies of contemporary philosophers.

The term ‘contemporary philosophy’ refers to the current era of philosophy, generally dealing with philosophers from the late nineteenth century through to the twenty-first century.

### **Major Philosophical Movements of Contemporary Philosophy are;**

Pragmatism, Existentialism, Analytic Philosophy, Logical Positivism, Phenomenology, Postmodernism, Feminism, Social Constructivism,

## UNIT I

Who is Soren Kierkegaard?

Soren Aabye Kierkegaard was a Danish philosopher, critic and theologian. He is widely considered as the first existentialist philosopher also labeled as the father of existentialism. For Kierkegaard, existence and truth is prior to thinking. If you remember in one of our previous lectures we have discussed Descartes dictum of (*Cogito ergo sum*). *I think therefore I am*” Kierkegaard is severely critical of Descartes assertion that thinking precedes existence. For Kierkegaard truth is just the opposite of it. In his view we must ‘be’ before any thinking is possible. In this view existence is prior to thought. Thus it is the basic belief of all existentialists ontology is prior to epistemology.

### **What is existentialism?**

Existentialism is a new trend in the development of philosophy emerged in 19th- and 20th-century which takes as its starting point the experience of the human subject—not merely the thinking subject, but the acting, feeling, living human individual. It is a philosophy of concrete human being.

Meaning and nature of subjectivity;

### **What is subjectivity?**

In simple terms, subjectivity refers to what is personal to the individual. If something is subjective that means its existence or properties depend on the subject. It means that it’s our perception of the particular object which gives it Particular properties.

Something is objective if it is independent of our opinion or experience. Thus, ordinarily the ‘subject’ in philosophy means a knowing agent or “the knower”. Subjectivity in this sense would mean the nature or the state of the knower.

Subjectivity is a central concept in Kierkegaard's philosophy. In Kierkegaardian sense subjectivity, however, does not mean this abstract nature or state, but self-consciously existing concrete subject. Kierkegaard conveys that most essentially, truth is not just a matter of discovering objective facts. While objective facts are important, there is a second and more crucial element of truth, which involves how one relates oneself to those matters of fact. Since how one acts is, from the ethical perspective, more important than any matter of fact, truth is to be found in subjectivity rather than objectivity. Though Kierkegaard emphasizes subjectivity over objectivity, but it is necessary to point out that Kierkegaard did not deny objective knowledge, rather he regarded it incapable and limited in its achievements. For him, objective approach is unreliable and inadequate to lead a religious and ethical life. Hence, Kierkegaard's subjectivity has ethical and spiritual dimensions. Kierkegaard not only prioritizes individuals' personal relation to God and his categories of faith, passion, inwardness and commitment that signifies the way in which this relationship should be lived, but also addresses an ethical issue which is concerned about one's life, that is how best to live? Hence subjectivity is also an ethical quality and has validity only when it is brought into existence, otherwise it has no value and remains a mere idea or possibility. In Kierkegaard's view truth must satisfy the entire being of an individual not only the intellect.

## **STAGES OF EXISTENCE**

### **Three spheres/stages of human existence**

In Kierkegaard's view human beings are living on one or more of three different planes of existence, each of which corresponds to a different life-style. The three stages of existence are; the aesthetic sphere, followed by ethical sphere, and finally the religious sphere. Kierkegaard sometimes calls these 'the stages on life's way' and other times he refers to them as spheres of existence.

Each of these stages represents different modes of human existence and each mode has its source in a corresponding state of consciousness that determines the particular outlook or worldview responsible for the values, ideals, behavior and so on of that mode of existence. These stages also represent a developmental theory of human existence.

As a person continues to evolve in consciousness there tends to be a progression stage. There is also a hierarchical arrangement within each sphere- some humans will express a particular mode of existence in an undeveloped manner, whereas others are exemplary of more evolved versions of that way of life. Since the development through the stages of existence has a spiritual character, it is not automatic, like physical growth, but requires a conscious choice by the individual.

