

Kamma and Existence: An Atheist-Existentialist Interpretation of the Early Buddhist Concept of Kamma

S. M. Chathuri Gaweshika Samarakoon

chathuri@bpu.ac.lk

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8110-6736>

Abstract

Existentialism was a highly influential tradition in contemporary continental philosophy. Although widely popular in the modern era, it is often considered that the philosopher Nietzsche initiated the trend later associated with existentialism. There are two main categories of existentialists: theistic and atheistic. Existentialism places strong emphasis on human existence, essence, and the responsibility of defining oneself. This research focuses on the atheist existentialist dimension of Jean-Paul Sartre, the most prominent modern existentialist philosopher, using his ideas as a lens to examine the Early Buddhist concept of karma and explore whether it reflects an atheist existentialist perspective. The central research problem is whether the concept of kamma contains an atheist existential aspect. This qualitative study is grounded in the fundamental principles of existentialism outlined by Sartre and in selected suttas from the Pali Canon. The methodologies employed include existentialism as an approach, comparative study, and logical examination. The objectives of this research are to examine the foundational principles of Sartrean existentialism, to explore the atheist existentialist interpretation of the Buddhist concept of kamma, and to compare, contrast and investigate the relationship between two. When considering the key principles of existentialism, such as “existence precedes essence,” freedom of choice and responsibility, subjectivity, and the mental conditions that have been used to demonstrate existentialist state such as, anguish, abandonment, and despair, it becomes evident that the Buddhist notion of karma aligns closely with these criteria. Therefore, it may be concluded that the Buddhist concept of kamma demonstrates an atheist existentialist aspect when analysed through Sartre’s framework.

Keywords: atheist, Buddhism, existence precedes essence, existentialism, kamma, Sartre

1. Introduction

Contemporary Western philosophy can be identified as comprising two main traditions: the Analytic tradition and the Continental tradition. Existentialism, as a philosophical school within Continental philosophy, emphasises the importance of focusing on human existence rather than the metaphysical concerns that characterise many other philosophical traditions. Although existentialism emerged in the modern period, it was shaped and enriched by influential philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), considered the father of existentialism, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860).

Existentialism is commonly divided into two schools: theistic and atheistic. This paper focuses on the atheistic existentialist doctrines articulated by the renowned existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), using his thought as a lens through which to examine the early Buddhist concept of kamma and to highlight its atheistic existentialist dimension. The scope of this study is limited to the canonical doctrines of early Buddhism and the existentialist ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre.

2. Literature Review

The dialogue between Buddhist philosophy and existentialist thought has attracted increasing scholarly interest in recent decades. Notably, there is a potential alignment between the Buddhist concept of karma and the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. This literature review examines the intersection of these domains, focusing on the interpretive possibilities of karma within a Godless, responsibility-centred framework, as articulated in Sartre's *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946).

The classical Buddhist understanding of karma (Pāli: kamma) is action-based causality, which posits that intentional volitional acts (*cetanā*) determine the nature of one's future experiences not absolutely and exclusively, but in a crucial way. (*Nibbedhika Sutta*). As pointed out by scholars such as Gombrich (2009) and Keown (1992), karma is not fate, but an ethical law of cause and effect that functions without divine intervention. This impersonal, naturalistic feature distinguishes the Buddhist theory from the theistic notions of divine judgment or providence.

Richard Gombrich emphasizes that early Buddhism, especially in the *Nikāyas*, portrays karma as a self-regulating ethical principle grounded in psychological and moral intentionality. Similarly, Damien Keown argues that karma is best understood

as part of a moral natural order rather than a cosmic ledger maintained by a deity. These interpretations open the possibility for atheist-friendly readings of karma.

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, particularly in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, insists on the radical freedom and responsibility of the individual in a universe devoid of pre-existing essence, God, or moral absolutes. Sartre's famous dictum, "existence precedes essence", rejects any preordained human nature or divine blueprint, asserting that individuals create meaning through choices and actions (Sartre, 1946/2007).

Sartre maintains that in the absence of God, humans are "condemned to be free", thrust into existence and responsible for their essence through projects and actions. This radical responsibility parallels the Buddhist emphasis on intentional action (*cetanā*) as the root of moral consequences, albeit within different metaphysical systems.

Several scholars have attempted to map existentialist frameworks onto Buddhist ethics. In *Buddhism and Humanism*, Damien Keown (2005) suggests that Buddhist ethics can accommodate secular humanist values, including responsibility and agency. Others, such as Loy (1996), propose that Buddhist thought and existentialism share deep structural affinities, notably the rejection of a permanent self (*anattā*) and the burden of freedom in the absence of divine oversight.

From an existentialist perspective, karma can be viewed not as a supernatural mechanism but as the internal and social consequences of one's freely chosen actions. This re-framing aligns with Sartre's notion of "bad faith," where individuals deny their freedom by attributing responsibility to external forces, an attitude criticised in both traditions.

