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Existence Preceding Essence: An Atomic Shift of Modern Philosophy from Descartes' Essentialist Rationalism to Sartre's Existentialism

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the philosophical revolution of Rene Descartes rationalism into Jean-Paul Sartre existentialism, which is a major philosophical revolution in contemporary philosophy. Descartes gave the basis of the modern rationalism and stressed human thinking as the main source of insights and said in his most famous proposition "Cogito ergo sum". Although this viewpoint was a challenge to empiricism, it was also very stimulating to the Renaissance movement and to the intellectual discourses since it helped form a chain of human beings under societal demands that establish human value in terms of predetermined identities and successes. Conversely, existentialism of Sartre denies those essentialist modes of perception and claims that existence comes before essence based on the argument that human beings are essentially free to make their own lives uninhibited by socialized roles and identity. To expose the relevance of this debate of Descartes vs Sartre to the 21st century young generations, the study includes a survey of 92 Bangladeshi university students regarding psychological pressure created by socially imposed "essences" such as academic success, physical appearance, profession, and property. The findings show that the majority experience heavy pressure from these societal expectations to prove themselves fit and successful. It is mixed research incorporating both qualitative and quantitative typology based on content analysis method and survey method. A questionnaire is used as a tool of the survey to collect primary data from the students. The secondary data are collected from different online and printed sources relevant to the theoretical ground of the research.

INTRODUCTION

If an atomic bomb is detonated, it produces a large fusion first, emits hyper-reactive energy, and then generates a chain reaction of constant branching and sub-branching of atomic particles. It becomes almost impossible to reduce the atomic energy in its spreading radius. Even if it is declined, the long-lasting aftereffects remain active. There are two conditions for someone to become an atomic philosopher. (1) He has to prove his previous and contemporary philosophers wrong. And (2) The atomic philosophy will generate branches and sub-branches, and the philosopher will produce many other philosophers. An atomic Philosopher generates a new generation of philosophies. There are five atomic philosophers: Descartes, Kant, Darwin, Marx and Sartre who ruled over science, philosophy, social systems and religion in their contemporary centuries.

Modern philosophy has experienced various waves that have transformed the perception of human knowledge, identity, and existence. All these waves were a result of the disapproval of the former philosophy and finding of the new. It gives birth to a new philosophy, a new generation of sciences; that is why philosophy is referred to as the mother of all sciences. One can see that existentialism as put forward by Sartre was a groundbreaking philosophy of the new wave of thought that led to the dethroning of Descartes, the father of modern philosophy. Descartes

developed human reason as the basis of knowledge by his well-known proposition, Cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am), which served as a giant wave of science, philosophy, and religion in the Renaissance. Descartes questioned the empiricist traditions by giving intellectuality more weight than sensory experience and formed a new philosophical, scientific, and intellectual reaction that made a difference in centuries of scientific discovery and intellectual discussion. His focus on logic helped to establish modern science and rational inquiry and defined the direction in which Western philosophy has taken.

Nevertheless, centuries later, subsequent philosophers started doubting the essentialist overtones of the rationalist tradition of Descartes. Among the most outstanding existentialist philosophers of the twentieth century, Jean-Paul Sartre disproved the fact that human beings have predetermined essences and demonstrated the concept to be erroneous. Instead, he stated that existence comes before essence; people are free to create identity by choice and action as opposed to being identified by a social structure or already established roles. The paper examines how the philosophical trend shifted from Descartes' essentialist rationalism to Sartre's existentialism and how the shift shows the global transformation of the understanding of human freedom, identity, and existence.

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The general objective of this research is to explore the philosophical shift from René Descartes' rationalist essentialism to Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism and examine how existentialism proves rationalist essentialism wrong redefining the understanding of human existence, identity, and freedom.

Modern conceptions of knowledge, identity and human existence heavily depend on the philosophical tension between rationalism and existentialism. Rationalism of René Descartes has been commonly seen as the groundwork of modern philosophy, with reason being the main source of knowledge. Descartes (1641/1996) in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* states the thesis *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) and puts thinking as the initial evidence of being. This paradigm favors intellectual certainty over sensory experience and makes human reasoning the foundation of truth and identity.