Let's turn to these stages one by one

**Aesthetic stage;** the first stage is the aesthetic stage. At this stage one lives according to his/her impulses and emotions. In this stage individual's most part is governed by his senses. Thus aesthetic stage is the realm of sensory experience and pleasures. Kierkegaard views this sphere of existence as stage of desire fulfillment. For this reason Kierkegaard defines it as individual's immature or corrupted stage.

The aesthetic stage of life is self-interested, it is actually based on very weak sense of self, since all action is motivated by momentary moods, desires and inclinations, and none of these can provide a person a stable identity.

Kierkegaard further believes that the aesthetic mode of living is devoid of commitment, social conventions, at this level one fails to engage with reality of one's existence, and refuses to accept freedom and responsibility. Kierkegaard however, maintained that in this stage individual experiences dissatisfaction and boredom that makes a move to another stage (ethical) possible.

### **Ethical stage;**

The second realm of human existence according to Kierkegaard is the ethical sphere. "Ethical" means acting morally and responsibly. In other words ethical mode can be understood in relation of conformity to moral law. The actions which are being taken out in terms of ethical vocabulary, and the responsibilities, duties, rights etc. that an ethical person recognizes and acknowledges are the rules of morality. Moreover, "ethical person accepts the limitations upon his/her life that moral responsibility imposes. But Kierkegaard describes this as "choosing oneself". At this stage individual seeks self-knowledge and struggles to become a good human being.

Kierkegaard, however, observes that ethical approach to life does not always work because human life is filled with ambiguity and paradox for this reason he himself took a leap to the religious sphere.

**Religious sphere;**

The religious sphere is the mode of existence according to Kierkegaard, in which an individual is said to be related to God. Kierkegaard maintains that this stage is to be his chosen mode of existence. According to him, the religious stage of life is the highest mode of human existence which is ruled by faith in God.

## **Introducing Friedrich Nietzsche**

Friedrich Nietzsche was an influential German philosopher. Nietzsche saw his age facing a fundamental crisis in values. With the rise of science, the Christian worldview no longer held a prominent explanatory role in people's lives, a view Nietzsche captures in the phrase "God is dead." However, science does not introduce a new set of values to replace the Christian values it displaces. Nietzsche rightly foresaw that people need to identify some source of meaning and value in their lives, and if they could not find it in science, they would turn to aggressive nationalism and other such salves.

### **Doctrine of will to power;**

Friedrich Nietzsche was an influential German philosopher. The doctrine of *will to power* is one of the prominent concepts in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. The doctrine of Nietzsche's will to power describes what Nietzsche might have believed to be the main driving force in humans.

On one level, the will to power is a psychological insight: our fundamental drive is for power as realized in independence and dominance. This will is stronger than the will to survive, as martyrs willingly die for a cause if they feel that associating themselves with that cause gives them greater power, and it is stronger than the will to sex, as monks willingly renounce sex for the sake of a greater cause. While the will to power can manifest itself through violence and physical dominance, Nietzsche is more interested in the sublimated will to power, where people turn their will to power inward and pursue self-mastery rather than mastery over others.

Nietzsche contends that humanity is a transition, not a destination. We ceased to be animals when we taught ourselves to control our instincts for the sake of greater gains. By learning to resist some of our natural impulses, we have been able to forge civilizations, develop knowledge, and deepen ourselves morally. Rather than directing our will to power outward to dominate those around us, we have directed it inward and gained self-mastery. However, this struggle for self-mastery takes us to Nietzsche's concept of the superman that is the destination which we started heading towards when we first reined in our animal instincts.

## Who is Gabriel Marcel?

Gabriel Marcel was a well known theistic existentialist philosopher. His philosophical concern is to restore and explore the vital experiences. These experiences spring from man to man in the fullness of their being. Marcel understands philosophy as the contemplation of being. He observed that the importance of being has been destroyed in abstract speculative philosophy of earlier philosophers. In his view being (human existence) has been reduced either in the nature of things or the objective thought. According to Marcel we have return being from the abstract thought to concrete being.

