



Sartre: An Ontological Analysis of Freedom

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Abstract:

Jean-Paul Sartre, the French philosopher, is the best-known exponent of the philosophy of existence. The beginning of existential philosophy is said to lie in the thoughts of Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher of 19th Century. Existentialism is not a body of philosophical doctrines. But it concentrates attention on some themes rather than others, so that we find these themes recurring in most of the existentialist thinkers. Existentialists hold that humans have no pre-given purpose or essence laid out for them by God or by nature. An individual has no essential nature, no self-identify other than that involved in the act of choosing. Sartre himself says that existence precedes essence. The object of this paper is to describe and elucidate Sartre's notion of freedom. If the problem of freedom is a separate philosophical problem, then Sartre's existential understanding of freedom surely contributes to that problem. Sartre, in his existential philosophy develops a unique understanding of freedom. Later Sartre seems to revise some of his early philosophical thoughts. But, for the sake of brevity, in this analysis, I shall concentrate only on Sartre's notion of freedom as developed by him in his major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. The present paper is divided into four sections. The first section focuses on Sartre's viewpoint that human existence is freedom. The second section presents Sartre's contention that anguish arises with the recognition of one's freedom. The third section puts emphasis on Sartre's notion of Bad Faith or self-deception as an attempt to flee the anguish of freedom. In the fourth and the concluding section a positive note is added on Sartre's philosophy of freedom.

Keywords: Consciousness, Freedom, Anguish, Bad faith, Responsibility.

Section I

The central theme of Sartre's existentialism is consciousness. At the center of his theory of consciousness, there is a theory of nothingness, and from this notion of nothingness, the notion of freedom emerges. Hence, to analyze Sartre's notion of freedom is to begin with his study of consciousness. Consciousness is analyzed in the phenomenology of Sartre as "active", "living" consciousness. While Descartes, Kant and Husserl took thinking and knowing as the essential conscious acts, Sartre argued that consciousness is a perceiving, feeling, motile consciousness. Sartre begins with the Husserlian dictum: 'All consciousness is consciousness of something'(Sartre,1957, p.li). Now, this statement necessarily focuses on the intentionality of consciousness, it's always being directed towards an object.¹ Though Sartre like Husserl

¹ Although the concept of intentionality was common place in the Middle Ages and goes back to Aristotle, it owes its modern prominence in the writings of Franz Brentano in the 1870's, in which it served as the defining characteristic of mental as against the

has also used the notion of intentionality, Husserl's notion of intentionality has got a cognitive connotation, whereas in Sartre's consciousness this intentionality is stripped of its cognitive connotation. The paradigm of intentional act according to Sartre is not that I know or I think, but that I can or I perform. So, this activity refers to the activeness and not to the thinking ego. Sartre refers to the concrete human being by this intentionality.

It must be noted here that Sartre distinguished between pre-reflective (non-positional or non-thetic) and reflective (positional or thetic) consciousness. According to Sartre, consciousness is primarily pre-reflective consciousness. This pre-reflective consciousness is egoless consciousness; and Sartre's study of pre-reflective consciousness is known as non-egological theory of consciousness. Sartre says that when I am aware of a chair, for example, I am non-reflectively conscious of my awareness. But when I deliberately think of my awareness, this is a totally new act of consciousness; and here only am I explicitly positing my awareness or myself as an object of reflection. However, for Sartre, both pre-reflective and reflective are self-consciousness. Though consciousness is always aware of itself, whether it is reflective or pre-reflective, it does not mean that consciousness is always aware of itself as an ego. Consciousness is aware of itself as it is conscious of an object according to Sartre. This consciousness of object is called Being-for-itself, that is it is aware of itself in the sense that it is not the unconscious material world. Being-in-itself means the entire unconscious material world. Being-in-itself or objects are characterized by their completeness and their determinacy. Objects simply present themselves or are given to consciousness. On the other hand, consciousness or Being-for-itself actually depends on its objects of which it is conscious. Being-for-itself is dependent, unfulfilled and incomplete.

Here starts the notion of Sartre's nothingness which is inalienable from his study of consciousness. Mary Warnock, in her book *Existentialism*, says that externally nothingness is the gap between the conscious being and the world. But internally nothingness is not a gap but rather it is an emptiness which is *in* consciousness which one wants to fill by his own actions, imaginations, perceptions and so on. This emptiness inspires me to be someone that I am not at the present moment. In view of this, according to Sartre, 'Consciousness is Nothingness'(Warnock,1970, pp.93-94).