Nevertheless, rationalism was challenged by empiricist philosophers like Locke, Berkeley and Hume who maintained that knowledge is a product of sensory experience (Berkeley, 1710/1998; Hume, 1748/2007). This rationalism and empiricism debate turned out to be the main focus of contemporary philosophy. Later, Kant tried to unite these points of view when he proposed an idea that knowledge grows out of the interplay between experience and pre-existing cognitive structures, thus closing the gap.

Jean-Paul Sartre brought about a complete change in the twentieth century in his existentialism adopting a route that was not epistemology but human existence. In his statement that existence comes before essence, Sartre (1946/2007) disproves the very idea of essentialism by stating that people are not predetermined but instead make decisions and take actions. This approach focuses on freedom, responsibility, and subjectivity and opposes the predetermined identities of the rationalist traditions. This is also supported by phenomenology by Heidegger (1927/1962) who describes human beings as beings that exist without meaning.

Modern thought has brought these philosophical arguments down to social spheres, demonstrating how imposed identities and social expectations generate psychological stress. Gaarder (2009) shows that philosophical concepts retain their significance in the development of the modern self-perception. Therefore, the shift of rationalist essentialism to existentialism is a part of a more radical change towards seeing the concept of human identity as dynamic and self-determined.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The philosophical confrontation between rationalism and existentialism has greatly influenced contemporary ideas on knowledge, identity, and human existence. Modern philosophy has been broadly considered to be founded on rationalism developed by René Descartes, who stressed the importance of reason as the ultimate source of knowledge. According to Descartes (1641) in

his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the fundamental proof of existence was thinking, *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). This paradigm puts intellectual certitude at the forefront of human senses and posits human reasoning as the foundation of truth and identity. The rationalism nevertheless was challenged by empiricist philosophers like Locke, Berkeley and Hume who held that knowledge is a product of the senses (Berkeley, 1710; Hume, 1748). This empiricism and rationalism discussion came to the fore of modern thought. Later Kant tried to integrate these points of view and proposed that knowledge is created by the interplay between experience and intrinsic intellectual frameworks, thus filling the gap. Jean-Paul Sartre in the twentieth century changed the course of epistemology to human existence in his existentialism. The argument against essentialism is made by Sartre (1946): in his statement that existence precedes essence, people are not characterized by a set of predetermined identities but make their own choices and actions. The view focuses on freedom, responsibility, subjectivity, and opposes the fixed identities suggested by rationalist traditions. The phenomenology of Heidegger (1962) also confirms this perspective because he describes human beings as existing without any purpose.

The modern day scholarship takes these philosophical arguments to social aspects, which shows how forced identities and societal demands cause psychological stress. Gaarder (2009) emphasizes the timeless applicability of philosophical concepts in the development of self-perception in the present. In this way, the move towards rationalist essentialism and existentialism represents a more general shift in perception of human identity, towards the dynamic and self-determined.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a mixed-methods research to investigate the transformation of rationalist essentialism to existentialism. The qualitative part is the content analysis of the primary texts of Descartes and Sartre with references to the appropriate secondary sources. The quantitative piece is a survey of 92 students of Bangladeshi Universities with a structured questionnaire on socially imposed essences like academic performance and looks. Sampling was done using convenience sampling with the responses being anonymous. The data were treated in the form of descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage distribution), and qualitative insights were used to interpret the data. The adherence to ethical norms, such as informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality was observed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descartes' Rationalism

Descartes is the first philosopher who questioned contemporary empiricist philosophers, religious commandments, and scientific discoveries from his view of rationalism. He holds the unconditional fatherhood of modern rationalism. According to rationalism, any

discourse of philosophy, religion, and science built on sensory experience is considered invalid and irrational. If science is developed based on sensory experience, that cannot be considered science at all because whatever we can perceive by our senses or get by physical experience cannot hold its permanence. Sensory experience means the knowledge or experience gained by the five senses. The philosophy, established on its philosopher's sense perception, does not hold discursive credibility. For Descartes, the discourses of science, philosophy, and religion must be metaphysical, beyond the physical sensory experience. Religion must talk about something that is beyond the physical touch of the common people. Whatever is visible in our eyes is illusive and temporary. The visible truth is an ever-changing process. The sensory world is like an optical illusion.



Figure 1: Optical Illusion: Are these dots black or white?