The distinction between problem and mystery is central to Marcel's philosophy. A problem is something external to us. A mystery, on the other hand, is something from which we cannot extricate ourselves. Marcel called a mystery a "problem which encroaches upon its own data." It has roots in the depths of our being, but it also reaches beyond us. There is no general technique for addressing a mystery. It can only be lived out with wisdom responsive to the particulars of the situation and the people involved. Birth, love, and death are central mysteries for Marcel. The death of a child involves a parent in all three.

Marcel thinks that we should try to understand the distinction between problem and mystery. He says that a mystery is a problem which encroaches upon its own data, invades them, as it were and thereby transcends itself as a simple problem. He tries to clarify the distinction with the help of some examples. We know that there exists a mystery of the union of the body and the soul, the indivisible unity is always inadequately expressed by such phrases as I have body, I make use of body , I feel my body , etc. the unity can neither be analyzed nor reconstituted out precedent elements. It is not only data Marcel would say that it is the basis of data. It is the sense of being my own presence to myself. It is presence of which the act of self consciousness is only an inadequate symbol.

Marcel often describes a mystery as a "problem that encroaches on its own data" Such a "problem" is, in fact, meta-problematic; it is a question in which the identity of the questioner becomes an issue itself—where, in fact, the questioner is involved in the question he or she is asking. On the level of the mysterious, the identity of the questioner is tied to the question and,

therefore, the questioner is not interchangeable. To change the questioner would be to alter the question. It makes every difference who is asking the question when confronting a mystery.

Marcel insists that mysteries can be found in the question of being, in the union of the body and soul, as well as well as in relation to the “problem” of evil, freedom and human emotions. For example, I cannot question Being as if my being is not at issue in the questioning. The question of being and the question of who I am (my being) cannot be addressed separately. These two questions are somehow incoherent if approached as problems; however, taken together, their mysterious character is revealed and they cancel themselves out as problems.

## Unit II

### Husserl's phenomenological method;

The word phenomenology is associated with a great German philosopher Edmund Husserl. Phenomenology etymologically means, "Science of phenomenon or appearance". Phenomenology, in Husserl's conception, is primarily concerned with the systematic reflection on and study of the structures of consciousness and the phenomena that appear in acts of consciousness. The doctrine of Phenomenology has become Husserl's legitimate philosophical method or way of proceeding in philosophy.

By "phenomenology" Husserl always meant the science of consciousness and its objects; Husserl's method entails the suspension of judgment while relying on the intuitive grasp of knowledge, free of presuppositions and intellectualizing. Sometimes depicted as the "science of experience," thus the phenomenological method is rooted in intentionality. Intentionality represents an alternative to the representational theory of consciousness, which holds that reality cannot be grasped directly because it is available only through perceptions of reality that are representations of it in the mind. Husserl countered that consciousness is not "in" the mind; rather, consciousness is conscious of something other than itself (the intentional object), whether the object is a substance or a figment of [imagination](#) (i.e., the real processes associated with and underlying the figment). Hence the phenomenological method relies on the [description of phenomena](#) as they are given to consciousness, in their [immediacy](#). Thus it is study of consciousness as intentional, i.e. as directed towards objects.

The procedure of bracketing is essential to Husserl's "phenomenological reduction" - the methodological procedure by which we are led from "the natural attitude," in which we are involved in the actual world and its affairs, to "the phenomenological attitude," in which the analysis and detached description of the content of consciousness is possible. The phenomenological reduction helps us to free ourselves from prejudices and secure the purity of our detachment as observers, so that we can encounter "things as they are in themselves" independently of any presuppositions".

The phenomenological reduction consists of at least two stages: the transcendental reduction and the eidetic reduction. The transcendental reduction requires the suspension "natural attitude"—the implicit, unexamined, and familiar outlook most people exhibit throughout most of their lives

—in order to view objects in the specific way in which they are perceived “in consciousness.” Man has the unique ability to turn consciousness on itself; the transcendental ego can become both subject and object, delegating meaning to an object within its own consciousness. In this transcendental reduction, also called the epoche, the natural attitude is bracketed out, eliminating the notion of perspective “self,” and leaving only transcendental awareness of the process of directed consciousness.