The atheist existentialist interpretation of the Buddhist concept of karma, especially through Sartre's lens in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, reveals profound commonalities in ethical structure and personal responsibility. While doctrinal differences persist, particularly regarding rebirth and metaphysics, both frameworks emphasise the individual's burden of choice, the creation of meaning through action, and moral responsibility in a godless world. This synergy opens promising avenues for reinterpreting traditional doctrines like karma within modern secular paradigms.

This research attempts to present an original contribution to the intersection of existentialist philosophy and Buddhist thought by reinterpreting the Buddhist concept

of karma through the atheist existentialist framework of Jean-Paul Sartre, particularly as articulated in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. While existing literature has explored Buddhist ethics and modern existentialism separately, there remains a notable gap in analysing karma as a self-grounded, godless system of moral responsibility aligned with Sartre's notion of radical freedom. This study fills that gap by offering a novel, philosophically coherent interpretation of karma that situates it within the domain of atheist existentialism, thereby enriching both Buddhist studies and contemporary existential ethics.

3. Methodology

This research is a qualitative philosophical analysis that employs scriptural analytical methods to examine the Buddhist concept of karma as presented in early canonical texts. The study adopts an interpretive approach, analyzing key doctrinal elements through a comparative lens informed by existentialist philosophy. Specifically, it utilizes the existentialist methodology of Jean-Paul Sartre, particularly the principles outlined in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, to critically assess how notions such as "existence precedes essence," personal choice, radical freedom, self-responsibility, and self-definition in a godless universe resonate with or illuminate the Buddhist understanding of karma. Further, logical analysis and comparative study are associated. By integrating these methodologies, the research aims to identify and clarify the existentialist dimension of karma as an ethically self-sufficient principle, independent of any theistic foundation.

4. Findings

The findings of this study reveal a compelling convergence between the Buddhist concept of karma and the core principles of atheist existentialism as articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre. Through a comparative philosophical analysis, it becomes evident that karma functions not as a theistic or fatalistic mechanism, but as an existential structure grounded in intentional action, personal responsibility, and self-authored meaning. Just as Sartre's existentialism rejects divine authority in favor of human freedom and self-definition, early Buddhist teachings portray karma as a self-directed ethical law that empowers individuals to shape their own existential trajectory. This study highlights that both systems affirm the necessity of inner transformation and moral agency in the absence of external salvific forces. Hence, karma emerges not merely as a metaphysical postulate, but as a dynamic existential tool aligned with Sartre's notions of anguish, abandonment, and the burden of freedom. This article attempts to examine the Buddhist concept of karma

within its own framework and Sartre's existentialism within his, before identifying the points at which the two intersect.

5. Discussion

5.1 What is Existentialism?

Existentialism can be simply identified as a philosophy of life. According to Thomas Flynn, although existentialism presents itself as a novel and unprecedented movement, it continues a long-standing tradition in Western philosophy, one that dates back at least to Socrates, who approached philosophy as a form of self-care, or *epimeleia heautou* (Flynn, 2006, p. 1). Existentialism encourages a focus on human existence rather than on metaphysical discourses. It invites individuals to search for the meaning of life through their own lived experience.

The emergence of existentialism became particularly notable in the 19th century and gained significant momentum after the Second World War. This was a period marked by profound hardship, where many individuals were confronted with existential crises. As a result, existentialism rose in prominence because much of traditional philosophy seemed detached from the concrete realities of human life, concerned more with abstract speculation than with the human condition. The decline of religious authority further pushed people to search for meaning and purpose on their terms. The Second World War was not only a political catastrophe but also a profound collapse of humanity, prompting a renewed concern for human existence. As the world grew more complex, traditional religious institutions increasingly failed to provide satisfying answers to the questions brought about by these crises. In this context, existentialism came to be viewed as a philosophical response to such challenges.

Existentialism did not emerge spontaneously; rather, it was shaped by several modern thinkers (as mentioned earlier) who emphasised freedom, individuality, and subjectivity. Søren Kierkegaard, regarded as the father of existentialism, stressed the importance of personal choice. Friedrich Nietzsche, a key influence on postmodernism and atheistic existentialism, introduced the concept of nihilism, radically asserted the 'death of God', and emphasised the need for humanity to create its values. Fyodor Dostoevsky, a novelist, explored inner conflict, free will, and faith through his literary works.

Existentialism is not merely another philosophical theme like metaphysics, ontology, or epistemology, it is a distinctive approach to understanding humanity.

