



The Paradox of Freedom: Navigating Existential Dilemmas in a Complex World

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the existential dilemma of human freedom in contemporary society, particularly emphasizing the tension between individual quests for authenticity and societal pressures towards conformity. Existentialist and phenomenological thinkers like Sartre, Heidegger, and Husserl provide valuable critiques of modernity that highlight how functionalism, operationalism, and actionalism can impede authentic existence. The paper then examines the Indian context, where political pragmatism manifests in mechanisms like Aadhaar and the UAPA, creating a pseudo-world of freedom while restricting genuine autonomy. It acknowledges the limitations of existing philosophical frameworks in addressing the complexities of human existence and proposes a shift towards a more nuanced and inclusive dialogue. This dialogue, informed by hermeneutics, critical reflection, and openness to diverse viewpoints, fosters the development of a "dialogical self" and empowers individuals to navigate the challenges of forging an authentic path in a world fraught with uncertainty. Virtue ethics is introduced as a complementary framework, emphasizing the development of character traits that contribute to a meaningful and authentic life. By fostering critical thinking, open dialogue, and an awareness of power structures, this approach equips individuals to navigate the complexities of freedom and live a more fulfilling life.

Keywords: Freedom, Authenticity, Existentialism, Phenomenology, Dialogue, Virtue Ethics, Hermeneutics, Social Justice

I. Introduction

The existential dilemma of human freedom in contemporary society is a profound issue that has been addressed by several key existentialist and phenomenological thinkers. This dilemma centers on the tension between an individual's quest for authentic existence and the pressures of societal norms that prioritize practical and utilitarian concerns. Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism posits that "existence precedes essence," asserting that individuals are fundamentally free and responsible for creating their own meaning and values. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre discusses the concept of "bad faith" (*mauvaise foi*), where individuals deceive themselves to escape the anxiety of absolute freedom and the accompanying responsibility (Sartre, 1943, p. 70). This notion of bad faith illustrates how societal pressures and functionalist thinking can lead individuals to conform, thus compromising their authentic freedom (Sartre, 1943, p. 86). Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, explores the concept of "Dasein" (being-there), emphasizing authentic existence and the necessity of confronting the "nothingness" that underlies human existence. Heidegger warns against the "they-self" (*das Man*), where individuals succumb to societal norms and lose their authentic self (Heidegger, 1927, p. 167). The dominance of operationalism and functionalism can be seen as manifestations of the "they-self," diverting individuals from genuine existential reflection (Heidegger, 1927, p. 220). Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, introduces the concept of "lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*), referring to the pre-reflective world of lived experience. In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl critiques the reductionist tendencies of scientific and functionalist approaches that strip away the richness of human experience (Husserl, 1936, p. 48). By focusing on practical, utilitarian concerns, modern thinking can obscure the deeper, existential aspects of human life (Husserl, 1936, p. 73). Max Weber's analysis of modernity and rationalization highlights how the "iron cage" of bureaucratic rationality constrains individual freedom. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber describes how the rise of bureaucratic and utilitarian thinking can lead to disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) and a loss of individual autonomy and meaning (Weber, 1905, p. 181). This rationalization process, while efficient, often limits the scope for personal freedom and authentic existence (Weber, 1905, p. 203).

The existential dilemma of human freedom in contemporary society, as outlined, is deeply rooted in existentialist and phenomenological critiques of modernity. Thinkers such as Sartre, Heidegger, Husserl, and Weber provide valuable insights into how functionalism, operationalism, and actionalism can impede authentic existence and existential reflection. Their works collectively underscore the tension between societal pressures and the individual's quest for genuine freedom and meaning.

