

# KHAYYAM AND EXISTENTIALISM

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Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are generally acknowledged as the founders of the philosophy of existentialism. The reason for this is not that they were the first to argue existentialist themes; such themes are found sporadically throughout the history of Western Philosophy. Rather, the reason is that they were the first to organize existentialist themes into unified, more-or-less consistent statements expressing those themes as an identifiably unique and cohesive philosophy. Nearly a thousand years earlier, however, the Persian poet Omar Khayyam articulated many of these same themes in his poem, the Rubaiyat.<sup>77</sup> The Rubaiyat also expresses these themes as an organized, coherent, and cohesive philosophy. It is my view that an analytic examination of the Rubaiyat confirms the melancholy Persian poet, rather than his 19th Century colleagues, as the original existentialist philosopher. Indeed, it seems remarkable that he has not long since been so recognized.

To demonstrate Khayyam's existentialism we may consider five fundamental existentialist concepts and examine just how they are expressed in the Rubaiyat. These fundamental concepts are:

1. Atheism
2. The abandonment of the individual in the world
3. The absurdity of the human circumstance
4. The subjectivity of value
5. The subjectivity of truth

## KHAYYAM'S ATHEISM

Like Nietzsche and Sartre, Khayyam rejected theism. Unlike Nietzsche and Sartre, Khayyam doesn't present a militant, rational rejection of theism. Rather, he emotionally laments the necessity to foreswear the notion of a supernatural metaphysical scheme. Verse after verse mourns the loss of an omnipotent and loving creator and of an after-life existence for the

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<sup>77</sup> Edward Fitzgerald, trans., *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (5th ed. of the translation), Garden City Books, Garden City, N.Y., 1952

individual. In the end, however, he remains an atheist, or at the very least, a hardened skeptic. In verse thirteen he observes that:

“Some for the Glories of This world; and some  
Sigh for the Prophet’s Paradise to come;”

He concludes the verse by admonishing his reader to:

“Ah, take the cash, and let the Credit go,  
Nor heed the rumble of a distant Drum!”

Clearly, Khayyam sees the “cash” of worldly rewards as of more negotiable value than the “credit” of distant and hence dubious heavenly rewards.

In verse eighteen he mocks the notion of resurrection by describing how the greatest of hunters cannot be enticed from the grave even by direct insult from the lowliest of beasts.

“And Bahram, that great hunter -- the Wild Ass  
Stamps o’re his Head, but cannot break his sleep.

Khayyam carries us to something of a conclusion to this thought in verse twenty-four where he urges his reader to make the most of the present since death is naught but an eternal oblivion.

“Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,  
Before we too into the Dust descend;  
Dust into Dust, and under Dust to lie,  
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and -- sans End!”

Verses twenty-six, twenty-seven, and twenty-eight express his atheism with even more direct clarity in rejecting theological metaphysics and the words of theological scholars as mere foolish, empty rhetoric ending insignificant babble.

“Why, all the Saints and Sages who discuss’d  
Of the Two Worlds so wisely -- they art thrust  
Like foolish Prophets forth; their words to Scorn  
Are scattered, and their Mouths are stopt with Dust”  
“Myself when young did eagerly frequent  
Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument  
About it and about: but evermore  
Came out by the same door wherein I went.  
“With them the seed of wisdom did I sow,  
And with mine own hand wrought to make it grow:  
And this is all the Harvest that I reap’d --  
‘I came like water, and like water, and like wind I go.

Khayyam considers here the two worlds, this world and the heavenly world of theological metaphysics, which he describes as being asserted by fools whose mouths (or doctrines) are-obliterated by the dust of death. Further, all the scholar’s heavenly speculations finally led Khayyam only through the same worldly door and to the conclusion that we know nothing of any before or after-life. He reduces the supposed knowledge of supernatural eternity to the rational vacuity of spuriously eddying wind and water.

Should Khayyam’s atheism need any emphasis, it is amply provided in verses sixty-three, sixty-four, and sixty-five. In verse sixty-three he describes the concepts of paradise and. hell as outright lies.

“Oh, threats of Hell and Hopes of Paradise!  
One thing at least is certain -- This Life flies;

Verse sixty-four asks facetiously:

“Strange, is it not? that of the myriads who  
Before us pass’d the door of Darkness through,  
Not one returns to tell us of the Road,  
Which to discover we must travel too.”

And in verse sixty-five he muses that:

“The Revelations of Devout and Learn’d  
Who rose before us, and as Prophets burn’d,  
Are all but Stories, which, awoke from Sleep  
They told their comrades, and to Sleep return’d.”

Finally, in verse sixty-six he concludes. “I Myself am Heav’n and Hell:”  
All this would seem to leave little doubt of Khayyam’s atheism.

