

The Parallels Between Hamlet and Existentialism

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Have you ever questioned yourself— what is the purpose of life? Of our existence? Why do we live? What happens to us when we die? What defines us as people? and as an individual? These are only a speck of the number of questions, which people have pondered upon for centuries. There have been many suggestions, ideas and *uncertain* conclusions. The search for answers to these questions we call philosophy.

Shakespeare offers the reader a view of how corrupt and fake the world is through the eyes of his characters in his plays. In one of Shakespeare's most notable works, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, we see the young prince Hamlet who tries to find authenticity and truth in himself, and in the people around him. He searches for this truth by asking unanswerable questions. It is this philosophical mind of Hamlet that formed his choices, behavior, and his most tragic destiny. Hamlet's process of thinking is encompassed in the philosophy called *existentialism*. This essay intends to make the correlation between Hamlet's story and this philosophy in an effort to better understand Prince Hamlet's thinking from a different perspective.

Before beginning to make comparisons, it would be best if the definition and a brief explanation of existentialism would be given. Existentialism is a philosophical theory underlining that it is the freedom and responsibility of each individual to find their own meaning of life through their actions, and this is the purpose of our existence. The Fathers of this philosophy arrive a lot later than Shakespeare: in the 19th century. They include German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and the most notable for fathering existentialism—Søren Kierkegaard, who is, ironically,

also Danish like Hamlet. Kierkegaard claimed that “each individual— not society or religion— is solely responsible for giving meaning to life and living it passionately and sincerely, or ‘authentically.’” Philosophical authenticity can be defined simply as how one is being true to them self. (A lack of authenticity is called “bad faith” in existentialism). Existentialist thinkers question on the topics of life and death (existence), a person and their life’s meaning (known as essence). These two grand topics are explained with ideas on absurdism, choices, morality, truth, religion and God, and individualism. Important definitions, which will be covered upon in this essay, include authenticity, “bad faith”, anguish, despair, absurdism, essence and subjectivity.

ABSURDISM & DESPAIR

In Hamlet’s very first soliloquy, Hamlet demonstrates “absurdity”. Absurdism is a philosophy, which claims that humans search for an immanent meaning unachievable due to the uncertainty in any given answer. In other words, it is the tendency for one to search for meaning, and being unable to find it*. Hamlet self-reflects: “How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable Seem to me all the uses of this world! Fie on't, ah fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden that grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature” (1.2.136-137). In this quotation, Hamlet compares his life to a garden of weeds— all the beauty and good perished while the ugly weeds remain. {Kierkegaard understand this as he has undergone a very difficult life. He had difficult relations with his father all his life, numerous obstacles in terms of his relationships and his mother and five of his six siblings died before he was 21. Despite this Kierkegaard expressed: “There are, as is known, insects that die in the moment of fertilization. So it is with all joy: life’s highest, most splendid moment of enjoyment is accompanied by death”. That is to say, life may present many

frightening and sorrowful events that may make one feel lost and hopeless, but it is a part of life and who we are individually.} The feeling Hamlet has reflects on another existential topic— despair. Despair is the loss of hope. More detailed, it is the loss of hope after a collapse in one or more defining qualities of one’s identity. In this case, it was Hamlet’s father that was a defining piece of Hamlet’s life. Existentialism is all about self-identifying and individualism; therefore the state Hamlet is present in and his quote predict his development as an existential philosopher.

The main idea of existentialism is that people individually choose what they put faith in, and what meaning lies in some idea. Thus, Hamlet is at the core of existentialism when he phrases: “For there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.” (2.2.257). In other words, it is whatever meaning the person gives it through their thinking and understanding, and it is so. To another person the meaning may be different, and he too is right. It is their freedom to choose and define and answer for themselves.

EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE

The famous 20th-century French existential (and atheist) philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in his book “L’Existentialisme est Humanisme” that “existence precedes essence”. This in itself is the shortest possible explanation of existentialism.

“What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me—“ (2.2.308-313).

Here Hamlet reflects upon the essence of man. Hamlet sees how everything is lost after death. One works hard to achieve something only to perish in the dust. Hamlet recounts

this numerous times in the play (another notable example is I,ii,97-92)— seeing the emptiness of life after the thought of death. It is as Sartre expressed, “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world— and defines himself afterwards”. Thus, people through their own consciousness and thought create their own values and govern their own definition of life.

This idea of *existence precedes essence* is revived multiple times throughout the play but most notable when Hamlet holds up Yorick's skull. Hamlet is staring death through its physical representation, and Hamlet expresses in an unfortunate tone his realization how Yorick was a great fellow, but now he is gone and all that's left is a vivid image in Hamlet's mind.

“Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy; he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar?” (V.i.160-168). This quote reflects on life's insignificance, how in the end we all die and become bones, and in this death all humans are equal with one another. “To what base uses we may return, Horatio. Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bunghole?” (5.1.178-180) points out Hamlet. These examples demonstrate the existential perspective of the simplistic existence of man. It is essence that must be brought to this existence, however.

THOUGHT AND ACTION, AND ANGST

The most famous soliloquy in all of literature— “To be, or not to be, that is the question” (3.1.63)— is also the most existential. There are a few major ideas that fall into the existential philosophy, and they all interconnected, like a web. Hamlet discusses freedom of choice and action, angst and dread, existence, essence and death. However we will not discuss existence and essence in this soliloquy, as it is already clear it is present and what it means through the last example. In this soliloquy, Hamlet is contemplating suicide, and concludes that death would be the better option to living but the only thing that restricts humans is the uncertainty, or the unknowingness, of death. Within the soliloquy, Hamlet mentions the corruption and pains of life here (the reason why death may be a better option), as well as the delay for killing Claudius when Hamlet expresses: “Thus conscious makes cowards of us all... and lose the name of action”(3.1.90-95).

The quote above presents a strong theme in Hamlet— thought and action. While there are many interpretations of why Hamlet delayed to kill Claudius, it is agreeable that Hamlet thinks carefully about the consequences before doing so. This is reflected in existentialism because it is the freedom of one’s choices and actions that define the meaning (or essence of one’s life), and finding the purpose is what Hamlet tries to do. This given freedom of choice comes to Hamlet’s sudden realization when he claims, “Thus conscious makes cowards of us all”(3.1.90). Note also that Hamlet realizes this in a very dark scene, a scene when Hamlet is contemplating on killing himself. In existentialism, when one gets a negative feeling from the realization of being free and responsible for your life’s essence is called angst (also called dread). As a matter of fact, Hamlet even uses the word in this precise soliloquy “But that the dread of something

after death”(3.1.85). Thus, as Hamlet begins to question more about life and death, he is searching the purpose of his life through an existentialist-type thought. But at this point, one can even argue that Hamlet is a nihilist— a philosopher who believes in nihilism, the idea that there is no meaning to life whatsoever. This is not so because the thought of death makes life more meaningful as he realizes he must find his purpose.

AUTHENTICITY

Meanwhile, Hamlet also puts his thought into the corruption of people. Corruption is the dishonesty in people with power. Hamlet sees this in practically all the character’s, but he expresses it most about Claudius and his mother, Queen Gertrude. Existentialism also takes into account the thought of people, called *authenticity*. The definition of this term is “being true to oneself”. It is the idea that one creates themselves and then lives in accordance with this self. In my opinion, Claudius is an authentic character because of this particular passage: “O, my offence is rank it smells to heaven... All may be well.”(3.3.36-72). In this soliloquy, Claudius admits to his wrong doing and he understands that it is a sin, but openly speaks to God about his guilt and then admits that he is still passionate for his Kingship and of Queen Gertrude which is why he “cannot pray”. Not only is he honest with himself, the idea of him being on an individual— a personal level with God is also a notable idea by Kierkegaard. But religion and existentialism will be discussed later on. It is clear that Claudius has found his meaning to life, and his essence as well.

Queen Gertrude, however, displays a complete lack of authenticity. This is evident when Hamlet confronts her: “Now mother what’s the mother... No more!”(3.4.08-105). Gertrude is made to face her guilt by Hamlet who exclaims: “Nay,

but to live/ In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed/ Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love/ Over the nasty sty!"(3.4.93-96). Much important background information on Gertrude is not given, but a vivid interpretation that Gertrude is not such an authentic character can be supported from the way Gertrude sobbingly reacted.

The authenticity of Hamlet is self-evident as his thoughts are clearly presented while he searches for his truth.

SYSTEMS AND INDIVIDUALISM

Systems are not well regarded in the existential philosophy. By "system", it is meant, as a set of principles and procedures one must follow, religion for example. Existentialists dislike systems because they are restricting the freedom for one to choose what the essence of life is, and the choices that will define our lives. Atheist existentialists include Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Friedrich Nietzsche. And although this may seem as a contradictory to Hamlet being an existential philosopher, it is not so. It is safe to deduce that Hamlet is most likely a christian (most likely Protestant as Catholicism was banned in Elizabethan era) because of the perspective on certain topics and numerous references to the bible.

For example:

"What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason I how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?"

