

CONCEPT OF FREEDOM IN SARTRE'S PHILOSOPHY

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INTRODUCTION: Jean Paul Sartre, the principle exponent of French Existentialism, accords complete autonomy to human beings suggesting that there is no reality higher than human individuals. He was one of the key figures in 20th century in the philosophy of existentialism and phenomenology, the philosopher of human freedom. His major contribution was his system of existentialism, humans' freedom and responsibilities within a framework of human dignity. Sartre in his book entitled "Existentialism and Humanism" presented existentialism in the form of humanism. His existentialism is concerned, unlike other philosophies with the problem of being than the problem of becoming; more with the particulars than with the universals; more with existence than essences. The conception of human that was advocated by Jean Paul Sartre will be explained with an examination of his rejection of essentialism and his advocacy of human freedom. Sartre has famously stated that man is Condemned to be Free. In many sense Sartre's philosophy is peculiar, as it advocates an unconditional atheism and individualism, but also accounts for concepts like responsibility.

ABSTRACT: The concept of freedom occupies an important place in Sartre's philosophy and his Existentialistic Humanism. It plays a significant role in his existentialism. He states that Man is condemned to be free. Man is born free, as he also holds that our existence is absolutely free and it consists in developing our life in full freedom which brings responsibility. Again, his existentialism is atheistic. The existence of God is not necessary for the existence and freedom of finite personalities. He believes that for the existence of human beings, there is no need of any Super-natural Being or God. He only gives importance for the human beings in this world. Since Sartre's existentialism is concerned with man's freedom and its aim is to change its readers or to free from illusion, therefore it always been taught as a practical philosophy. In this article, I shall discuss the concept of freedom that have found in the philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre.

Key words: Freedom, Individual, Existentialism, Humanism, Responsibility, Condemned, God.

METHODOLOGY: This article is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data have been collected from the original works of Sartre and Secondary data have been collected from different books, articles, research journals, internet, etc.

CONCEPT OF FREEDOM:

Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, upends the conventional view of freedom and frames the issue in a new, existential framework. For Sartre, human reality is free because it is not full and sufficient like the being-in-itself (material object). As man is incomplete, man has a possibility and he has the power of choose. Thus, freedom is not a being; it is the nothingness of being. He emphatically states, "Man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free, he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all."¹ Freedom plays a key role in the determination of consciousness—for Sartre, freedom is the being of humans, and is inexorably linked to being-for-itself. Although it sounds uncomfortable, if not unnerving, Sartre maintains that human beings are necessarily free, always, and it is impossible for a human to fail to be free. To fail to be free, in his view, is the same as to cease to be. So the result Sartre ends up with—redefining the role of freedom as the mode of being of the for-itself—while unexpected, provides for a new way of looking at our lives, and I think that Sartre successfully sheds light on our understanding of ourselves and our choices in the world. As an existentialist philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre proclaimed the superiority of human beings, their positions and their values in this world as mentioned in the above discussions, along with these, he proclaimed the freedom of man to be absolute and established that in man's life existence precedes essence. For him, freedom occupies an important place in the life of a human being in determining his course of action. But, freedom for Sartre is not a mere concept rather it is something which comes along with the birth of an individual. The nature of consciousness according to him is to go beyond itself and to become what-it-is-not and not to remain what-it-is. It is because the consciousness in an individual is always free. Human consciousness and freedom are always inseparable and their freedom defines man's very being. Sartre says that,

"Thus freedom... is not a property which belongs among others to the essence of the human being. We have already noticed furthermore that with man the relation of existence to essence is not comparable to what it is for the things of the world. Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom. What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the being of 'human reality'. Man doesn't exist first in order to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of man and his being free."²

So, Sartre concludes in the latter passage, "I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself or, if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free."³ This theory relies upon his position that there is no creator, and is illustrated using the example of the paper cutter. Sartre says that if one considered paper cutter, one would assume that the creator would have had a plan for it: an essence. His forms the basis for his assertion that since one cannot explain one's own actions and behavior by referencing any specific human nature, they are necessarily fully responsible for those actions. "We are left alone, without excuse."⁴ "We can act without being determined by our past which is always separated from us."⁵ Sartre maintained that the concepts of authenticity and individuality have to be earned but not learned. "We need to experience 'death consciousness' so as to wake up ourselves as to what is really important; the authentic in our lives which is life experience, not knowledge."⁶ Death draws the final point when we as beings cease to live for ourselves and permanently become objects that exist only for the outside world. In this way death emphasizes the burden of our free, individual existence. Though, Sartre

¹J.P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992

² *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956) P. 25

³ Ibid, p.439

⁴ *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufman, Meridian Publishing Company, 1989

⁵ Yoann Malinge: *Does our past have a motivational effect? Our reasons for acting: Sartre's philosophy of action*.