In fact, in his earlier works, *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936) and *The Psychology of Imagination* (1940), Sartre prepares the ground for the text *Being and Nothingness* in which he says that consciousness is nothingness. The definition of "consciousness", as it has already been said, focuses on the intentionality of consciousness-- it's always being directed towards an object. Consciousness is nothing but this intentional activity; it is not the object itself or an object for itself. Sartre dramatizes this by noting that consciousness is nothing. From this view, Sartre derives two very crucial points about nothingness: (i) Nothingness is an object of our experience - is in the world. (ii) Consciousness creates nothingness through an act of nihilation. According to Sartre, we do not just see somethings but even in perception we see nothings, that is we are conscious not only of the presence of objects in our world, we are also conscious of their absence. Nothingness, for Sartre, is not an abstract idea complementary to being, nor can it be conceived outside being; it must be given at the heart of being. Non-being is forever there, in us and outside us. Being is haunted by non-being, but non-being appears only where being might be "expected". This brings us to the second characterization of nothingness, that it is an object of experience, which is produced by conscious activity of nihilation. According to Sartre, an act of nihilation is a refusal or denial of the "givenness" of Being-in-itself; an act which will not simply accept what is given in consciousness -- for example, simple observing or attending to. By this he means that objects can be different or consciousness can bring about changes in the existing order. This implies that consciousness is incomplete, imperfect; it has expectations, desires, aspirations and possibilities. These aspirations, desires and expectations emerge from nothingness. Sartre holds that this act of nihilation has got double movements (i) consciousness nihilates the world and (ii) consciousness nihilates itself. Now, when Sartre says that consciousness nihilates the world, its primary meaning is that consciousness wants to alter the world. Secondly, when it is said that consciousness nihilates itself, it means that consciousness is nothingness. If it were not nothingness, then it would have no possibilities, no expectations.

physical phenomena. Later, intentionality came to play a key role in the phenomenology of Husserl from which it influenced the existentialist thinking.

It is through acts of nihilation and specially acts of self-nihilation that human freedom is introduced in Sartre's philosophy. According to Sartre, freedom is tied up with negativity and nothingness. Freedom, in this sense, is finitude or limitation. It is the deficiency(lack). Consciousness or Being-for-itself takes part in the process of freedom of choice because it has got limitations. For Sartre, "I am the being that I am not, I am not the being that I am", that is I have the constant possibility of becoming some other being. According to Sartre, freedom leads to a kind of self-negation. From this analysis of Sartre, it is clear that every human being for him is originally free in the sense that he can cast himself spontaneously in the world. There is a strong self-confidence in the notion of freedom when it is said that I am the maker of my own future. So, it is said that I am beyond my own self. I negate myself and in the exercise of my negativity I realize myself. In other words, to exist man must perpetually transcend himself. Sartre contends that freedom is not the capacity of consciousness. The domain of consciousness is the domain of freedom. He insists ---- that freedom is the nature of consciousness is evident from one of the features of consciousness, that is consciousness is self-transcendent. For Sartre, consciousness does not only refute the situation, it tries to alter the situation. In this sense, consciousness is free (or freedom). Hence the domain of consciousness is the domain of freedom and vice-versa.

For Sartre, man is absolutely free. But this does not mean that a man is free to do anything he wants to do, an exaggerated popular claim; rather it means that a man is always free within his situation that is the situation in which he finds himself, the situation in which he is "thrown" or "abandoned" to confer significance upon that situation. Absolute freedom is thus freedom of intention, freedom of choice. Freedom is limited by one's situation and freedom is absolute only within these limitations. Thus, if in wartime a town is invaded by enemy forces, that is not a matter of free choice for the townspeople. Nevertheless, one could not say that people are compelled by fear or the threat of death to obey the enemy. Resistance is a real option even unto death.² The situation is the basis for the choice, the town being invaded is the basis for the decision to obey the enemy or resist them, but it is never sufficient condition for the choice that is it cannot compel to obey or resist. Sartre will not deny that external circumstances may cause actions to fumble. But he does maintain, as Solomon observes, that all such external circumstances are such only in view of the goals men seek to achieve; 'Human reality everywhere encounters resistance and obstacles which it has not created, but these resistances and obstacles have meaning only in and through the free choice which human reality is'. For example, if a man was not intending to climb the rock, it would not be unclimbable for him, nor would its size and obliqueness present obstacles to him. It is only so far as he has expectations of success in climbing the rock that he finds the rock to be an obstacle. The choice of the project of climbing or simply strolling by entirely depends on him, but his success in climbing depends as much on the rock as it does on him. He is absolutely free to form the project and try to climb; he is not absolutely free to reach the top of the rock (Solomon,1972, p.281). For Sartre, the formula "to be free" does not mean "to obtain what one has wished" but rather "by oneself to determine oneself to wish"--- in the broad sense of choosing. Success is thus not important to freedom.