II. The existential dilemma of human freedom:

The existential dilemma of human freedom in contemporary society, as shaped by political pragmatism, is vividly observable in India through various mechanisms and strategies. These measures, while ostensibly protecting and enhancing freedom, often restrict individual autonomy and create a pseudo-world of freedom. Here are some current examples illustrating this dynamic in India:

(a). The Aadhaar program, which issues a unique identification number to Indian residents, is one of the largest biometric identification systems in the world. While the government promotes Aadhaar as a means to improve welfare delivery and reduce corruption, it has raised significant concerns about privacy and surveillance. The collection of biometric data and its potential misuse by the state or other actors can lead to mass surveillance, restricting individual freedom and privacy (Chaudhuri, 2019). This situation reflects the existentialist notion of "bad faith," where individuals' authentic freedom is compromised by external pressures. A key concern with Aadhaar is the infringement on individual privacy. The Supreme Court of India, in the landmark Puttaswamy judgment (2017), recognized the right to privacy as a fundamental right. However, the mandatory linking of Aadhaar with various services (such as bank accounts, mobile numbers, and social welfare schemes) often forces individuals to surrender their biometric and personal information, thereby compromising their privacy. Chaudhuri (2019) points out that the collection and storage of such extensive personal data without robust privacy safeguards can lead to a surveillance state, where citizens' movements and activities are constantly monitored. The Aadhaar project, while aiming to enhance administrative efficiency and service delivery, inadvertently creates an existential dilemma regarding human freedom. The necessity of biometric authentication for accessing essential services can lead to exclusion for those without Aadhaar, either due to system failures or lack of enrollment, effectively curtailing their freedom to access welfare benefits. This mirrors Sartre's concept of "bad faith," where individuals' authentic freedoms are compromised by external constraints (Sartre, 1943, p. 70).

(b). The UAPA has been increasingly used to detain activists, journalists, and political opponents under the pretext of maintaining national security. The broad and often vague definitions of "unlawful activities" allow the government to suppress dissent and curtail civil liberties, creating an environment where individuals are afraid to exercise their freedoms for fear of legal repercussions. This situation reflects a state of unfreedom masked by legal and institutional mechanisms that purportedly protect the nation (Ramanathan, 2019). Political pragmatism in India often results in the transformation of freedom into unfreedom, as illustrated by examples such as the Aadhaar program, centralization of power, demonetization, media control, and the use of the UAPA. These measures, while ostensibly aimed at enhancing security, unity, and economic stability, frequently constrain individual autonomy and create a pseudo-world where citizens believe they are free, despite significant restrictions on their genuine freedoms. This contemporary manifestation of unfreedom underscores the ongoing relevance of existentialist and phenomenological critiques of modernity.

Alienation and Non-Freedom:

The attempts of these philosophical alternatives to establish human freedom paradoxically result in man's total non-freedom and further alienation. The concept of authentic existence, when pursued within these frameworks, becomes another form of alienation, as it fails to address the complexities of individual identity and experience. Karl Marx argued that capitalism inherently alienates workers from their labor and their own humanity, turning them into mere cogs in a machine (Marx, 1844). However, critics point out that the pursuit of a communist utopia, with a powerful state controlling everything, could create a new form of alienation by restricting individual freedoms (Fromm, 1961). Similarly, existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre's emphasis on absolute freedom and the responsibility to create one's own meaning in life, while promoting individual agency, can be paralyzing. The constant pressure to choose and be responsible for everything can lead to isolation and a sense of meaninglessness (Sartre, 1943). Likewise, feminist Simone de Beauvoir argues that societal expectations often define women in relation to men, leading to a sense of "the Other," but the pursuit of a pre-defined "authentic female self" can be equally restrictive. Women's experiences are diverse, and a singular definition of a free woman might not capture this complexity (Beauvoir, 1949). These critiques highlight a common thread: imposing rigid structures or expectations, even in the pursuit of freedom, can be alienating. Some thinkers suggest focusing on the process of becoming authentic rather than a fixed end goal, allowing for individual exploration and growth (Taylor, 1971). Additionally, fostering social connection and shared purpose can offer a sense of belonging without sacrificing individuality (Ferguson, 1983). Ultimately, developing critical thinking skills allows individuals to assess different ideas and choose a path that promotes both freedom and connection, leading to a more meaningful and less alienated existence.