Compared with:

What is man, that thou art mindful of him? or the son of man, that thou visitest him? Thou madest him a little lower than the angels; thou crownedst him with glory and honor, and didst set him over the works of thy hands. Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet." (Hebrews 2:6-8, a redaction of Psalm 8:4-6)

Certain topics such as incest, murder and suicide are also reflected through a religious perspective: *"That the Everlasting had not fix'd/ His canon 'gainst self-slaughter"* (1.2.131-132). Therefore is assumable that Hamlet was under a religious system, which caused him to stop and think about the morality and the consequences of his actions. (Many of the themes interconnect with one another, providing support and a claim concurrently). Religion is an important idea in Hamlet, which we will not discuss in detail in this essay. However in short, religion drives many of Hamlet's ideas, morals, and can also be seen as the reason why Hamlet lacks taking action. Kierkegaard is also a Christian—the "anti-christian Christian" he was called for heavily criticizing the Danish church. Kierkegaard claimed a few things: 1) he thought that the church did pushed people in a certain direction too much, thus preventing individuals to be on a *personal* level with God in which they understand their faith better and 2) in terms of existentialism, something like the ten commandments should not be forced down upon an individual, but rather it should be used to guide the person from within them. The latter will be further analyzed in the next theme. The first point, however, can be more easily explained through Kierkegaard's question: "Who has the more difficult task: the teacher who lectures on earnest things a meteor's distance from everyday life— or the learner who should put it to use?". We already saw how Claudius is carrying an individual relation with God (individualism, another important aspect in existential thought

contradicting systems) but Hamlet is doing so too. Hamlet refers to the Bible often, and often agrees with its ideas, but Hamlet also does it through the philosophical and moral questions which he asks, but at the same time, through these questions he distances himself from the systematic approach of religion from something existentialists refer to as the “Divine vs. Human perspective”, discussed in the next section.

THE HUMAN CONDITION AND THE DIVINE VS. HUMAN PERSPECTIVE

The “Human Condition” is a term used by philosophers to explain the characteristics that composes human existence such as birth, growth, emotions, aspirations, conflict and mortality. The Human condition asks questions like those of Hamlet such as why am I here? what does it mean to be human and how should I live my life? A major problem with systems— philosophical, religious or scientific— is that they do not take into account what it is like to be human. They lose the practicality of what an individual experiences in life such as fears, anxieties and hopes that are apart of the human condition. Existentialists often reject these systems because they offer a Divine perspective as opposed to human perspective, one aspect that differs in these perspectives is mortality— something the divine perspective would not and does not offer. This is a vast topic in Hamlet that is not quite seen easily. This relates to Hamlet because mortality is something many existentialists promote that we must face up to it, as it is beneficial to realize our existence is but a temporal one, and so this gives people like Hamlet strength to not living in a passive agreement with the masses, but take control of our own lives and live by our own chosen standards and values. This is something that Hamlet has done through the whole play.

The ghost can be a symbol of a system that offers a divine perspective. Since the ghost is non-living, it does not face mortality and so is very eager to push Hamlet to vengeance: "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.25) says the ghost. (Note that the ghost used *his* not *my* yet this ghost is suppose to be King Hamlet himself). Through my perspective, the ghost is an internal struggle within Hamlet (and this can be proven: "Alas he's mad"(3.4.109) yells Queen Gertrude after the ghost appears to Hamlet telling him not to hurt his mother). This internal struggle within Hamlet, the ghost, is the system which pushes Hamlet into thinking a certain way. Hamlet's existential thinking wants to break free (freedom of choice) from such a mentality and find the purpose of his life for himself, and through the story of Hamlet, he reveals many human conditions which stalls Hamlet's revenge on Claudius. Hamlet is uncertain which "side" to listen to, and what consequences follow each "side". Another aspect of the ghost was Kierkegaard's second claim in the previous section on religion. Laws and rules should not be forced down upon an individual, but rather it should guide the person from within. The ghost may be acting in a similar way to Hamlet, which may also be a possibility.

CONCLUSION

Like a cycle of life, we will end with the main idea that *existence precedes essence* indicated in act V. "What is a man, If his chief good and market of his time Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more. Sure, he that made us with such large discourse, Looking before and after, gave us not That capability and godlike reason To fust in us unused" (4.4.35-41). Hamlet is discussing the emptiness of people's lives as they simply sleep and eat and waste the talents that were given to us. Hamlet continues his search for meaning, or essence to him and his life. After this, Hamlet looks at Fortinbras and sees

that Fortinbras has found his purpose and is living his essence. It is after this, Hamlet takes action and fulfills his purpose, but resulting in a tragic death.

In the end, philosophers like Hamlet search for answers in the in-authentic, cruel world, which presents many unpleasant, difficult and unexpected challenges. In Hamlet's case it was the death of his murdered father (this is called facticity in existential philosophy, something one was given without choice, and they must deal with it). The existential thought gives an answer that through our free choice, our actions and responsibilities, we can overcome such challenges through life's difficulties and find our meaning, or essence after our existence. In one phrase by Sartre "*Etre homme, etre responsable*" [to be man is to be responsible].

Hamlet is *aware* of death and what it means, and so is an existential philosopher— concerned with our individual existence. Like the 1957 Nobel prize author Albert Camus once phrased: "There is only one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide".

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