Section II

The freedom of which we are talking about is a freedom of pre-reflective consciousness. Consciousness is freedom even before it is reflectively aware of its freedom. Man becomes aware of his freedom in anguish (Angoisse). As Sartre says: 'anguish is the mode of being of freedom as consciousness of being; it is in anguish that freedom is, in its being, in question for itself'(Sartre,1957, p.29).

The concept of anguish or angst is discussed by several existentialist philosophers. However, the word anguish does not carry the same literal meaning for every philosopher using it. Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre have somewhat differently understood it. Both Sartre and Heidegger, however, borrow the notion of anguish from Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard characterizes anguish as "anguish in the face of freedom". On the other hand, according to Heidegger, anguish is the "apprehension of nothingness". Since according to Sartre freedom is nothingness, he concludes that these two notions of anguish as discussed by Kierkegaard and Heidegger are complimentary and not contradictory to each other.

² See, 'Freedom', Lawrence J. Hatab in Haim Gordon (Ed.), *Dictionary of Existentialism*, (1999), p.161(of pp.160-63).

Sartre begins with Kierkegaard's analysis of anguish as the vertigo of freedom. Vertigo is anguish to the extent that one is afraid not of falling over the precipice, but of throwing oneself over. Fear and anguish, Sartre thinks, are exclusive of one another. 'Fear is immediately directed outward toward the object feared and is, consequently, unreflected. For example, I see someone tampering with my car and I fear being robbed. On the contrary, anguish is a reflected phenomenon, focused within ourselves. I am in anguish over how to live with the constant threat of being robbed'(Catalano,1980, p.70). According to Sartre, as Macquarrie explains, there is a profound ambiguity in freedom. A nothingness slips into my action. I am not the self that I will be, or I am it in the mode of not being it (Macquarrie,1973, p.131). Thus, anguish is precisely my consciousness of being my own future, in the mode of not-being. This is anguish in the face of the future. However, according to Sartre, there is also anguish in the face of the past: 'It is that of the gambler who has freely and sincerely decided not to gamble anymore and who when he approaches the gambling table, suddenly sees all his resolutions melt away'(Sartre,1957, pp.32-33). The gambler's past resolutions cannot cause his present actions. He must resolve anew not to gamble. According to Sartre, there is a rupture between this past decision not to gamble and the self that is now facing the gaming table; nothing prevents him from gambling now. He must decide anew and re-create the very motivations that led to his decision not to gamble.

The upshot of all this is that in a state of anguish I recognize possibilities as my possibilities, detached from any realizations of them, past or future, and depends on me alone to sustain. In anguish I am aware of myself as free and, hence, of my nothingness in relation to Being-in-itself. Accordingly, it is impossible to overcome anguish, since anguish is what, in the literal sense of the term I am. Yet, as Sartre says, the experience of anguish is rare. Our ordinary active lives commonly hide our anxious apprehension. It is for this reason that Sartre's plays and novels so often take wartime situations as their setting, for it is in such extraordinary situations that men are forced into confrontation with themselves. Moreover, men also attempt to flee anguish by taking refuge in some form of determinism. He attempts to interpret his situation as part of his pure facticity³ and denies his own interpretative evaluative role in that situation. However, according to Sartre, it is not possible to flee from one's anguish without knowing that one is anxious. That is to say, to flee from one's anguish is also to become aware of one's anguish even in denying it. Thus anguish, properly speaking, can be neither hidden nor avoided. For Sartre, "Bad Faith" is the attitude, born of anguish, that flees anguish and, simultaneously, denies the anguish-ridden character of this flight.

Section III

In *Being and Nothingness*, bad faith is introduced by Sartre at the conclusion to his account of anguish of freedom. For Sartre, bad faith (*Mauvaise Foi*) is an attempt to flee the anguish of freedom and responsibility. Refusing to appeal to the unconscious,⁴ Sartre describes the phenomenon of bad faith as "self-deception", that is any type of lie through which one deliberately suppress from oneself that truth which one knows and through which to a certain degree one deceives oneself.