⁶ J.P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 246

advocates absolute freedom, yet he understands that there are many things which abstract our exercise of freedom. Such obstacles to freedom can be categorized under five heads. They are-

- a) My place
- b) My past
- c) My environment
- d) Other human beings
- e) My death

These five categories Sartre says, may abstract human freedom to certain extent. But, in all of them it is possible to construct a new situation while speaking about “My Place”. Sartre says that the place of birth is not determined by the choice of the individual. About ‘My Past’ he says that freedom means an escaped from the past, but it doesn’t mean that freedom is possible independently of the past. Regarding my environment, Sartre says that an environment consists of things which surrounded us with their co-efficient of adversity and utility. Again, he says that other human beings also limit our freedom. And, finally, Sartre says that ‘death’ is the limit of everything and in that sense it is the limit of our situation; because, we are not free to die, but we are beings who are mortal.

Sartre in his concept of freedom shows that there is a relationship between facticity and freedom. The relationship between them makes it clear that though freedom is always in a situation, it is freedom which gives meaning to the situation. Here, we have met the paradox of Sartre’s philosophy because, it gives rise to a theory of Absolute freedom on one hand and on the other hand it makes freedom dependent on the situation. If we accept man’s dependence on facticity then Sartre’s theory of freedom cannot be called Absolute.

Again, Sartre has associated responsibility with freedom because he believed that a man who is condemned to be free carries the burden of the whole universe on his head. Whatever happens in the world has its significance because of man. It is man who builds up the world by his action. Man has responsibility for all the wars that devastate the world.

Thus, the sketch of freedom as found in Sartre’s philosophy in the context of his existentialistic humanism is a dimension of the ontology of for-itself and is mainly connected with the being of the individual. But, freedom of the individual becomes meaningless, unless the individual man understands that his freedom is to be operated to be society. Man has to relate himself to other beings to produce a fruitful realization of freedom.

FREEDOM IN RELATION WITH RESPONSIBILITY:

One important aspect of Sartre’s existentialistic Humanism is the understanding of the word subjectivism. He points out that the word ‘subjectivism’ is to be understood in two sense- i) Subjectivism means the freedom of the individual subject and ii) subjectivism means man cannot pass beyond human objectivity. In Sartre’s philosophy, it is found that when a man chooses for himself, he also chooses for everyone. Sartre says, “What we choose is always the better and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all”⁷. Therefore, a man is a legislator for the whole of mankind. As such, a man cannot escape

⁷Jean Paul Sartre: *Basic Writings*, edited by Stephen Priest. Psychology Press, 2001.p.29

from the sense of complete and profound responsibility. That is what Sartre means when he says that man is condemned to be free, the word 'condemned' means that a man did not create himself but he is nevertheless at liberty and from the moment he is through into this world, he is responsible for everything he does. Another aspect of the humanistic existentialism of Sartre is the relation of man to other beings. He wants to say that man discovers not only himself in his thought but also the existence of others. The others are necessary for their own existence and self-knowledge. The fact of knowing others through one's own existence is called by Sartre as Inter-subjectivity. In addition to this, an important part of Sartre's humanistic existentialism is his opinion about human universality. He says that human universality is the condition of man's action. These conditions are objective, because these exist in all places. In 'Existentialism and Humanism' he has taken his theory of morality to the level of social theory. Sartre wanted to establish existentialism as true humanism and he expressed these ideas in 'Existentialism is Humanism' published in 1945 and in 'Materialism and Revolution' published in 1946. Sartre says that the basic idea of existentialism is that even in the most crucial situations, the most different circumstances, man is free.

He lays greater emphasis on human existence. There is only one being whose existence comes before its essence that being is man. He wrote, "First of all man exists, turns up, appears on the scene and only afterwards defines himself."⁸ So, for him, man first of all is nothing. In fact in the philosophy of Sartre, the idea of existence gets associated with the idea of nothingness. To exist, in the primordial sense is to be nothing. To exist means to exist as being-for-itself. Being-for-itself is characterised by consciousness. Consciousness, in the philosophy of Sartre is pure spontaneity confronting the world of objects. The world is characterized by inertness. Consciousness while confronting this inertness appears as spontaneity. So, we can say that in Sartre's philosophy existence is itself characterised by spontaneity. In explaining the nature of human existence, Sartre brought the idea of transcendence also. An element of self-transcendence is clearly present in human existence. Sartre wrote, "Human reality is its own surpassing towards what it lacks"⁹. The experience of lack or absence itself is painful experience. So, human reality or existence is so constituted that an element of suffering is clearly present in human existence. Therefore, human existence is called by Sartre, an unhappy consciousness. The idea of unhappy consciousness first appears in Hegel. Sartre borrowed it from Hegel. But for Hegel, unhappy consciousness is a stage in the process of development while for Sartre is existential predicament.