Contingency of Human Existence:

The controversial and conflicting nature of these philosophical alternatives underscores the contingent nature of human existence. None of these alternatives can provide a conclusive answer to the problem of human freedom and authentic existence due to their inherent limitations and ideological biases. The very disagreement between philosophical alternatives on freedom and authenticity highlights the contingency of human existence, as championed by existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre (Sartre, 1943). Since existence precedes essence in existentialism, there's no preordained script for human life. Freedom, with its inherent limitations and anxieties, is our starting point. These limitations and biases become opportunities for creating our own meaning through the choices we make (Sartre, 1943). Therefore, the "problem" of human freedom and authenticity has no single, universally applicable answer because each individual forges their path within the constraints of their unique situation. However, this freedom comes with limitations and anxieties. Sartre acknowledges the limitations imposed by our biological makeup, social circumstances, and past choices (p. 528). These limitations can feel like constraints on our freedom, leading to a sense of anguish (p. 48). Existentialism doesn't see these limitations as negating freedom. Instead, they become the starting point for creating our own meaning. As Sartre puts it, "man is condemned to be free" (p. xxxi). We are condemned because we have no choice but to make choices, even when faced with limitations. These choices, however limited, are what define who we are and the path we forge in life (p. xxxii). Therefore, the disagreement among philosophical alternatives on freedom and authenticity becomes a

testament to the contingency of human existence. There's no single, definitive answer because each individual, with their unique set of limitations and biases, creates their own meaning through the choices they make within their circumstances (Sartre, 1943).

The Indian context exemplifies the contingency of human existence in a particularly nuanced way. Individuals grapple with forging their own paths amidst powerful social structures, historical legacies, and diverse philosophical traditions. The "freedom" to choose is constantly challenged by limitations, making the process of creating meaning a complex and ongoing struggle. The rise of media and the internet presents a double-edged sword. On one hand, it increases exposure to diverse ideas, potentially fostering a more tolerant and pluralistic society. From an existentialist perspective, this aligns with the concept of individual freedom - the ability to question established norms and forge one's own path. The ease of access to information can also lead to a superficial understanding of complex issues like religion and atheism. This, coupled with a lack of critical thinking skills, can have unintended consequences. Individuals raised in deep-rooted traditions might reject their upbringing without fully grasping the nuances of their own heritage or the intricacies of alternative belief systems. This exemplifies a potential pitfall of uncritical freedom within a context rich with tradition. As sociologist Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 1991) argues, individuals in late modernity face a constant process of reflexive modernization - questioning and potentially revising their inherited traditions in light of new information. However, without the tools for critical analysis, this process can lead to a fragmented sense of self and a disconnect from their cultural identity.

The challenge lies in fostering an environment that encourages informed freedom. This might involve educational reforms that emphasize critical thinking skills alongside exposure to diverse viewpoints. By equipping individuals with the tools to navigate the complexities of modern life, we can empower them to make meaningful choices about their beliefs and traditions, even within the context of a rich and enduring heritage.

III. Permanent Dialogue and Open-mindedness:

Contemporary philosophical alternatives on freedom and authenticity, while offering valuable insights, often present limitations due to their inherent biases and ideological frameworks. The article argues that a more fruitful approach lies in a concept of **permanent dialogue**. This ongoing conversation wouldn't seek a single, definitive answer but rather facilitate a continuous process of interpretation, drawing inspiration from the field of **hermeneutics**. Here, individuals engage in open exchange, constantly revising their understanding of freedom and authenticity through encounters with diverse perspectives. This dialogue fosters the development of a **dialogical self** (Bakhtin, 1981). Imagine two individuals: one raised in a strictly religious household and another with a completely secular upbringing. Through conversation marked by self-restraint and open-mindedness, they might gain a deeper understanding of how each views freedom and authenticity within their respective contexts. Each person's experiences and beliefs would inform the conversation, allowing both to refine their own perspectives on freedom and what constitutes an authentic life. This interaction expands their understanding of the possibilities and limitations of freedom, moving beyond the confines of their individual backgrounds.