As Marjorie Grene notes, the more fashionable a philosophy becomes, the more elusive its definition tends to be. She observes that although many people criticise existentialism, few truly understand it. Existentialists, she explains, emphasise the fundamental optimism of their doctrine, namely, that "man makes himself," and that there is always another chance as long as one is alive. According to Grene, existentialists' willingness to explore the full range of the human condition, including its darker dimensions and unspoken perversions, reflects not pessimism but a deep sense of humanity. Their uncompromising critique of the bourgeois ideal of "human dignity" often leads to their dismissal as perverse or iconoclastic, more as rebellious eccentrics than serious philosophers. As a result, Grene argues, the term "existentialism" is often misunderstood and misused, frequently applied to anything bleak, destructive, or shocking, much like how naturalism in the works of Zola or Ibsen was mischaracterised in their own time (Grene, 1948, p. 1).

5.1.1 Key Concepts of Existentialism

Existentialism engages with a broad range of philosophical domains, including ontology, metaphysics, epistemology, and psychology, and is closely connected to art and aesthetics. Therefore, existentialist doctrines are difficult to classify with precision. However, several key themes consistently emerge across existentialist thought. These include the freedom and responsibility to define the meaning and purpose of life; the experience of angst and anxiety as emotional responses to uncertainty; the emphasis on authenticity, or living by self-chosen values rather than societal expectations; the conflict between individual meaning-making and societal norms; and the feeling of alienation or disconnection from society, the self, and God.

As Walter Kaufmann reports, existentialism is not so much a coherent philosophical system as it is a label applied to a variety of disparate reactions against traditional philosophy. He notes that most thinkers commonly associated with existentialism have rejected the label altogether, and to an outsider, it may seem that their only common feature is mutual disagreement. Kaufmann highlights the further complication of retroactively categorising earlier writers as existentialists, many of whom would likely have opposed such a classification. He argues that existentialism cannot be reduced to a school of thought or a single set of doctrines. Even the three central figures most often associated with the movement, Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre, differ significantly on fundamental issues. Alleged forerunners like Pascal and Kierkegaard, both devout Christians (with Pascal being Catholic and Kierkegaard a committed Protestant), stand in stark contrast to others. If Nietzsche and Dostoevsky are also included, one must account for Nietzsche's vehement opposition to

Christianity and Dostoevsky's strong Russian Orthodox nationalism. When figures such as Rilke, Kafka, and Camus are added to the list, Kaufmann argues, it becomes clear that the only consistent thread among them is a passionate commitment to individualism (Kaufmann, 1956, p. 1).

5.1.2 Two Schools of Existentialism

As mentioned earlier, existentialism is generally divided into two schools: theistic and atheistic. Theistic existentialists believe in God and uphold the idea that God is responsible for creating and overseeing human lives. In contrast, atheistic existentialists reject any presupposed meaning or divine purpose, maintaining instead that individuals define their own meaning through freedom and responsibility. This paper focuses on the atheistic existentialist approach as described by Jean-Paul Sartre. According to Sartre, Christian existentialist philosophers such as Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel represent the theistic tradition, while Martin Heidegger, the French existentialists, and Sartre himself represent the atheistic tradition (Sartre, 2007, p. 20).

5.1.3 Sartre and Existentialism

Jean-Paul Sartre, a French philosopher, novelist, playwright, and political activist, is recognised as a central figure in atheistic existentialism. He studied philosophy and was deeply influenced by phenomenology, particularly the works of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, which emphasised consciousness and the nature of being. Sartre served in the French army during the Second World War, was captured by the Germans, and later escaped from the prison camp. These wartime experiences, marked by imprisonment, moral uncertainty, and crisis- significantly shaped his understanding of freedom, choice, and personal responsibility.

He observed that individuals often deny their freedom by blaming external circumstances, a phenomenon he referred to as bad faith (*mauvaise foi*). These lived experiences, combined with his philosophical training, steered him towards an existentialist outlook. As Joseph Catalano explains in his commentary on Sartre, the notion of bad faith refers to a psychological tendency or pattern of self-deception. While not everyone would articulate it in Sartre's terms, the underlying experience is widely recognisable. Catalano points out that people often deceive themselves in everyday ways, for example, by claiming they are inherently bad at something like mathematics. However, he notes that the most significant instances of bad faith are often profound enough to lead someone to seek psychological help (Catalano, 1980, p. 78).

5.1.4 Sartre and Atheist Existentialism

Sartre explicitly identified himself as an atheist existentialist in his well-known lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism* (Sartre, 2007, p. 20). As an atheist, he argued that even if God did exist, it would not change anything, since, from his perspective, the real issue is not God's existence but humanity's task of rediscovering itself. He claimed that nothing, not even irrefutable proof of God, could absolve human beings of the responsibility to define themselves. Sartre stressed that existentialism, in this regard, is an optimistic doctrine, rooted in action. He contended that Christians who accused existentialists of hopelessness were themselves in bad faith, mistaking their own despair for his.

