

A CRITIQUE OF THE CONCEPT OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD: AN EXISTENTIAL CRITICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper aims to critically analyze the concept of lifelong learning with regard to the conditions of the contemporary world in the light of existentialism. Definitions which point to accumulation of knowledge and skills throughout life, for the purpose of adjustment and adaptation of oneself with the changes that new technologies bring with them, neglect the human aspects of life. Such definitions, inevitably, have led to alienation and reification of human beings. The educational systems based on such approaches turn schools into factories that produce sophisticated, efficient servants of the dominant groups for the purpose of guaranteeing the status quo and reproduction of power relations in the best interest of capitalist and market values. An existentialist definition of lifelong learning aspires for achievement of a self-consciousness that is attained through feeling the responsibility for understanding one's existence as a whole in relation to other humans and strives for emancipation and self-actualization and freedom.

Key words: *lifelong learning, existentialism, self-consciousness, self-actualization, globalization*

1. INTRODUCTION

Though educational activities and resources have usually been concentrated on teaching-learning procedures during childhood and adolescence, lifelong learning is of great values. That's why lifelong learning is an old concept, which has also been mentioned in different religions, for example it is quoted from prophet Muhammad "seek knowledge from cradle to grave". The same attention has also been paid to learning and its importance in other religions as well. Knowledge is considered, in these religions, as a means to the truth; this truth is called "nirvana" in Buddhism (Tivari 2002) and in Hinduism it is the event of reaching "Brahma" (ibid), while in monotheism this truth is associated with knowing and finding God.

Apart from religion, life-long learning has also been a concern of philosophers. Socrates, for example, rejecting sophist's long speeches, introduced his method of Q & A dialogues (Naghizadeh 2009). Dialogue, a method which can be used anywhere out any time for anyone, is an interactive method of learning which goes beyond the borders of place and time. Thus it could be considered as a way of learning through different seasons of an individual's life. Plato, Socrates's student, also does not restrict learning to the early ages of a person's life. For Plato, childhood and adolescence education is the basis for philosophy, or dialectics; an activity which aims to achieve and know the truth; thus, learning goes on during adulthood too. (ibid).

Despite all these, the term "life-long education" or "learning" is a contemporary one. This term was first introduced in the 1960's during UNESCO'S meetings on the future of adult education. It was after the second international conference on adult education that the member states were asked to pave the way for integration of informal education into their educational systems. And provide learning opportunities for all people in their whole life (Ahmadi Tavana, Jaffarzadeh & Jahed 2013).

Essentially, the concept of life-long learning is associated with the age of modernity and its features. Modernity is linked with industrial, scientific and even political and economic revolutions; agricultural societies, in the modern age, gradually leave the scene and are replaced by industrial societies in which liberal economy and industrial production is dominant. We also see massive and rapid developments in different scientific domains as well as political movements that seek the development of democratic governments and liberal politics. Besides, the fast growth of ICT, globalization, immigration and multinational companies have multiplied the necessity and importance of life-long education. In other

words life-long learning is a response to the needs and necessities of modern industrial, societies. Thus, life-long learning is a way of adaptation with the modern world while in the pre-modern ages- or the age of tradition- learning was associated with knowing the truth. Therefore, it could be said that throughout history there have been two conceptions of lifelong learning; a modern one that is implicitly associated with adapting oneself to the industrial society and a traditional conception that sees lifelong learning as the process of seeking and finding truth.

So, this paper aims to critically study the concept of lifelong learning in the contemporary world within an existential perspective, in other words, we intend to elicit the implications existentialism can have for a lifelong learning in a world which is overflowed and populated with new technologies and machines that have caused numbness, detachment and confusion in human beings.

2. METHODOLOGY

As the present paper is a philosophical study which seeks to critically analyze the concept of life-long learning in the perspective of existentialism, it is firstly necessary to clarify the concept of human growth in the light of existentialism. Secondly, we would focus on the criticism of life-long learning in its contemporary, common meaning. Thus the paper is set in two sections, one that describes and explains existentialism and one which criticizes the common understanding of life-long learning from the perspective of existentialism.