The dialogue aligns with the concept of **communicative action** (Habermas, 1984). Through respectful and rational discussion, participants can critically examine their assumptions about freedom and existence. Imagine someone who believes complete freedom comes from following their every whim. Through dialogue, they might encounter someone who argues that true freedom lies in making informed choices, even if they involve constraints. This critical exchange allows participants to challenge their own biases and potentially arrive at more nuanced and informed positions on what constitutes freedom and authenticity. **Inclusivity** is a key principle. By incorporating marginalized voices into the conversation, the dialogue embraces **feminist standpoint theory** (Harding, 1986). Imagine a discussion about freedom that excludes the experiences of women or those from oppressed social classes. This limited perspective would create a lopsided understanding of both freedom and authenticity. Feminist standpoint theory emphasizes the importance of including voices that have been historically marginalized. This ensures a richer exploration of freedom and authenticity, encompassing diverse experiences beyond traditional philosophical frameworks.

The focus on self-restraint and open-mindedness during the dialogue resonates with **existentialism** (Sartre, 1943). Here, individuals acknowledge their own limitations and biases while remaining open to learning from others. Imagine someone raised in a culture that emphasizes conformity. Through dialogue, they might encounter someone who values individuality. This exchange wouldn't necessarily force a change in beliefs, but it would encourage the individual to acknowledge their own cultural biases and consider alternative perspectives on what constitutes an authentic life. This aligns with the existentialist concept of individual responsibility: we are free to choose our paths, but true freedom requires open dialogue to understand the complexities of our own perspectives and the limitations of any single framework. In essence, this permanent dialogue doesn't aim to provide a definitive answer. Instead, it serves as a crucial tool for navigating the complexities of human existence. Through ongoing interaction, mutual respect, and critical reflection, individuals can develop a more nuanced understanding of freedom and authenticity within a world filled with diverse experiences. This ongoing conversation allows participants to continuously learn, challenge assumptions, and ultimately navigate the challenges of creating a meaningful and authentic life in the face of the limitations inherent in any single philosophical framework.

Engagement with Changing Conditions: Human existence is portrayed as dynamic and responsive to changing conditions of life. Individuals are depicted as engaged in a continuous dialogue with one another, adapting to new challenges and uncertainties while grappling with questions of freedom and authenticity. The concept of human existence as a process of continuous adaptation and dialogue with ever-changing life conditions resonates with both Martin Heidegger's and Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophies. Humans are not born with a predetermined script for existence; we are "thrown" into the world and must constantly adapt to its ever-changing circumstances (Heidegger, 1927, p. 162). This "thrownness" necessitates a constant engagement with the world and its complexities. Our existence is inherently relational. We are constantly engaged in a dialogue with others, interpreting the world and ourselves through these interactions (Heidegger, 1927, p. 118). These ongoing dialogues with others shape our understanding of what it means to be free and authentic in a shared world. Human existence is characterized by "care," a constant concern for being in the world. This care involves

grappling with challenges, uncertainties, and the ever-present possibility of death (Heidegger, 1927, p. 180). As conditions change, so too must the nature of our "care," requiring us to continuously adapt and find new ways of engaging with the world.

For Sartre, existence comes before essence, meaning we are not born with a predetermined nature (Sartre, 1943, p. 29). We are free to define ourselves through our choices and actions in an ever-changing world. New circumstances may necessitate new choices and a redefinition of who we are. Sartre warns against "bad faith," which involves clinging to comforting illusions or societal expectations to avoid the anxiety of absolute freedom (Sartre, 1943, p. 93). Facing new challenges and uncertainties may force individuals to confront their "bad faith" and re-evaluate their choices towards authenticity. Changing conditions can expose inconsistencies in our self-definition, prompting a reevaluation of our choices and a move towards greater authenticity. Sartre describes human beings as "for-itself," meaning we are constantly projecting ourselves towards the future through our choices (Sartre, 1943, p. 121). These choices are shaped by the changing conditions of life, pushing us to define and redefine our authenticity as we navigate new situations. The ever-changing world necessitates ongoing choices that shape and reshape who we are. Both Heidegger and Sartre emphasize the dynamic nature of human existence. We are constantly adapting to changing circumstances, a concept captured by Heidegger's "thrownness" and Sartre's "existence precedes essence." The importance of dialogue is present in both perspectives. Heidegger's "being-with-others" and Sartre's implicit focus on our interactions with the world through choices highlight how our understanding of freedom and authenticity is shaped by ongoing engagement. Both thinkers acknowledge the challenges and uncertainties inherent in human existence. Heidegger's "care" and Sartre's "bad faith" illustrate how changing conditions can force us to grapple with anxieties and redefine our approach to life.