According to Sartre, atheistic existentialism rests on several key principles, which will later be discussed about the Buddhist concept of kamma. These principles include: Existence precedes essence, Self-responsibility, Subjectivity, Anguish, Abandonment, Despair and Meaning-making.

5.2. The Early Buddhist Concept of Kamma and Its Atheist Existentialist Foundation

Since the discussion centres on the Early Buddhist concept of kamma and its atheist–existentialist characteristics, the analysis will proceed gradually by first examining Buddhism as a form of atheism, followed by a comparison with the fundamental characteristics and principles of atheist existentialism.

5.2.1 Buddhism as Atheism

Since the central discussion of this paper engages with atheistic existentialism, it is essential to first clarify whether Buddhism qualifies as an atheistic tradition. There is little doubt that Buddhism can be regarded as an atheistic religion. As Prof. R. D. Gunaratne points out, the fundamental assumption of theism is the belief in a creator God who is responsible for the creation and governance of the world and of human beings. Religions grounded in theism generally assert the existence of a soul that ultimately seeks union with God after death, and they view moral guidelines as divinely ordained. In contrast, he observes, Buddhism is an atheistic religion in that sense. (Gunaratne, 2021, p. 118).

The Buddha explicitly rejected the idea of a creator God in multiple discourses (suttas). In the period during which the Buddha lived, the concept of a creator deity

was represented by *Brahmā*, reflecting the Brahmanical (Hindu) notion of a supreme divine creator. As this belief was widely accepted at the time, the Buddha addressed it directly and critically. In the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, he classified the belief in a creator God as a *micchā diṭṭhi* (a wrong or misguided view). (*Brahmajāla Sutta*, www.pitaka.lk)

The Buddha's rejection of a divine creator also appears in a more satirical form in the *Aggañña Sutta*, where he ridicules the idea of cosmic creation and the hierarchical caste myths tied to it. (*Aggañña Sutta*, www.pitaka.lk) Furthermore, in the *Tevijja Sutta*, the Buddha challenges the Brahmins' claim that the ultimate spiritual goal is union with *Brahmā*. He argues that these Brahmins have never seen *Brahmā*, nor have they had any direct experience of him. Their assertions are therefore based solely on hearsay, tradition, and unexamined belief, not on personal insight or verifiable knowledge. In this way, the Buddha rejects blind adherence to religious doctrines that rely on speculative metaphysics or unverified authority. (*Tevijja Sutta*, www.pitaka.lk)

Thus, there is substantial doctrinal and textual evidence to support the classification of Buddhism as an atheistic tradition. With this established, we can now turn to examine whether the Buddhist concept of kamma, when seen in its early canonical formulation, rests upon foundations that align with the core principles of atheistic existentialism.

5.2.2 “Existence Precedes Essence” and the Concept of Kamma

Atheist existentialism rests on several key assumptions, among which Jean-Paul Sartre's principle that “existence precedes essence” stands out as foundational. Sartre argues that a human being first exists, comes into the world, and only afterwards defines themselves through their choices and actions. In his view, at the outset, a person is nothing and becomes something only through the exercise of free will. Rejecting belief in God, Sartre also dismisses the notion of a fixed human nature. A person is not what they are given by birth, tradition, or divine will, but what they choose and will themselves to become. Because individuals only become aware of themselves after they have been “thrown” into existence, they bear full responsibility for shaping their own identity. Sartre famously declares, “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself,” which he calls the first principle of existentialism (Sartre, 2007, p. 22).

Sartre further asserts that human beings begin from nothingness and must create themselves freely through their choices. Identity, for Sartre, is never fixed;

it is always in flux, just as existentialism itself is open-ended and resists dogmatic conclusions (Sartre, 1938, p. 10).

Turning now to Buddhism, the concept of kamma plays a central role in its ethical system, as well as in the doctrines of rebirth and liberation. Kamma can be considered a fundamental principle that underpins the workings of the world. According to the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha defines karma as volition:

“Cetanāhaṃ, bhikkhave, kammaṃ vadāmi. Cetaṃyitvā kammaṃ karoti – kāyena vācāya manasā.”

(“Monks, it is volition that I call karma. For having willed, one acts by body, speech, and mind.”) (*Nibbedhika Sutta*, www.pitaka.lk)

Thus, intentionality is the defining criterion for an action to qualify as karma in Buddhism. Moreover, kamma is not confined to bodily acts, it encompasses speech and mental activity as well. Unlike divine forces such as God, Brahṃā, or Tao, karma is not an eternal, static force that governs the world. It is instead a dynamic process rooted in ethical intentionality, leading to both wholesome and unwholesome consequences. Importantly, kamma is not deterministic, it does not predetermine every outcome in a person’s life, a point this paper will explore further.