3. DISCUSSION

Existentialism, which has been influenced by great thinkers including Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean- Paul Sartre, Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcelle, was a reaction to and criticism of the dominance of modernism and its philosophies. Rationalism and empiricism, as the two main pillars of modernism are the targets of existentialism's criticism. Existentialism states that the world built up on these two pillars is a world without meaning and existence; a soulless, mechanical world in which human has lost its place and is neglected.

The main subject of existentialism is the agency of human beings while classical or modern philosophies are interested in the study of the world itself as their subject matter and/or they tend to consider human being as a rational, intellectual organism. For instance Aristotle defines humans as logical animals, thus, human is, at most, an animal with logical capabilities. In this sense, in the realm of classical and modern philosophies, human as a rational entity does and must act rationally. The same thing could also be concluded from Kant's philosophy as he identifies human mind with certain categories that restrains and affects the judgments and thinking of human beings within these categories (Naghizadeh 1999). These approaches indicate some sort of determinism, whereas existentialism rejects any a priori determination. Being is in the process of becoming can't be predicted; it is an unknown path. Though classical and modern philosophies confirm the event of change or flux, they define these changes as something predetermined, this is the point of departure for existentialism from its classical or modern counterparts.

In the following section, we try to discuss main characteristics and postulates of existentialism for a better understanding of them.

3.1. The meaning of human being

In existentialism a person's existence precedes his/her essence, this makes human the only being that is not predefined. In other words you could not have a unified definition of all human beings. Any individual defines him/herself based on his/her choices and decisions- or his/her becoming (Guttek 1997).

In this view, any human being is unique and that's why there can't be any general rule applicable to all of them. Therefore, each person decides his/her own path and rules for life. The prerequisite for this is consciousness, another key term that is explained below.

3.2. Consciousness

Consciousness is both an outset for and result of choice and becoming. In fact, the main concern in existentialism is the question about the essence. The question of “what am I?” Is replaced by the question “what should I become?” (Jaspers, in Blackman 1988), a Question which results from consciousness. This consciousness, as Heidegger mentions, originates from my awareness of others. (ibid). Being aware of the existence of others arises from the passion for others. So, what is achieved through this process of consciousness?

3.3. The authenticity of choice

As mentioned before, human is what that “acts”. Human’s actions are done based on their choices, thus, each person is defined and developed upon his/her set of choices (Kneller 1971). So, what happens if one lets others choose for him/her? Especially if he/she is satisfied with others making the choice for him/her. From an existential perspective, even so, these are made by him/herself as letting others choose for you is, after all, making a choice; you have chosen to let others choose for you. However, this is a weak choice and the satisfaction related to that is neither authentic nor useful since these choices are made upon distancing oneself from freedom. An individual which lets others decide for him what to become has a false feeling of satisfaction (ibid).

Authentic choice is unique and done freely. It is unique because it belongs to the person who has made it freely and willingly. It is made from inside oneself and not imposed on him/her from outside, then, it is an existential choice.

3.4. Freedom

Freedom leads to, and later originates from, consciousness, freedom is also linked to authentic choice. Freedom is most important existential value. According to Kierkegaard, absolute freedom is the base of existentialism (Gutek 1997). Human through his/her free deeds shapes him/herself and give meaning to the meaningless world around him/her/ according to Jaspers, the most important goal of human must be actualizing his/her freedom in life (Blackham 1988). In Sartre’s words (1957) freedom is not a form of existence, it is essentially the existence of human beings. Thus, an individual can’t be from time to time free; he/she is absolutely free, otherwise he/she wouldn’t exist at all.