The Catholic Church used descriptions of God and Heaven that are nothing but the constructions of what we experience in real life. God is like in a position of a father who has infinite knowledge and might, and heaven is described as a beautiful and imaginary place where lower-middle-class people dream to live at. They used to construct religion based on their physical experience and imagined screening. However, humans' approach to getting out of this illusion was always based on the knowledge perceived by the senses. It is like searching for an illusion to mitigate the previous illusion. Therefore, human beings will never be able to come out of the illusory cycle and the misguidance of the empiricists if they do not activate human reasoning as the source of knowledge, science, philosophy, and religion. The atomic philosophers (Descartes, Darwin, Marx, and Sartre used to be unfaithful to any social or religious conformity. They are commonly found to believe in ARZ - Awake, Realize and Zest'.

The prominent rationalist scientists, who brought revolutionary discoveries, are Sir Isaac Newton, Galileo

Galilei, and Nicolaus Copernicus, who utilized and executed human reasoning because their scientific discoveries were metaphysical. Newton's 'Three Laws of Motion' and Galileo's 'Principle of Falling Bodies' were metaphysical. These scientific philosophies were based on no sensory experience of the philosophers. They brought up their human reasoning and applied it to nature. Descartes was followed by Spinoza and Leibniz, John Locke and Berkeley, David Hume and Immanuel Kant. Empiricism and rationalism had become a long-standing debate among philosophers and philosophers were also divided into two groups like two political parties. Rapidly, Descartes's rationalist metaphysics became the largest motivation for scientists and philosophers and ruled over the next 200 years, it ruled Renaissance science and philosophy in the heaviest form.

Descartes refuted his contemporary and former empiricist philosophers, as their experience-based philosophies have no permanence because what we see or perceive by the senses cannot be determined as the ultimate truth or eternal. According to Descartes, human reasoning is the ultimate matter of human existence. He denied the objective science and philosophy. Objective science, religion, and philosophy are fake epistemological constructions. To prioritize subjectivism, he uplifted individual reasoning power and claimed, "I think, therefore I am". In this world, even if all objective knowledge gets massive support leading in the wrong way, Individual human reasoning will stay alive, and only the "thinking beings must exist" (Gardner, 2009). Thinking being is a source of knowledge, science, and philosophy. For Descartes, it was both his motivation and meditation, and an absolute philosophy that silenced his contemporary philosophers.

Sartre's Existentialism and the Rejection of Essence

Existence cares only about your existence as an animal being. It does not care about your racial identity, nationality, profession, projections, ideologies, religion, grand narratives, lifestyle, society, relatives, motivations, social grouping, norms, values, anticipations, being a man or woman etc. An existential being is free from all these chains that make a person in some identity grouping like he is a man, and he must be successful. The idea of success is completely an essential construction that you must be like other men in the society otherwise you lose your essence of living. People call it existential crisis, the crisis of being a human in society with proper identity and respect. First, it is not the existential crisis. It is essential crisis. An existential being is completely free from any sort of essence like, position, profession, life partner, religion, social values, dignity etc. Now the question arises: what is 'essence'?

In essentialism the matter essence means the things which human beings depend on with emotional attachment. Different people have various essences like life partner, spouse, money, property, children, parents, religion, food, branded smartphone, own founding company, nation etc. Existentialism says that essence does not create a big

change in a person's life. A person can have an essence, can cry for or die for an essence. But if that person leads a life without that essence, he will remain the same. He will have the same life and lifetime. After his death, his existence is deleted. He will remain no longer existent on this planet, in this universe. Sartre (1946) says in this case that when all have to be deleted, why not we lead our lives as existential beings not essential beings. His motivation is to be free from all sorts of essences that create pressure in life.

The Rush for 'Essences' among 21st Century Young Generations

If you miss the essence or target or the achievement, you will be considered as an unsuccessful failed person. Suppose one has an essence and that is his degree of MBBS. If he fails to be a doctor, he will be lost in depression and won't be able to show his face to society with dignity. But there are Billions of others who are leading a happy life without having any dream to be doctor. That means being a doctor is the happiness for