The alignment between the Buddhist concept of kamma and the existentialist notion of “existence precedes essence” becomes particularly clear in the Buddha’s radical critique of the caste system. The caste hierarchy, widely accepted in ancient Indian society, assigned people their value and role based on birth. The Buddha strongly rejected this system and instead emphasised that one’s moral worth arises from one’s actions. He famously stated,

“Not by birth is one a Brahmin, but by deeds (kamma) one is a Brahmin.” (*Vāseṭṭha Sutta*, www.pitaka.lk) The sutta further mentions this context essentially in relation to human action, in the sense of what one does or one’s profession, and subsequently applies the same principle to moral action.

This ethical emphasis resonates with Sartre’s claim that individuals are responsible for who they become. For the Buddha, human beings are not defined by divine design or inherited social status but by their own volitional actions. He denied that a God or external being controls fate. When questioned about whether there is a “self” that acts as a controller, the Buddha instead pointed to dependent origination,

explaining how actions arise from conditions, thus affirming moral agency without invoking an enduring soul or metaphysical essence (*Attakāra Sutta*, www.pitaka.lk).

While kamma plays a vital role in shaping human experience, it is not the sole determining factor. The Buddha also rejected three popular explanations of causality: that everything is due to past kamma, that a God controls everything, or that events occur purely by chance. All three were regarded as erroneous views. In the *Titthāyatana Sutta*, the Buddha cautions against fatalism: if all consequences are the result of past karma, there would be no incentive for ethical effort. Instead, he emphasised the importance of present intention and mindful action. This doctrine allows individuals to shape their future regardless of past deeds. While past kamma has influence, it does not fully determine future outcomes.

Thus, both Sartre and the Buddha affirm that individuals have the responsibility and potential to shape their own “essence.” Kamma in Buddhism can be understood in two senses: as past intentional actions, and as present or future intentional actions. Since future intentional actions are not yet in existence, intentionality becomes relevant only at the moment when a person attempts to act. If one reflects on one’s intentionality at that point, it becomes a decisive factor in shaping future actions and their consequences. Often, kamma is mistakenly interpreted only in the first sense, as a force determining one’s present circumstances based on past deeds. However, the Buddha rejected the idea that all experiences are caused by past kamma. Rather, future actions, freely chosen and ethically intentional, hold immense power in shaping the trajectory of one’s life. Buddhism, therefore, is not a form of kamma determinism. Both Buddhism and existentialism centre human responsibility and self-definition, denying that external forces (be they divine or mechanical) dictate personal destiny.

The existentialist axiom “existence precedes essence” is not merely an ontological claim; it is a direct challenge to the idea that a person’s nature or purpose is predetermined. Sartre explained that what is usually called “will” is a conscious decision that follows a deeper, often unconscious, formation of self. Major life choices, such as joining a political party, writing a book, or getting married, are expressions of a broader project of self-creation that begins earlier. For Sartre, the core message of existentialism is to confront individuals with their total responsibility for who they are. Moreover, he contended that personal responsibility extends beyond the individual; each person, by their choices, also helps shape humanity at large (Sartre, 2007, p. 23).

The Buddha, similarly, denied the ontological reality of any fixed existence. According to the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, all constituents of personality, form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness are impermanent. He declared:

“*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*” (All conditioned things are impermanent – *Dhammapada*, vv. 277–279)

Given this emphasis on impermanence and conditionality, the Buddhist understanding of human existence is not metaphysical or essentialist. In this light, the apparent contrast between Sartre’s and the Buddha’s views on existence disappears. Both traditions reject a fixed ontology and affirm the human capacity for self-determination.

The notion of “essence” in both Buddhism and existentialism can thus be understood as fluid and constructed. In Buddhism, karma is a key (though not exclusive) contributor to shaping one’s experiences and character. As the *Sīvaka Sutta* clarifies, not all experiences are due to past kamma, there are other causes as well. This balanced view avoids fatalism while still emphasising ethical accountability.

Furthermore, time itself plays a role in expressing how “existence precedes essence.” Present actions influence future outcomes. In this way, the doctrine not only supports Buddhist ethics but also inspires individuals to strive for self-transformation in both secular and spiritual domains. The *Saṃyutta Nikāya* affirms this principle of self-reliance:

“*Attadīpā viharatha, attasaraṇā, anaññasaraṇā...*”

(“Dwell with yourselves as an island, with yourselves as a refuge, with no other refuge.” – *Attadīpanā Sutta*, www.pitaka.lk)

The Buddha repeatedly emphasized personal effort (*vīriya*) as the key to success in both mundane and spiritual goals. In the *Vīriyārambha Suttas*, he encourages individuals to act with the same urgency as if their heads were on fire. All such effort, whether in body, speech, or thought, falls under the domain of kamma. As defined earlier, kamma is nothing other than volitional action.