3.5. Responsibility

An authentic choice accompanied by freedom guides us to the concept of responsibility. As Sartre mentions freedom necessitates responsibility (Blackham, 1988). The being of oneself in the world is associated with one’s responsibility for the way of his being in the world. Human being is free to choose and due to that he/she is responsible over his/her choices and can’t deny his/her responsibility or blame others over his/her being. An individual who has defined him/herself, is an individual who willingly and knowingly accepts and approves his/her responsibilities in life. Such a person feels his/her responsibility towards him/herself, others and the world.

After this brief look at the main features of existential approach, a short glance at the existential education can be helpful here.

3.6. Characteristics of existential education

Though existentialists have not shown direct interest in education, several implications can be derived or deduced from their philosophy. An existential approach to education can be viewed in two major aspects; firstly the implications that existentialism can have for education and, secondly, criticism of the dominant present trends of education. With regards to the first aspect, following point are to be considered:

- 1- The educational systems, apart from their duty of paying attention to the necessary professional trainings and knowledge, must be careful not to let these trainings and knowledge’s become the center of educational activities. In the existential view, human being and his existence is the center, thus this is the human that must govern over the professions, knowledge and technology (Kneller 1971). The focus of attention is the learner and not the curriculum or program. This means that the humanness of

educational activities must be preserved, however, the necessary skills and knowledge for life are included in the educational programs.

2- A teacher can convey his teachings to the students only if he/she has turned those teaching into his/her own internal experiences. In other words, a teacher's knowledge must result from his/her lived experiences. In that case, teacher and student can meet each other as two persons and enter a dialog, which for Buber (1958) happens between "I" and "Thou". In existential education the teacher is in the center and initiates educational activities in a way to influence the lives of students through his/her own lived experiences, however, the opposition, resistance and disagreement that might or will occur from the side of students are not only suppressed but also welcomed. The teacher being at the center is not in contradiction with student's freedom, as one postulate or principle of existentialism is that no force is strong enough to impair one's freedom, then, a person's freedom is absolute.

3- For existential educationalists no subject or discipline has superiority over other lessons or disciplines; any subject can be used for the development of human self, but the point is that all teachings must lead to self-consciousness, self-actualization and awareness about the world. These must give way to the emancipation and authentic choice of the students (Kneller 1971).

4- Open education, the idea which was first introduced by John Holt (1995), in his *Freedom and Beyond*, is about classrooms which provides and abundance of choices for the students to choose so that they learn by pursuing their interests in an environment where there are no obligations or pressures from their teachers or the school. Existential education rejects one-way, mechanical methods of teaching learning, standardized testing, pressure and fear of failure in the learners and replaces them with an atmosphere of trust and acceptance which gives the students a sense of security.

5- Existentialism sees the relationship between self and other in a new perspective. One's existence is inevitably related and dependent on the existence of others. This is also important that I considers others as subjects with equal qualities as self, that is others cannot and should not be perceived as objects, or the I-It relationship. The existence of others is a prerequisite for the existence of I. That is why Martin Buber suggests that that the relation between me and others must be put as I-thou. He (1958) says "The primary word *I-Thou* can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, not can it ever take place without me. I become through my relation to the *Thou*; and as I become the *I*, I say *Thou*". The I-It relationship implies a separation or distancing, while the I-Thou relation suggests meeting, involvement and inclusion which makes it much easier to encounter the other. To meet also means to communicate through language or silence, thus human beings find and confirm each other.

The critical dimension of existentialism focuses on criticizing the current education systems. For instance, Jaspers, criticizing modernity, states that in the era of technologic skills and propaganda, intelligence has replaced faith and reason (Jaspers 1956). Here, Jaspers points to the reality of mass societies and their education. In these societies and their educations the personhood and identity of people gradually fade out and people are led to different destinations and aims like lambs. In such societies, the educational systems are completely preplanned and organized in advance and their programs are applied to all students in the same way. The educational systems of such societies are apparatuses that are designed to turn individual into obedient useful tools. The output of these systems are people without existence as their personhood and individuality is of no importance, in fact, the graduates are considered as products of a factory; products which can be categorized and evaluated according to their vital force, intelligence or professional skills. More clearly, people are considered as consumable products which are discarded when they are expired (Naghizadeh 2009).