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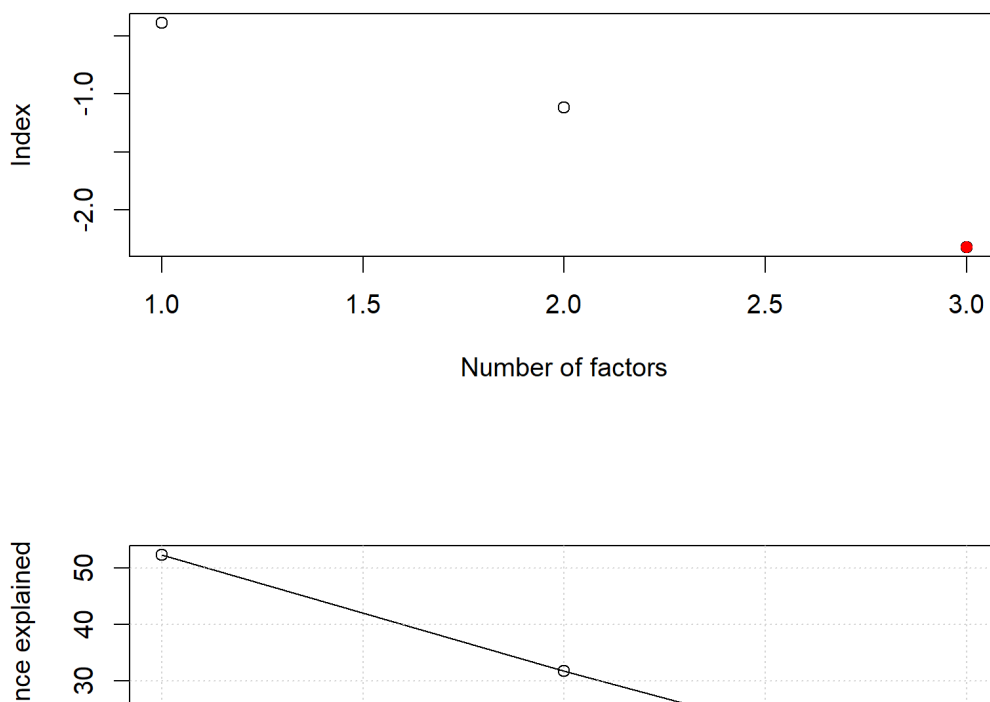


Figure 2: The Load of Different Essences on Young People

that person who set up the degree as an essence. In this way, essence controls human freedom and imposes some liability and accountability to themselves.

The researchers of this research have made a survey among 92 Bangladeshi university students to make a survey of having psychological pressure for any fixed essence. Among these 92 people, 83 are under continuous psychological pressure from the age of 12. That means, 90.2% of young people are having restrictive and

repressive pressure on why they do not possess certain qualities like others. What are these qualities or essences? These are: academic result (65% People), skin color/physique/mental illness (41.3% people), certain skill/expertise (28.3% people). The family is teaching them that if they do not possess the standard level quality in these things, they are not qualified and being burdens of the family and the society.

The survey report makes it clear that the young people

Table 1: The Percentage of the Ruling Essences

Category of load taking Essence	Number of People	Percentage
Results/Ability in Study	60 (The Highest Pressure)	65.20%
Skin Colour/Physique	38	41.30%
For sharing own understanding in meeting	26	28.30%
Voice	1	1.10%
Immaturity/Childishness	1	1.10%
Being introvert/not talking	1	1.10%

Smoking/Class bunking	1	1.10%
Feeling less important in a group	1	1.10%
Appearance	1	1.10%
Other / Cannot share	11	9.90%

are mostly in the rush to become rationalist “I am”, the so-called success projection in life. Some may achieve and some may not. The failure of the achievement leads to depression and sometimes suicide as well. Descartes made it a social motivation that if you cannot be an intelligent

being, you are not eligible to call yourself a human being. That means you must prove your intelligence to call yourself a human being. Otherwise, you have no difference between an animal being. Though Descartes’ “Cogito ergo sum” brought a new