IV. Re-centering Individuality in the Pursuit of Freedom and Authenticity

The critique offered in the passage suggests that theoretical approaches to human freedom and authentic existence should prioritize individual autonomy, critical reflection, and openness to diverse perspectives. It calls for a reevaluation of philosophical frameworks that tend to prioritize ideological coherence over existential complexity. Within the discourse on human existence, a pertinent critique has emerged concerning the limitations of established philosophical approaches to freedom and authentic existence. This critique contends that these frameworks often prioritize the establishment of a coherent ideology over acknowledging the intricate complexities of individual lives. It advocates for a reevaluation, urging a shift towards philosophical paradigms that champion individual autonomy, critical self-reflection, and an openness to diverse perspectives. Traditionally, philosophical schools have striven to present comprehensive systems that elucidate the nature of reality, including the human condition. This pursuit of coherence, however, can inadvertently obscure the lived experiences of individuals. Rigid frameworks may offer a seemingly complete picture, yet they often fail to account for the nuances of individual circumstances and the dynamism of human existence. This critique emphasizes the necessity of prioritizing the agency of the individual, acknowledging the freedom to chart one's own course unfettered by the strictures of established doctrines (Mill, 1859). The critique underscores the importance of critical self-reflection. Individuals must be encouraged to continually question underlying assumptions and re-evaluate what constitutes freedom and authenticity based on their unique experiences. Human existence is a dynamic process, constantly evolving in light of changing circumstances. Philosophical frameworks that fail to accommodate this dynamism risk offering outdated or irrelevant prescriptions for achieving a meaningful life. Critical reflection, on the other hand, empowers individuals to adapt their understanding of freedom and authenticity as they navigate the complexities of life's journey (Dewey, 1933). Engaging with viewpoints that differ from one's own expands the understanding of human existence and challenges the limitations inherent in any singular philosophical framework. By fostering dialogue across ideological divides, individuals can gain a more nuanced appreciation of the myriad ways in which freedom and authenticity manifest in human lives. This openness fosters a richer understanding of the human condition, acknowledging the multiplicity of experiences and the limitations of any single perspective in capturing the full complexity of existence (Gadamer, 2004). The rise of identity politics, for instance, while highlighting the experiences of marginalized groups, can also lead to the creation of rigid ideological silos. The critique encourages individuals to transcend pre-defined identity categories and engage in open dialogue across differences, fostering a more multifaceted understanding of freedom and authenticity (Fraser, 2018). The pervasiveness of social media echo chambers reinforces existing beliefs and limits exposure to diverse viewpoints. This critique advocates for platforms that promote critical thinking and an openness to a wider range of ideas, fostering a more informed exploration of human existence (Pariser, 2011). Finally, rapid technological advancements like automation and artificial intelligence necessitate the adaptation of philosophical frameworks to address the challenges these developments pose to traditional notions of work and career paths, ensuring the continued relevance of philosophical inquiry in a rapidly changing world (Bostrom, 2014).

V. Conclusion

In summary, the passage raises important questions about the nature of human existence, the limitations of philosophical alternatives, and the need for a nuanced and inclusive dialogue about freedom and authentic existence. This paper delves into a critical juncture within philosophical discourse. It identifies limitations in existing frameworks for comprehending human existence, particularly regarding concepts of freedom and authentic living. This critique lays the groundwork for a theoretical exploration of these concerns, examining their implications for contemporary thought and proposing alternative pathways to navigate the complex existential dilemmas of modern life. A tendency within traditional philosophical schools to prioritize the establishment of a coherent ideology over acknowledging the intricate complexities of individual experience. Grandiose, all-encompassing systems often fail to capture the nuances of individual circumstances and the dynamism of human existence. This aligns with Martin Heidegger's notion of "thrownness" (Geworfenheit) (Heidegger, 1927). Humans are not born with a preordained script; we are "thrown" into the world and must continuously adapt to its ever-changing conditions. Existing philosophical frameworks, however, might not provide the flexibility required to navigate this "thrownness." The emphasis on monolithic ideologies overlooks the importance of individual autonomy. This resonates with Jean-Paul Sartre's