Another significant in Sartre's humanism is the concept of freedom. Man is born free. He cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. Sartre holds that our existence is absolutely free and it consists in developing our life in full freedom. This freedom brings responsibility. Freedom exists for us in two forms—(a) freedom of choice, (b) choice of freedom. If we are free—(a) we must be free to choose, but (b) we can make either a choice which really makes me free or a wrong choice which enslaves us again. Since we are free to choose our actions therefore we are responsible for all our actions. That is why man can control his nature. When we say that man irresponsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible for his own individuality but that he is responsible for all men. What we choose is always better; and nothing can be better for all unless it is better for all. Thus, our responsibility is much greater than we had supposed for it concerns entire mankind. In Sartre's humanism, apart from the idea of individual freedom, the idea of human uniqueness is also recognized. Sartre always emphasises upon individual existence. Existence means for them a full, vital, self-conscious, responsible and growing life. Man cannot enjoy a holiday. Every moment he is creating himself. Man cannot define his pre-history of birth. But it is possible to define him gradually. He knows that he is not complete and not perfect. According to Sartre, I

⁸Jean Paul Sartre. *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 1946

⁹Jean-Paul Sartre: *Basic Writings*, edited by Stephen Priest. Psychology Press, 2001.p.161

am free to perform chosen acts, free to impose meaning and significance upon the brute facts. The recognition of this factor enables Sartre to introduce a very important factor. This factor is the distinction between levels of existence i.e. the authentic level and inauthentic level of existence. In authentic level of existence I realize that I am not endowed with readymade essence. I am originally nothing. I am to create my essence through my freely chosen acts. So we can make ourselves. Man is the own maker of his fate. Thus, a kind of activist programme is present in Sartre's humanism. In the philosophy of Sartre, humanism and atheism is closely associated. Nietzsche had declared that God is dead and Sartre by following him upholds atheism. According to Sartre, because there is no God therefore, there is no value following from God. Man is always a possibility. Man is to create his value and project his values upon the external world. We ourselves decide our being. As F. Ponge has truly written-"Man is the future of man"¹⁰

ABSENCE OF GOD IN SARTRE'S PHILOSOPHY:

Sartre's whole philosophy of existentialistic humanism is atheistic in character. There is no God in Sartre's existentialism. He gives importance for the human beings in this world. He is an atheist and therefore we have seen that the fundamental postulates of his ontology are the absence of God or any Super-Power. This indicates that there is no concept of man in the minds of God which constitutes man's essence. He wanted to establish that the existence of the very nature of God is self-contradictory. In his existentialism, he also wanted to prove Nietzsche's famous saying 'God is Death' and tries to establish atheism by giving more importance on human existence.

Sartre rejects the traditional concept of God as Almighty, Omnipotent, Omnipresent and Omniscient Being. For him, God is neither an Absolute Being nor He is Omnipotent and Omniscient Person. God is like a writer of a book. The writer is responsible for the creator of each and every word in the book, but he has no control of it. Like, God is the creator of the universe, but he doesn't exercise of the control over it. If there is any god, then he is meaningless for human beings or human existence. This view of Sartre made him an atheist. Sartre says that from the proceeds of essence the theistic proves the existence of God. But, it is not actually true. He maintained that at least one being, whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exist before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is Man. Man first of all exist as nothing and it is only later on that he defined himself, makes himself what he is and thereby he forms a conception of himself. And there is no God.

CONCLUSION:

Sartre's existentialism is Humanistic. For him, man is absolutely free. By this absolute freedom, he creates his essence by his own. He creates himself what he wants to do. There is no any eternal force which determines man's nature. It is a man full responsible and free. There is no need, no place of God in man's life. Again, if there is God then man is not absolute freedom. Again, man is the creator of values. This responsibility is so generate that he is the legislating the world because God doesn't creates the value. According to religious belief, God alone decides the time, place and the manners of death. Sartre says that if God determines one's death, then I am not responsible of my life. If God is not responsible of my death, it is not equally due to man can know what moment he would do.

¹⁰ *Existentialist Politics and Political Theory*, edited by William Leon McBride. Taylor & Francis, 1997

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