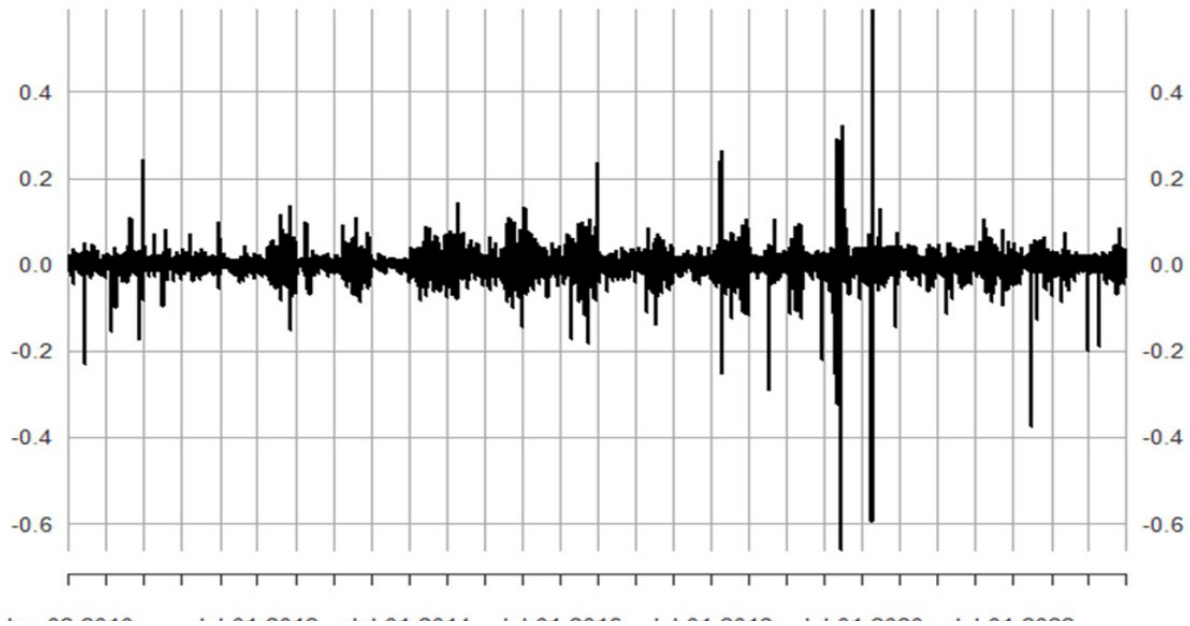


Figure 3: Descartes Versus Sartre

world modernizing this planet with science, philosophies and discoveries, his permanent trend made human beings in the chains of essences. From 17th century Renaissance to today, humans are chained, are rushing to achieve respective essences. Therefore, we call upper class is good, middle class is bad; light skin tone is fair, blacks are to remain underrated. We made all these binaries, and we are taking the load of these binaries. Even the richest and the fairest are also rushing for another essence and getting lost for failing to achieve the essences. However, Sartre suggests rejecting all these binaries. For Sartre, all these binaries and essences do not matter at all. Rather, he motivates himself to lead a life with freedom and everyone after their birth is free to choose what lifestyle, profession, class or whatever they wish in life at any time, any period, any age. According to Heidegger (1927), “Humans are just thrown on this planet to crawl like a broken legged dog only for some days”. This planet existed before human beings came and will exist after humans leave the planet. So, there is nothing good or bad or fair or high or low. All these are temporary human creations, and humans should not take the pressure of socially ascribed essences.

CONCLUSION

The philosophical transition from Descartes’ rationalist essentialism to Sartre’s existentialism represents a shift in the understanding of human existence and identity. Descartes’ emphasis on human reasoning established the foundation of modern philosophy and scientific thought through the principle “Cogito ergo sum” which means “I think, therefore I am”. His philosophy encouraged people to become intellectually stable to mark their existence. Without proving yourself an intellectual being, a successful being, a man’s existence is baseless, valueless and he is equal to no more. This the long-standing influence of Descartes’ rationalist thinking impacted human society in the development of social expectations that define human worth through fixed identities, achievements, and socially constructed standards. In contrast, Sartre’s existentialism rejects these essentialist assumptions by arguing that existence precedes essence. Any essence cannot define a human’s value, dignity and happiness. Human beings are not bound by predetermined identities or social roles but are fundamentally free to define their own lives, and free to choose their way of life. The survey conducted among Bangladeshi university

students reflects how socially constructed essences such as academic success, physical appearance, and social abilities create psychological pressure among young people. These findings expose the continuing relevance of Sartre's critique of essentialist thinking. Sartre rejected the Noble Prize. If he accepted the award, he would become a supporter of "essences" and go against his philosophy that says any award or class or achievement cannot define anybody. His rejection proves that without any certain essence or achievement, a person can have a happy free life. Standardization and classification do not make humans free, rather these dominate humans' existence.

Therefore, although Descartes ushered in the revolutionary change of modern thought through the establishment of rationalism, Sartre offers a better and refined philosophical structure that predicts freedom, responsibility, and authenticity. His interpretation asks people to go beyond any socially constructed dichotomies, thus acknowledging the freedom that exists facilitates human life.

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