idea of "existence preceding essence" (Sartre, 1943). We are not defined by pre-established categories, but rather forge our identities through our choices and actions. Rigid philosophical frameworks, by their very nature, might limit this freedom of self-definition.

The passage advocates for a shift towards a more nuanced and inclusive dialogue on the nature of freedom and authenticity. This aligns with the tenets of hermeneutics, which posits understanding as an ongoing process of interpretation (Gadamer, 2004). Through open dialogue, individuals can engage in a "hermeneutic circle" (Gadamer, 2004), constantly revising their understanding of freedom and authenticity by encountering diverse perspectives. This continuous dialogue fosters the development of a dialogical self (Bakhtin, 1981). By interacting with those who hold different values and beliefs, individuals refine their own perspectives, expanding their understanding of the possibilities and limitations of freedom. Furthermore, by facilitating communicative action (Habermas, 1984), such dialogue allows for critical reflection and the challenging of assumptions about freedom and existence.

In a world characterized by constant change and uncertainty, the concept of freedom can feel elusive. Virtue ethics offers a valuable framework for navigating this complex landscape by emphasizing the development of character traits that contribute to both a meaningful and authentic life, and ultimately, a sense of true freedom. Absolute freedom, without guidance, can lead to choices that ultimately restrict our own flourishing. Virtue ethics helps us navigate this by promoting virtues like prudence (wisdom in practical matters). Prudence allows us to make informed decisions that consider long-term consequences and avoid impulsive actions that might lead to negative outcomes, ultimately limiting our freedom to pursue a fulfilling life (Annas, 1993). Freedom is not simply the absence of constraints, but also the ability to act in accordance with our values and goals. Virtue ethics equips us with the virtues necessary to exercise this kind of freedom effectively. For example, courage allows us to overcome fear and pursue the life we truly desire, while temperance helps us resist temptations that could lead us down a path of unfulfillment (Annas, 1993). Virtues like justice and compassion promote a sense of fairness and connection with others. This fosters a more just and equitable society, where individuals are less constrained by external factors like social injustices or oppression. In a society that prioritizes these virtues, individuals have greater freedom to pursue their own goals without fear of discrimination or undue limitations (Annas, 1993). Unfreedom can also stem from internal factors like negative emotions or unhealthy desires. Virtue ethics promotes virtues like fortitude (emotional resilience) and moderation, which help us manage our emotions and desires in a healthy way. By addressing these internal obstacles, we free ourselves from self-destructive tendencies and gain greater control over our choices, leading to a more authentic and fulfilling life (Annas, 1993).

Virtue ethics doesn't prescribe a rigid set of rules, but rather encourages individuals to develop the character traits necessary to navigate the complexities of freedom in a world fraught with uncertainty. By fostering wisdom, courage, and a sense of responsibility for oneself and others, it empowers individuals to make choices that contribute to a meaningful and authentic life, ultimately leading to a sense of true freedom.

This proposed dialogue-based approach aligns with the emphasis on critical reflection and openness to diverse perspectives highlighted in the passage. It addresses the limitations of existing frameworks by promoting individual autonomy and acknowledging the complexities of human existence, similar to Heidegger's "thrownness" and Sartre's "existence precedes essence." By incorporating virtue ethics, feminist standpoint theory, and care ethics, the dialogue can foster a richer and more nuanced understanding of freedom and authenticity, fostering the development of a dialogical self. This shift towards a dialogue-based approach ensures that philosophy remains a vital tool for not only understanding the human condition, but also for guiding individuals through the existential dilemmas of the contemporary world.

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