## **THE ABANDONMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE WORLD**

On the concept of abandonment, Sartre has argued that the existentialist finds himself abandoned in the world.<sup>78</sup> Certainly, Khayyam would concur: he had long since described such a condition of human abandonment. In verse forty-seven he depicts the world as magnificently indifferent to the individual’s existence and demise.

“When you and I behind the Veil are past,  
Oh, but the long, long while the World shall last  
Which of our Coming and Departure Heeds?”

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<sup>78</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* Meridian Books, The World Publishing Co., Cleveland and New York N.Y., .1956, pp. 294-298.

As the Sea's self should heed a pebble-cast.”

In verse forty-eight Khayyam continues and develops this thought in affirming that so far as we can know, we come from nothing and end in nothingness, our ontological Being being a mere momentary glimpse at existence. We are here -- for a moment

and we are gone -- for eternity. We are here without pre-life roots and without post-life surcease -- abandoned in the world.

“A Moment's Halt -- a momentary taste  
Of Being from the Well amid the Waste—  
And Lo! — the phantom Caravan has reach'd  
The Nothing it set out from— Oh, make haste!”

Again, in one of the Rubaiyat's most quoted verses, Khayyam expresses his concept of the condition of abandonment in describing the heavens as impotent, i.e., as incapable of offering the possibility of any heavenly companionship to which one might appeal for reassurance. Verse seventy-two relates:

“And that inverted Bowl they call the sky,  
Whereunder crawling coop'd we live and die,  
Lift not your hands to It for help -- for It  
As impotently moves as you or I.”

Verse seventy-four echoes virtually the same thought in concluding:

“Drink, for you know not whence you  
came, nor why:  
Drink, for you know not why you go, nor where.”

Once again, our unmitigated ignorance of ultimate destiny leaves us abandoned in the world. Verse ninety-six reiterates the theme in concluding:

“The Nightingale that in the branches sang,  
Ah whence, and whither flown again, who knows!”

### **THE ABSURDITY OF THE HUMAN CIRCUMSTANCE**

The existentialist concept of the absurdity of life is perhaps best expressed on the modern scene by Camus as he describes Sisyphus’ eternal struggle with his rock.<sup>79</sup> Khayyam is at least equally explicit in his description of the ultimate futility of life when he sings in verse twenty-nine:

“Into the Universe and Why not knowing  
Nor Whence, like Water willy-nilly flowing;  
And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,  
I know not Whither, willy-nilly blowing.”

By itself, this verse seems as expressive of abandonment as of absurdity, but when interpreted with the inherent indignation of the following verse, thirty, and the absurdity of life becomes the paramount theme.

“What, without asking, Whither hurried Whence?  
And, without asking, Whither hurried hence?  
Oh, many a Cup of this forbidden Wine  
Must drown the memory of that insolence!”

Indeed, what an absurd situation, to find oneself wandering aimlessly from an unknown origin toward an equally unknown destination, and to be pushed willy-nilly like wind and water in between. Little wonder many a cup is required to cope with the absurdity of it all.

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<sup>79</sup> Nino Langiulli, ed., *The Existentialist Tradition* Anchor Books, Doubleday and Co., inc., Garden City, N.Y., 1971, pp. 453-454.

Khayyam sees as no less absurd the concept of mankind as a creation of an omnipotent and benevolent creator. Hence the obligation to recognize religious values and responsibilities also becomes ludicrous. His argument is that there could be no truly benevolent God who would create from dust a sentient being, surround him with proscribed temptations and then condemn him for succumbing to them. Only an omnipotent sadist would do such a thing. That the God of religion is an absurd notion becomes the inescapable conclusion. Khayyam's rejection of such a lugubrious theistic scheme is effusively expressed as rational indignation in verses seventy-eight and seventy-nine where he states:

“What! out of senseless Nothing to provoke

A conscious Something to resent the yoke

Of un permitted Pleasure, under pain

Of everlasting Penalties, if broke!

“What! from this helpless Creature be repaid

Pure Gold for what he lent him dross-allay'd --

Sue for a Debt we never did contract,

And cannot answer -- Oh, the sorry trade!”

Khayyam concludes this thought by pointing out that were such a theistic metaphysical theory to be believed, God would be at least as much in need of mankind's forgiveness for creating such a human condition of sinfulness as mankind would be in need of God's forgiveness for succumbing to it. Verse eighty-one speaks with clarity:

“Oh Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,

And e'en with Paradise devises the Snake:

For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man

Is blacken'd -- man's forgiveness give -- and take!”