The second stage, the eidetic reduction, attempts to uncover an object’s essential “structures and relationships within the thing.” Husserl proposes a process entitled free imaginary variations, or envisioning the object without certain characteristics in order to determine which are essential.

### **Heidegger on the Problem of Being;**

Martin Heidegger is one of the important existentialist philosophers. Heidegger has given a masterpiece work *Being and Time* to contemporary philosophy. In *this* book, Heidegger attempts to answer the question "What is being?" He tries to do this through studying the concept of *Dasein*. *Dasein* is a German word that roughly translates to "being-there." Heidegger uses the word *Dasein* primarily to refer to the human being, as the self-conscious being who is aware of its own existence. Like other existentialists Heidegger also observed that science observes the being-there as an objective reality, whereas philosophy studies the being-per-se that beyond our commonsense experience. It is beyond both knower and the known. For Heidegger being can be studied only through inward experience by self-knowledge.

Heidegger was concerned with what he considered the essential philosophical question: What is it, to be? This led to the question of what kind of "being" human beings have. Heidegger posited a fundamental relation between the mode of being of objects and of humanity and the structure of time. The individual is, however, always in danger of being submerged in the world of objects, everyday routine, and the conventional, shallow behavior of the crowd. The feeling of dread (*Angst*) brings the individual to a confrontation with death and the ultimate meaninglessness of life, but only in this confrontation can an authentic sense of Being and of freedom be attained.

According to Heidegger, we need to restate the question of the meaning of being. Being is always the being of a being. The "ontological difference," the distinction between Being and beings, is fundamental for Heidegger. Heidegger felt that phenomenology was the only method by which to do *ontology*, the study of Being. For Heidegger, to understand Being, one must first understand the human kind of being. In Heidegger's view, temporality is the primordial meaning of *Dasein* and it is derived from three structures, existence, thrownness, fallenness. Existence means that *Dasein* is potentiality-for-being; it projects its being upon various possibilities. So it represents future. Thrownness means *Dasein* finds already in a certain spiritual and material, historically conditioned environment so with limited possibilities. This represents past. Fallenness means *Dasein* exists in the midst of beings which are both *Dasein* and not *Dasein*. This represents

present. Fallenness, explains Heidegger, is a turning-away or fleeing of *Dasein* into its "they-self." The present state is fallen state. It is a state of self-oblivion. As long as oblivion persists human being remains a stranger to himself. This turning-away is grounded in anxiety. In this view Heidegger maintains that the human *Dasein* is potentially capable of achieving the true authentic being.

## Sartre's Concept of Freedom

Jean Paul Sartre is a reputed twentieth century French existentialist philosopher. Sartre strongly said that Man is condemned to be free. Because we have not any choice in the matter of freedom and being free. Sartre said we are thrown in this world and after that, we are completely responsible, for everything we do. When we have no chance of whether we will be free to choose and then be responsible for all our activities in the future is indeed 'condemnation'. And further, when we make things worse, we cannot blame anybody or anything for it. Sartre rejected God as a deterministic father and said we cannot blame God, also we cannot blame our parents, our teachers our government for our predicaments they have nothing to do with it. It is called real irony in the philosophy of Sartre.

Sartre defines two types, or ways, of being: being-in-itself, and being-for-itself. He uses the first category of *being-in-itself* to describe things that have a definable and complete essence yet are not conscious of themselves or their essential completeness, such as trees, rocks, and birds, for example, fall into this category. Sartre uses *being-for-itself* to describe human beings, who are defined by their possession of consciousness and, more specifically, by their consciousness of their own existence—and, as Sartre writes, by their consciousness of lacking the complete, definable essence of the *being-in-itself*. This state of being-for-itself is not just defined by self-consciousness—it would not exist without that consciousness, and free being. Thus in Sartre's classification of being only for-itself that is only human being are free because they are not fixed or pre-determined like objects rather for Sartre humans are self-determining beings. They are absolutely free to make themselves what they choose and decide to be but this absolute freedom makes them responsible what they are and what they will be. In this sense freedom and responsibility in Sartre's philosophy goes hand by hand.