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Synthesizing Existentialism and Advaita Vedanta: A Comparative Analysis and Resolution in the Context of the Social Sciences

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Abstract- Existentialism and Advaita Vedanta represent two philosophical approaches that, while seemingly disparate, offer profound insights into the nature of self, existence, and reality. Existentialism, with its emphasis on individual freedom, angst, and the search for meaning in an often in different universe, contrasts sharply with Advaita Vedanta, which posits a non-dualistic reality where the self (Atman) is ultimately one with the universal consciousness (Brahman). This paper explores the potential synthesis of these two philosophies, arguing that the existential crisis of meaning can be resolved through the lens of Advaita Vedanta. By critically analyzing the key tenets of both traditions, the paper offers a unique perspective on how these philosophies can inform contemporary social sciences, particularly in understanding human agency, identity, and the quest for meaning in a complex world.

Keywords- Existentialism, Advaita Vedanta, Non-Duality, Social Sciences, Human Agency, Identity, Meaning

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I. Introduction

Existentialism, primarily developed in 20th-century Western philosophy, grapples with the individual's confrontation with a seemingly meaningless world. Philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, and Albert Camus have deeply influenced this school of thought, focusing on themes such as freedom, choice, alienation, and the absurdity of existence (Sartre, 1943; Heidegger, 1927; Camus, 1942). In contrast, Advaita Vedanta, an ancient Indian philosophical tradition, asserts the fundamental oneness of all reality, emphasizing the realization of the self's unity with the ultimate reality, Brahman (Shankaracharya, 8th Century). While existentialism tends to highlight the individual's isolation in a purposeless world, Advaita Vedanta offers a resolution through the recognition of a unified, non-dual reality (Vivekananda, 1896).

This paper aims to synthesize existentialist concerns with Advaita Vedanta's resolution, exploring how this integration can enhance our understanding of human existence and meaning in the realm of social sciences. The synthesis will also address how these philosophies can contribute to discussions on identity, ethics, and agency within contemporary societal contexts.

II. Literature Review

Existentialism: Freedom, Angst, and Absurdity

Existentialism, as discussed by Sartre (1943) in *Being and Nothingness*, posits that existence precedes essence, meaning that individuals are not born with a predefined purpose but must create their own meaning through choices. Sartre's notion of radical freedom comes with the burden of responsibility and the inevitable encounter with existential angst. Similarly, Heidegger (1927), in *Being and Time*, explores the concept of "being-toward-death" as a way to confront the authentic self, free from societal constraints. Camus (1942) in *The Myth of Sisyphus* articulates the absurdity of existence, where humans seek meaning in a universe that offers none, leading to a perpetual state of tension between the desire for meaning and the lack thereof.

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Advaita Vedanta: Non-Duality and Self-Realization

Advaita Vedanta, articulated by Adi Shankaracharya in the 8th century, presents a radically different view. The core teaching, as found in the *Upanishads* and elaborated by Shankaracharya, is that the true self (Atman) is not separate from the ultimate reality (Brahman). This non-dualistic perspective asserts that the perceived world of multiplicity is an illusion (Maya), and true liberation (Moksha) comes from the realization of the self's oneness with Brahman. Swami Vivekananda (1896) further popularized these ideas in the modern era, emphasizing that self-realization leads to freedom from suffering and the dissolution of the ego, which is the source of all existential dilemmas.

III. Methodology

This paper utilizes a comparative analytical approach, synthesizing the existentialist and Advaita Vedanta perspectives. The methodology involves a close reading of primary texts from both philosophical traditions, coupled with secondary analyses from contemporary scholars. By juxtaposing the existentialist focus on individual angst and freedom with Advaita's emphasis on non-duality and self-realization, the paper seeks to uncover points of convergence and divergence. The analysis will be structured around key themes such as identity, freedom, meaning, and agency.

IV. Analysis and Synthesis

Confronting Existential Angst through Non-Duality

One of the central concerns of existentialism is the feeling of alienation and isolation in a world devoid of inherent meaning. Existentialists argue that individuals must create their own meaning, but this process is fraught with anxiety and despair (Sartre, 1943). Advaita Vedanta, however, offers a potential resolution by dissolving the boundaries between self and other, individual and cosmos. The realization that the self is Brahman eradicates the dualistic perception that underlies existential angst. When the self is understood as non-separate from the whole, the individual is freed from the burden of creating meaning and instead discovers a pre-existing, inherent purpose in the unity of existence (Vivekananda, 1896).

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Freedom and Agency in Existentialism and Advaita Vedanta

Sartre's concept of radical freedom suggests that humans are condemned to be free, responsible for every action in a world without objective values (Sartre, 1943). This freedom can be both liberating and terrifying. In contrast, Advaita Vedanta reframes freedom as the liberation from ignorance (Avidya) and the ego (Ahankara). True freedom is not in the endless pursuit of choices but in the realization of the self's unity with Brahman, where the dichotomy of choice itself dissolves (Shankaracharya, 8th Century). This perspective can offer a broader understanding of agency within the social sciences, where individuals are seen not just as autonomous agents but as interconnected beings whose actions are part of a larger cosmic order (King, 1999).

Resolving the Absurd: The Role of Knowledge (Jnana)

Camus's absurd hero chooses to live without appeal, embracing the absurdity of existence (Camus, 1942). However, Advaita Vedanta proposes that the absurdity stems from ignorance of the true nature of reality. The pursuit of knowledge (Jnana) in Advaita is a journey toward understanding that there is no separation between self and the universe. By attaining this knowledge, one transcends the absurd and finds peace in the unity of all existence (Shankaracharya, 8th Century). This resolution can inform social scientific approaches to existential crises, suggesting that deeper self-awareness and understanding can lead to a more harmonious existence (Krishna, 2001).

Policy Implications and Contribution to Social Sciences

The integration of existentialism with Advaita Vedanta can have profound implications for the social sciences. It challenges the often materialistic and individualistic perspectives prevalent in contemporary social theories, offering a more holistic view of human existence. This synthesis can inform policies that address mental health, social cohesion, and ethical governance by promoting values of interconnectedness, compassion, and self-realization. Additionally, it encourages a re-evaluation of the concept of agency, moving beyond individual autonomy towards a recognition of collective responsibility and the interdependence of all beings (Das, 2020).

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V. Conclusion

This paper has explored the potential synthesis of existentialism and Advaita Vedanta, offering a resolution to the existential crises posed by the former through the non-dualistic insights of the latter. By bridging these two philosophical traditions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of human existence, meaning, and agency within the social sciences. The findings suggest that the integration of these perspectives can enrich contemporary discourse in social theory, providing a more nuanced and comprehensive framework for addressing the complexities of modern life.

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