In summary, the Buddhist doctrine of kamma aligns closely with the existentialist principle that “existence precedes essence.” Both affirm human freedom and responsibility while rejecting external determinism, be it divine, cosmic, or karmic in a fatalistic sense. They encourage individuals to take charge of their own becoming through mindful, intentional action.

5.2.3 Freedom as the Ground of Moral Agency: Sartre and Karmic Responsibility

According to Sartre, human beings are radically free because there is no divine creator or predetermined essence that defines them. Individuals exist first and must then define themselves entirely through their choices and actions. Since nothing external, such as God, nature, or social convention, determines what a person ought to become, Sartre insists that each individual is wholly responsible for what they make of themselves. This freedom, however, is not a privilege but a condition from which we cannot escape. Accordingly, Sartre stresses that with freedom comes profound responsibility, not only for oneself but also in serving as an exemplar for others. He describes this awareness as a source of existential anguish: the burden of shaping one's life without appeal to any higher authority (Sartre, 2007, pp. 23–25).

Webber, drawing from *Being and Nothingness*, notes that Sartre considers human beings as “condemned to be free” (B&N: 462). Though we do not choose to exist, we are nevertheless thrust into a condition of freedom that is inescapable. This freedom manifests in the fact that our experiences, thoughts, emotions, and actions arise from projects we have chosen, projects we are not compelled to pursue and which we are always free to alter. Our character, then, is not a fixed given but a continuous act of self-creation. As Sartre puts it, “I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence” and “beyond the motifs and mobiles of my act” (Webber, 2009, p. 58).

In a strikingly parallel manner, the Buddhist notion of kamma also affirms a form of radical freedom. Kamma is not a deterministic force but rather the principle that volitional action conditions one's future. In the *Cūḷakammavibhaṅga Sutta*, when the brahmin youth Subha asks the Buddha why human lives differ in fortune and character, the Buddha replies that beings are the owners and heirs of their kamma. Kamma, he explains, is the foundation, origin, and kin of beings; through kamma arise the distinctions among humans in terms of inferiority and superiority. Thus, each individual's volitional actions in the past condition the circumstances of their present (*Cūḷakammavibhaṅga Sutta*, www.pitaka.lk).

The *Dvedhāvitakka Sutta* offers an autobiographical account of the Buddha's own mental cultivation. Here, he describes how he divided his thoughts into two types: those rooted in sensual desire, ill will, and cruelty, and those grounded in renunciation, goodwill, and compassion. Recognizing that the former led to harm and the latter to wisdom and peace, he actively chose to abandon unwholesome thoughts and cultivate wholesome ones. His reflection, “Whatever a bhikkhu frequently

thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind”, underscores a conscious, volitional engagement with one's mental life (*Dvedhāvitakka Sutta*). Kamma, in this framework, is not limited to bodily or verbal acts but extends to mental intentions as well.

This insight echoes Sartre's assertion that man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. Actions, not identity, fate, or external decree, are central. The *Sutta Nipāta* declares: “By oneself is evil done; by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is evil left undone; by oneself is one purified. Purity and impurity depend on oneself. No one can purify another” (*Sutta Nipāta* 3.4). Similarly, the *Kamma Sutta* affirms, “Beings are owners of their kamma... whatever kamma they do, good or bad, they will inherit it” (*Itivuttaka* 50). These passages powerfully assert human agency without appeal to divine authority or external determinism. Freedom, in both Buddhist and existentialist perspectives, is inescapable, and so is responsibility.

Historically, both traditions emerged in opposition to prevailing theistic and deterministic paradigms. Buddhism arose in a context dominated by Brahmanical tradition, which posited an immutable soul (*ātman*) and cosmic order (*ṛta*) under divine governance. Similarly, existentialism developed against the backdrop of Christian theological determinism. In both traditions, the prevailing assumption was that essence precedes existence, that human nature is defined by something prior and external. Even though Buddhism did not associated the term 'essence' the idea could be seen embedded in the philosophy. By contrast, both Buddhism and atheistic existentialism challenged this view, asserting that existence precedes essence, and that human beings are self-constituting through action. In this study, Sartre's existential criteria serve as a lens through which Buddhist kamma is interpreted, not only as a rejection of determinism, but as a radical affirmation of freedom and self-responsibility. In the final analysis, kamma becomes a Buddhist counterpart to Sartrean existential freedom: a weapon against theistic and deterministic conceptions of human essence.

5.2.4 Karma, Subjectivity, and Authenticity

As previously noted, Sartre's concept of radical freedom entails the subjective creation of one's essence through action. This is the foundation of his existential ethics, which he characterizes as an “authentic” morality. In the absence of a divine moral lawgiver, values are not discovered but chosen. Authenticity, for Sartre, consists in embracing this freedom fully and acting in accordance with one's chosen commitments, rather than appealing to external authorities or absolutes.