## THE SUBJECTIVITY OF VALUES

Sartre expresses the existentialist view of the subjectivity of values in describing them as individual creations and self-legislations. He argues, for example, that values emerge in a painting only as the artist works with his materials, making subjective decisions and accomplishing them in the process of his endeavor.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, Khayyam emphasizes the realization of individual values within the context of an active involvement in life. Other than urging his reader to haste in becoming involved in life (verse twenty-four: “Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,”), rather than speculating about it or analysing it; Khayyam offers no specific prescriptions toward what values are to be realized. This he leaves to the individual’s subjective judgment. In perhaps the best known lines of the Rubaiyat, verse seven tells us:

Come, fill the Cup, and in the fire of Spring  
Your Winter-garment Repentance fling:  
The Bird of Time has but little way  
To flutter -- and the Bird is on the Wing.”

For himself, the values most worth pursuing are the clearly subjective, individualistic, and somewhat humanistic values of simplicity, tranquility, aesthetic appreciations, love, and as always with Khayyam, the immediate enjoyment of the here-and-now Verse twelve, in some of the most poignant and eloquent lines of the Rubaiyat, relates:

“A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,  
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread -- and Thou  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness --  
Oh, Wilderness was Paradise enow!”

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<sup>80</sup> William Y. Spanos, *A Casebook of Existentialism* Thomas Y. Cravell Co., N.Y., 1966, p. 292.



Khayyam's only qualification is a negative admonition to avoid wasting life in sterile speculations and disputations. Verse fifty-four advises:

“Waste not your Hour, not in the vain pursuit  
Of This and That endeavor and dispute;  
Better be jocund with the fruitful Grape  
Than sadden after none, or bitter, Fruit.”

And lest we be tempted to withdraw from the immediate living of life in favour of its analysis, verse fifty-five continues with:

“You know, my Friends, with what a brave Carouse  
I made a second Marriage in my house:  
Divorced old barren Reason from my Bed,  
And took the Daughter of the Vine to Spouse.”

The pursuit of individually determined values may not be rewarded with success and satisfaction. Nonetheless, such a pursuit in itself is of more value than the empty pursuit of those values mistakenly believed to be objective and eternal. Verse seventy-seven affirms Khayyam's existentialist perspective toward the pursuit of individually derived values in stating:

“And this I know: whether the one True Light  
Kindle to Love, or Wrath-consume me quite,  
One flash of It within the Tavern caught  
Better than in the Temple lost outright.”

## **THE SUBJECTIVITY OF TRUTH**

The subjectivity of truth is one of the salient themes in existentialist philosophy. Khayyam's view dismisses the search for objective truth as an insignificant endeavor, at least mundane if not futile. Since ultimate

knowledge of heaven, hell, and fate is not forthcoming Khayyam regards the distinction between true and false as relatively inconsequential. He implies that this fundamental epidemic inquiry over which so many have so laboriously struggled for so long, is really, at best, perhaps a simple matter of perspective finally unworthy of significant consideration. In verses forty-nine and fifty he asserts:

“... A Hair perhaps divides the False and True --

And upon what, prithee, does life depend?

“A Hair perhaps divides the False and True;

Yes: and a single A/if were the clue --

Could you but find it -- to the Treasure - house,

And peradventure to The Master too;”

This view of truth is further emphasized, perhaps more clearly, in verses fifty-six and fifty-seven where Khayyam states:

For ‘Is’ and ‘Is-not’ though with Rule and Line,

And “Up-and-down’ by Logic I define,

Of that entire one should care to fathom, I

Was never deep in anything but -- Wine.

“Ah, but my Computations, People say,

Reduced the year to better reckoning? -- Nay,

‘Twas only striking from the Calendar

Unborn To-morrow and dead Yesterday.”

These four verses would seem enough to establish that Khayyam came to regard ordinary knowledge as trivial. In rejecting the possibility of ultimate

knowledge Khayyam retains respect only for whatever philosophical knowledge of values the individual may glean from immediate experience.

To brand ordinary knowledge as trivial is not, of course, exactly to categorize it as subjective. Khayyam's epidemic subjectivity occurs in a broader sense. Not the narrower psychological subjectivism of Kierkegaard or Sartre it asserts, as it were, the grandeur scheme of metaphysical subjectivity. Khayyam expresses the collective subjectivity of our plenary ignorance of ultimate knowledge rather than the psychological subjectivity of the individual psyche. This identifies Khayyam as somewhat unique in the existentialist tradition and simultaneously displays his view as perhaps even a bit more existentialist than those of his more recent existentialist colleagues.

## CONCLUSION

The Rubaiyat concludes with a burgeoning crescendo of melancholy eloquence when, in verse ninety-nine, Khayyam sings:

“Ah Love! could you and I with Him Conspire?

To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things Entire,

Would not we shatter it to bits -- and then

Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's desire!”

This sentimental lamentation captures at once Khayyam's subjectivity, his sense of abandonment and view of absurdity; by itself nearly enough to establish his view as the original statement of existential philosophy.