There are two main patterns of bad faith, which Sartre illustrates by well-known examples. The first pattern of bad faith⁵ is illustrated by Sartre with the example of a young woman who has consented to go out with a man for the first time. She is fully aware of his sexual intentions towards her and knows that sooner or later she will have to make a decision. But she does not want to realize the urgency. She interprets the phrases which her companion addresses to her as devoid of sexual implications and even responds to his physical advances by denying their intentional import. At one point of time when the man takes her hand, the woman completely absorbs herself in an intellectual discourse dissociating herself from her hand and ignoring the fact that her hand is with him. The woman objectivizes her body, and ultimately herself, as in-itself, and thus stages a flight or an escape from herself as for-itself. She loses her subjectivity, her freedom, and her

³ Facticity makes up what is just "given" in our lives. However, facticity is only one aspect of human existence. As transcendence men takes over their situations and make something of them through their "choices".

⁴ According to Sartre, the usual way of explaining the phenomenon of bad faith is to appeal to the unconscious, to have recourse, as did Freud, to some degree of division in the psyche. The unconscious is then treated as the residue of hidden or forgotten realities. And the so-called censor allows some of these facts to pass to consciousness and represses others.

⁵ In the first pattern of bad faith a human being, a Being-for-itself, in order to protect himself against the recognition of his own freedom pretends to be a thing, a Being-in-itself, which therefore has no choice, but is managed by other people, or is just inert.

responsibility for decision. She exists in bad faith. Sartre illustrates the second pattern of bad faith⁶ by the example of a waiter in a cafe. The waiter in question does not pretend to be a thing, as the woman does who treats her hand as a thing. He pretends to be nothing but what people label him, that is, a waiter. Accepting the role, of the waiter, hides the possibility that one could be the rich businessman waited on; it is in bad faith that one denies that he could be anything other than a waiter.

Now, since human reality is freedom, the possibility of bad faith is an apriori feature of being human. However, according to Sartre, though bad faith is a risk built in to the nature of consciousness, it does not mean we are all necessarily in bad faith all the time. On the other hand, he also speaks of good faith or honesty by which a person confesses what he, in fact, is. But this good faith, as Sartre suggests, is usually itself only another form of bad faith, a different method of escaping the anguish of freedom by avowing one's faults, and thus seeming to render one's viciousness a kind of inevitable characteristic which one has in the way that objects in the world have inevitable characteristics. Thus, the honest man who confesses that he just is weak or wicked, or whatever it is, attempts to escape the constant obligation of becoming and to rest in a state of stability.⁷

Section IV

In conclusion, it can be said that for Sartre, the radical freedom of human consciousness is ineluctable. One is free, but one is not free to obliterate fully one's freedom. As Sartre puts it dramatically, "Man is condemned to be free". Man, according to Sartre, must decide who he will be; and, more than this, each individual must decide the question for himself. Each one's existence is characterized by a unique "mineness".

However, there is a tension at this point in Sartre's philosophy to which the existentialists like Maurice-Merleau Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir frequently refer. In Part III of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues against solipsism, and shows that a person is necessarily a participant in the social world where he is the object of "the look" of others. Now, if everyone is unique and is to determine who he will become, then there will be a chaos in which everyone "does his own thing" and does it without regard for others.

Sartre reconciles these two apparently conflicting facts the fact that a person is necessarily a participant in the social world with the fact that a person is a free "existing individual" -- by associating responsibility with freedom. Towards the end of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre contends that responsibility is "the logical requirement of the consequences of our freedom". By the sense of responsibility, Sartre means the sense of "being the incontestable author of one's way of orienting oneself in the world and towards others". For Sartre, one's responsibility does not show his weakness, it is rather an individual's strength. One denies his own freedom simply because he intends to escape his own responsibility. The man who makes himself is responsible for what he is (Sartre,1957, pp.553-56). In his much-publicized essay, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946) Sartre argues that men are responsible not only for their own destinies but for other people's as well. For whatever a man chooses, he chooses for everyone and not only for himself; for the notion of choice entails the notion of a thing being good and "good" means "good for everyone". Thus, Sartre says that "in fashioning myself I fashion man". One can hardly live without involving himself in the affairs of others. Sartre seems to assert that one should not be free in the sense that he intends to break the "intersubjective solidarity". One can take freedom as his goal, Sartre says emphatically, only if he takes that of others as a goal as well; and do not treat others as alien and objects. This is considered as the "reciprocity of freedom". Freedom, therefore, is the common goal by which every human individual is united.

⁶ The second pattern is that in which a human being pretends to be nothing except a Being-for-others, that is, he plays out the role which society has assigned to him, and he avoids questioning that role.

⁷ The real possibility of overcoming bad faith and becoming authentic is left something of a mystery in Sartre's ontological works. Indeed, in a footnote to *Being and Nothingness* he says that the description of authenticity has no place in his present work (Sartre,1957, p.70).

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