Responsibility for one's actions, and by extension, for the person one becomes, rests solely with the individual.

This idea resonates closely with the Buddha's ethical stance. The Buddha does not assume the role of moral legislator but rather encourages self-examination and reflective autonomy. The *Kālāma Sutta* provides a striking example of this approach:

“When you know for yourselves, ‘These things are unwholesome; these things are blameworthy; these things are criticised by the wise; these things, when undertaken and observed, lead to harm and suffering’, then you should abandon them. When you know for yourselves, ‘These things are wholesome; these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; these things, when undertaken and observed, lead to welfare and happiness’, then you should accept and practice them.” (*Kālāma Sutta*, www.pitaka.lk)

Here, morality is not handed down by an external force but arises from critical reflection and experiential insight. Intentional actions, mental, verbal, and physical, are considered karmic. This emphasis on volition implies that individuals must be acutely aware of their motivations and decisions, for these choices shape not only their future outcomes but also their existential orientation in the world. Kamma is not deterministic; it reflects potentiality and probability rather than mechanical causality.

Sartre similarly maintains that behind every action lies a fundamental project, a pre-reflective drive to "be", which constitutes the foundation of one's identity. For instance, a man's decision to go rowing may reflect a love for outdoor activity, which in turn may point to a deeper project of asserting freedom or pursuing harmony. But eventually, this chain of explanation terminates in a foundational desire: the project to be. Sartre argues that this desire cannot be further analysed; it is the existential bedrock of human individuality (Sartre, 1995). This notion, like the Buddhist emphasis on intentional volition, underscores the existential primacy of subjective commitment over any predetermined nature or externally imposed value system.

Together, Sartre's notion of authentic subjectivity and the Buddhist doctrine of karmic intentionality both affirm that human beings are the authors of their moral universe. In both traditions, liberation, whether from *dukkha* or inauthenticity, requires self-awareness, ethical reflection, and active engagement in shaping one's destiny.

5.2.5 Kamma, Anguish, Abandonment, Despair, and Meaning-Making

Sartre explained that terms like “anguish,” “abandonment,” and “despair” might sound lofty, but their meanings are straightforward. For Sartre, anguish refers to the deep sense of responsibility that arises when a person realises their choices not only define themselves but also serve as a model for humanity. This awareness, he argues, inevitably leads to a profound moral burden. Though many do not seem visibly anguished, Sartre believed this often stems from an unwillingness to confront their own responsibility. Individuals often rationalise their actions by assuming they only affect themselves. But when pressed about what would happen if everyone acted the same way, they tend to dismiss the question. Sartre contends that such evasions reflect bad faith. Even a liar implicitly affirms the value of truth, thereby assuming that their behaviour has universal significance (Sartre, 2007, p. 25).

As Anderson explains, following Sartre entails valuing freedom, not through obedience to an external moral code, but by affirming freedom as a fundamental condition of human existence. To respect this condition is to acknowledge both oneself and others as free beings (*êtres-pour-soi*), not objects determined by external forces. Acting on this recognition involves taking full responsibility for one’s decisions, without retreating into excuses. Sartre’s notion of freedom includes both ontological freedom (our inherent structure as free beings) and the freedom of choice (Anderson, 1993, p. 71).

Buddhism, too, identifies anguish as a fundamental feature of existence. The term *dukkha*, often translated as “suffering,” is classified into three forms: (1) *dukkha-dukkha* (ordinary suffering such as pain or grief), (2) *vipariṇāma-dukkha* (suffering due to change), and (3) *saṅkhāra-dukkha* (existential suffering arising from the conditioned nature of all phenomena). According to the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the Buddha’s first sermon after enlightenment, the First Noble Truth is the reality of *dukkha*: life entails suffering, birth, ageing, illness, death, separation, and unfulfilled desires.

In the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, the Buddha explains how the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness) are not-self and are inherently bound with *dukkha*. The *Dukkha Sutta* goes further, stating that every phase of life is characterised by suffering: “Birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering...”

From a Buddhist perspective, there is a profound existential dimension to karma. Karma is not merely a mechanism of reward and punishment; it is fundamentally linked to the individual's intentional choices and the consequences of those choices. For example, the Sabbāsava Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 2) identifies unwise attention as a mental cause of suffering, offering practical guidance on overcoming it. The Pañcavaggi Sutta narrates how the Buddha addressed the five ascetics after his enlightenment, asserting that liberation begins with a direct confrontation with the reality of suffering. In this context, wise-reflection (or *yoniso manasikāra*) functions like intentionality in Sartre's philosophy, directing volition and thus determining one's karmic path.