3.7. The meaning of life-long learning in today's world

Although there have been different definitions of concept of lifelong learning, all these definitions mostly reduce life-long learning to continuous learning of skills and knowledge that are necessary for a more successful presence in the society and ,specially, in the career and business. For example, McIntosh (2005) believes that along with ongoing development of knowledge and skills, the demands and needs change too. It means that former styles of education can no more respond to these changes and the need for updating knowledge and skills become a necessity for professional life. Hung (2007). Too, believes

that lifelong learning is the non-stop updating of knowledge and skills for a better understanding of the world which is necessary for global economic competition that is based on knowledge. Almost all these definitions refer to parameters such as skills learning, acquiring necessary knowledge for adapting oneself with the conditions of new world, professional, career and economic needs of people and society empower people for their better functioning in the cycle of production-consumption.

This dominant understanding and definitions of lifelong learning aids the process of turning students into tools and reinforces the mass society rather than emancipating people or helping them flourish their existence. Such definitions lead to alienation, thingification and reification of human beings and the educational systems based on such approaches aim to turn people into more sophisticated and efficient servants of the dominant groups for the purpose of guaranteeing the status quo and reproduction of power relations in the best interest of capitalist and market values. The truth, then, is that humans are becoming slaves that, through technology, are unknowingly protecting the ruling class. Thus, it could be said that people are turned into instrumental slaves in a modern way with benefits, while this false consciousness is globally spread that the technology is in the service of human beings. The hunger which we are witnessing for consumption of new technologies has increased dependence on them in everyday activities.

Undoubtedly, one could not ignore or refrain from the realities of the world which we live in and all its superfast technological changes and necessities; however, this is absurd to reduce the concept of lifelong learning into the quality of being capable of adjusting oneself to these technological dimensions of ordinary and professional life. The more human aspects of life cannot be sacrificed for the benefit of its material ones. Briefly speaking, the main characteristics of the contemporary world include dominance and hegemony of Neoliberal and market values, an increasing rate of globalization, widespread use and increasing supremacy of technology, especially I.C.T., in everyday life, and growing interest in social media. Defining lifelong learning as adding up and multiplying human's information about new technologies and obtaining more skills about how to cope with the changes they bring with themselves does not seem to be satisfactory. Such approaches to lifelong learning tend to see it as the development of potentiality in learners improving their proficiencies in order to do their tasks more appropriately, with higher quality and faster than before seems to be an inhumane, vicious and reduced one.

The best response existentialism can provide us in the face of ever growing presence of technology in our life is that it is our responsibility to be aware of our humanity. This responsibility brings with itself the anguish, however, it reminds us of our existence, which is our most precious property and is primary to all values that we encounter in life. Lifelong learning, in this sense, means providing individuals with necessary educations that enables them to seek an understanding of their existence in relation to others and do their best to actualize their human qualities. Human beings cannot be reduced to material entities with material existence, needs and functions. Existentialism reminds us of the spiritual dimensions of human which, just like the material or biological dimensions, needs to be satisfied and developed. That is why subjects like literature and art important and must be not only included in the curriculum but taken seriously enough so as to provide people with opportunities to experience their inner feelings more closely and try to express them in literary or artistic ways.

In addition, defining lifelong learning as a process of academic development that can assist one in her professional or individual life neglects the fact that a person's existence finds its significance in the presence of others. It means that apart from being-for-oneself, human beings must understand their being-for-others. Market society encourages more consumption and implies this false consciousness that you are engaged in a competition in which more consumption is the sole criteria for deciding the winner and victory. Therefore, everyone finds him/herself in a race where every other being is seen as a rival who must be defeated. Such feelings are the products of a school climate that encourages students for getting the best grades. In an existential approach to schooling and learning, it is not the school rewards, grades or punishments that decides success as they are considered, in this approach, as constraints to learning and knowing. What schools must do is facilitating the development of creativity and originality in students so that they create themselves and keep doing that in their whole life.