Sartre assumes that humans are anguished because they realise no external agent can eliminate their suffering. This realisation leads to several existential claims:

1. Human existence is inherently characterised by anguish.
2. No God or higher power can save individuals from this condition.
3. Individuals must therefore take responsibility for choosing how to live and define their essence.
4. These choices impact not only themselves but all of humanity.
5. When human apprehend that they have a huge responsibility which impact for not only them but also all humanity, they become anguish.

5.2.6 Humans are always in anguish

Buddhism aligns closely with these assumptions. As an atheistic tradition, it denies the intervention of a creator God. Multiple canonical texts affirm that individuals must save themselves. For instance, the Dhammapada (v. 160) states:

"One is one's own protector. What other protector can there be? With oneself well controlled, one gains a protector hard to find."

The Attadīpa Sutta reinforces this message:

"You must be your own lamp, your own refuge. Seek no other refuge... Let the Dhamma be your refuge."

The Rathavinīta Sutta uses the metaphor of a chariot relay to show that while the Buddha can indicate the path, one must undertake the journey to liberation personally. Even Sakka, the king of the gods in Buddhist cosmology, acknowledges the Tathāgata as a guide, not a saviour (Viriya Sutta). These texts collectively affirm that no external being, even a divine one, can liberate another.

Furthermore, Buddhist texts like the Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta show how moral decay on an individual level leads to societal collapse. The failure to practice dāna (generosity) initiates a cycle of greed, theft, and violence. The Samaññaphala Sutta argues that individual purification through ethical conduct, livelihood, and meditation benefits not only oneself but society. Likewise, the Aggañña Sutta mythologises how selfish and unethical actions transform the world from harmony to disintegration, demonstrating that karma has both individual and collective dimensions.

The Pārāyana Vagga portrays sixteen Brahmin seekers in existential confusion, seeking liberation but finding no reliable guide. They are plagued by aging and death and express their anguish in not knowing how to proceed. Similarly, the Lokavipatti Sutta outlines the Eight Worldly Conditions, gain/loss, fame/shame, praise/blame, pleasure/pain, which destabilise individuals and cause suffering when misunderstood. This resonates with Sartre's idea that confusion and suffering arise when people fail to grasp their freedom and responsibility.

Sartre's concept of abandonment refers to the human condition in the absence of God. Without divine or objective values, individuals must create their own values through action. They can no longer claim excuses based on nature or divine will. This is the burden of freedom (Sartre, 2007, pp. 27–29). The Kālāma Sutta exemplifies a similar principle in Buddhism. It encourages individuals not to rely on tradition, lineage, or hearsay but to determine what is wholesome through direct experience and reason. This places moral authority within the individual, mirroring Sartre's moral subjectivism.

Sartre's despair is not mere hopelessness, but a call to act within one's limits. Since no external agent can guarantee the outcomes of one's choices, one must act based on what lies within one's control. The Culamalunkya Sutta captures this idea when the Buddha refuses to speculate about metaphysical questions, like the eternity of the world or the afterlife, arguing that such speculation is irrelevant to the cessation of suffering.

The Buddha's exhortation in the Attadīpa Sutta to "be your own island, your own refuge" reinforces this existential orientation. Freedom in Buddhism, as outlined in the Kālāma Sutta, is not just freedom to choose, but the obligation to choose wisely, based on one's own discernment and karmic responsibility.

6. Conclusion

Atheist existentialism is a profound philosophical framework that foregrounds human existence, responsibility, and freedom, without recourse to divine authority. Jean-Paul Sartre, its most prominent figure, advanced this framework through ideas such as existence precedes essence, radical freedom, anguish, abandonment, despair, and meaning-making.

The Buddhist concept of kamma offers a striking parallel. It is not deterministic, nor is it fatalistic. Kamma in Buddhism is the existential capacity to define one's essence and values through intentional action. Both Sartre and the Buddha reject reliance on external salvific forces. Both affirm that human beings must forge their own paths toward meaning and liberation.

Buddhism clearly aligns with Sartre's atheist existentialist criteria. Karma, in this light, becomes an existential tool rather than a metaphysical doctrine. It allows for self-definition, moral subjectivity, and personal responsibility. It is a path of emancipation from suffering—not through external intervention, but through personal insight, effort, and transformation. As Jayatilleke notes, this leads to the highest knowledge, not only the knowledge of reality, but also the knowledge of liberation (Jayatilleke, 1961, p. 421).

Thus, the Buddhist doctrine of kamma can be regarded as a profound expression of atheist existentialism.

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Author Biography

S. M. Chathuri Gaweshika Samarakoon is a Lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies and Comparative Philosophy at the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka. She previously served as a Temporary Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Peradeniya. She holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Degree in Philosophy with First Class Honours and a Master of Philosophy in Philosophy, specializing in Buddhist logic and the philosophy of science. Her research interests include logic, epistemology, philosophy of religion, and philosophy of science, with a particular focus on Buddhist perspectives on classical theistic arguments and comparative philosophical inquiry.