Another feature of our modern world is that the relationship between people has increasingly become impersonal. Everywhere people are coded or assigned numbers which determines their situation in the

world. People are reduced to numbers in computers and the computerized connections are becoming dominant more and more. The same has happened in the school systems. With new technologies and equipment the personal intimate relationship between teacher and students or students with each other has been badly influenced. Again, it cannot be denied that such equipment and technologies provide us with new possibilities especially in the communication fields, however they are conversely separating people and affect their interconnectedness. This has led to a situation that people, though existing next to each other, are separated, secluded and disconnected.

The existentialist education focuses on inclusion and relation with others. A lifelong learner must be capable and passionate of knowing oneself, but this knowing or awareness cannot be achieved in isolation. There are always other beings coexisting with oneself in the society. Thus, a lifelong learner must be willing to engage with others in an equal relationship. This relationship fosters the trustworthiness between people and makes life more human.

In short, the meaning of education can be the process of assisting individuals realize the best that they are potentially capable of. This is something that cannot fully be achieved during the school, or further, in college years. Realization one's self is not pre-determined, also it cannot happen during a period of one's life. This is a continuous process that must go on all through one's life. It is also something that must take place freely. Then we could say that lifelong learning is a free search for one's actual self through seeking knowledge about oneself, others and the world in which one is situated. This knowledge must help the person to understand his whole –biological, material, spiritual- and actualize his/her potentiality in the best way possible. Nonetheless, there are obstacles, anguishes, fears and pressures from the crowd on the way to self-actualization which are the results of sense of responsibility. A lifelong learner, despite this anguish or fear is passionate for creating his/her essence, strives for existential knowledge since he believes that no force is strong enough to impair his/her freedom.

4. CONCLUSION

As it was mentioned the focal points of existentialism are precedence of existence over essence, Self-consciousness and self-actualization, authentic choice, freedom and responsibility. Having these properties in the mind, the concept of growth in the framework of 'becoming' includes subjectivity of human and self-awareness. It's clear that such a person not only rules over his/her destiny, but also is dominant over technology and knowledge; such a person is unique and is distinguished from the mass society. Thus, in this context, the lifelong learning means capability of an individual for seeking and realizing subjectivity, self-actualization and freedom from any kind of restraint, whether internal or external. Therefore, lifelong learning is a human process that leads to creating unique humans who are self-actualized and self-conscious. This is against the common conception of lifelong learning in the contemporary world which is associated with growth in its quantitative sense, in other words, the accumulation of knowledge and adding to skills instead of achieving freedom and mastering the world surrounding oneself.

The present education systems around the world are increasingly leading to humans' fascination to and captivation in a world overflowed with technologies and machines, in a sense, people are becoming a part of the technology or machine that are meant to serve humans; a machine that can function better and more skillfully with more trainings, and better serve its masters. It could be concluded that existentialism warns us not to sacrifice our existential values for transient pleasures that are provided by technology and save our humane dignity and values. Existentialism teaches us to strive for agency, self-consciousness and self-actualization. Additionally, existentialism reminds us that educational systems and schools should not be institutes for producing intelligent machines, tools or servants schools cannot be factories whose main concerns are manufacturing standard machines or products, on the contrary, school should be a place for developing consciousness, self-actualization, freedom and responsibility. Schools should provide proper space for living. This will help individuals to feel the responsibility for realizing all their existing potentialities both individually and in relation with others. A false sense of happiness or satisfaction is the result of material life in which one does his best to be more successful in a race in which others are seen as competitors. This happiness is meaningless as life is never without

suffering and anguish, thus, an education that wishes lifelong learning affirms them as inevitable part of both life and education. Lifelong learning is a free, constant search for meaning despite all these sufferings, and a lifelong learner is an individual who is not satisfied by the colorful, shallow, monotonous life that the material world provides.

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