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From Consciousness to Freedom: Understanding Sartre's Existentialism

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Abstract: ***The 'individual subject' and the notion of 'existence' gained utmost concern in mainstream Western philosophy during the second half of the twentieth century. Western philosophy (especially French philosophy), by that time, was highly dominated by existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905), an approach influenced by Husserl (1859) and Heidegger (1889), which tried to build up a comprehensive philosophical project to illustrate the conditions of human beings and their place in the world through a careful analysis of our concrete experience. Sartre, thus, became the personification of existentialism. This work is designed to provide a systematic framework and methodological orientation for understanding Sartre's philosophy. The justification for this methodological requirement is to reduce misconceptions and errors concerning Sartre's unconventional positions and philosophical ideas. His philosophy is almost always incurably misunderstood. Thus, a systematic reflection on Sartre's philosophy reveals how the philosophy of existence and freedom evolved from his concept of consciousness.***

Keywords: Consciousness, Nothingness, Existence, Freedom, Authenticity

1.Introduction

Throughout history, some philosophers have had profound impact on human life. They have transformed the way we see ourselves and the world. They have inspired debate, dissent, and revolution. Jean-Paul Sartre is one such name in the philosophical world who has enlightened and enriched lives through his philosophical project centered mainly on human existence. To understand Sartre's philosophy, one must focus on his conception of consciousness, as laid out in his major work Being and Nothingness. His entire philosophical position derives from his two fundamental claims about consciousness. First, that consciousness is always of something, and always directed towards something. For example, for me to be conscious implies that there is some object. Second, that consciousness in itself is nothing. It has no content or structure of its own. Consciousness to be meaningful requires a relation to something else. Consciousness, thus, sets the ontological ground for understanding the meaning of existence (being-for-itself) and nothingness (being-in-itself). Moreover, the distinction also gives the conceptual framework for Sartre's idea of freedom and authenticity.

2.What it is like to be Existential?

The existence is in question; it is not about a pseudo 'being' that traditional Western metaphysics has been searching for from Parmenides to Hegel, making it the self-existent, self-sufficient, self-regulating, which is always present as the ultimate reality, and of which the universe is just a mere appearance only. Like Western, Indian metaphysics, which originates from the Upanishads to various forms of Vedanta, has philosophized a similar idea, viewing that the only real existence is Brahman, and the world is unreal, i.e., Brahman satya jagat mithyā.

Besides the metaphysical construction of a self-existing 'being'. the word 'being' literally stands for 'the state of existing' upon which Sartre's existentialism is cantered, as he claimed that if there is no God or Absolute Being, there is at least one being exists, and that being is human being, who makes all discourses possible including the very idea of God and Being. The world has no meaning without human beings. The significance of individual experiences and perceptions raises profound questions about the nature of existence and reality. If human experience is the foundation of our understanding, can we dismiss the reality of individuals and the world around us? Or are they merely manifestations of a deeper, unknowable reality? Thus, Sartre's philosophy provides a clear and comprehensive account of the existence of the world, individuals, and other things, which, in totality, gives true meaning to human concrete experience. For Sartre, existence is not something out of this world; it cannot be understood in isolation. Thus, the independent metaphysical 'being' turned into the existential canvas as existing thing, i.e., 'being' is the property of existing things.

It is interesting to note that the origin of Existentialist thought dates back to Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher who placed the 'individual' at the centre of all his philosophical endeavours. Kierkegaard sowed the seed of existentialism, but his scathing attacks on Christianity invoked the wrath of the people, as a result of which Kierkegaard was ostracized and most of his work was suppressed. It was almost a hundred years later that it was rediscovered during the course of Sartre's academic pursuits, while he was in Germany. It was, however, through the writings of Sartre that existentialism as a philosophy gained maturity and popular acceptance. Along with his lifetime partner Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre challenged the cultural and social assumptions and expectations of their upbringings. Finally, of course, Sartre's personal experience in the Second World War - first as a soldier and prisoner of war, then as a member of the Resistance - gave the long-cherished existentialist themes of freedom, choice, and commitment an immediate and dramatic relevance to the world of action.

3. Understanding the Existence/Essence Debate

The distinction between 'existence' and 'essence' is one of the oldest in philosophy and has vast applicability and usefulness. To say that anything 'exists' is to point to the fact 'that it is'. Existence is characterised by concreteness and particularity, and also by a sheer givenness. The silver dollar lying on the table exists as a particular item in the world, and its existence is presented to me as a fact to be accepted. I can neither wish it into existence nor wish it out of existence, though indeed I can change the form in which it exists. However, as soon as we talk of 'the form in which it exists'. we are already beginning to move away from existence to essence. If the existence of anything has to do with the fact that it is, its essence consists in 'what it is. ' The essence of an object is constituted by those basic characteristics that make it one kind of object rather than another. The essence of the silver dollar would be described in terms of its colour, metallic body, composition, weight, shape, and so on. One would have to mention all the characteristics that are necessary to define this as a dollar rather than anything else. It follows then abstractions and universality characterise that essence (Macquarrie, 1972, p.61).

Throughout the history of Western philosophy, essentialism has been a dominant thought till the early 20th century. The entire tradition stemming from Plato has exalted essence at the expense of existence. This tradition has seen existence as belonging to the realm of the contingent and changeable. Reason turns away from this realm and seeks unchanging and universal essences, a realm of 'Forms' or 'Ideas'. One may even be pushed to the paradoxical conclusion that existence is unreal and that reality belongs to essences. However, philosophical common sense always stands in rebellion against such conclusions. Then we have periods in the history of philosophy when the existent, the concrete, the particular is placed over the essential, the abstract, and the universal (Macquarrie, 1972, p.62).

Modern existentialism begins with Kierkegaard's and Sartre's championing of the concreteness of existence over and against what they perceived as Hegel's essentialism. Existentialism vehemently opposes the Platonic tradition, prioritizing existence over essence and positing the dictum that existence precedes essence. The Cartesian dictum, 'I think, therefore I am', i.e., cogito ergo sum, where Descartes attempted to derive existence from essence, since he believed 'thinking my presence' proves 'my existence' is a self-evident truth. For him, 'I think' cannot be doubted, so when 'I think' then 'I exist' is the specific and authentic truth, and thus Descartes holds that essence precedes existence. Going against such essentialist tradition, Sartre asserts that it is not essence that precedes existence, rather, man first exists and then looks at the world, thinks of it, and acts in it, exerting a choice of his own. According to Sartre:

There is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it, that being is 'Man'. (Sartre, 1946, p.34)

Humans' contemplations and their actions are possible only because of their existence: existence, thus, is the first principle from which an essence becomes a reality. It is only by living, thinking, and acting that humans forge their identity, thus forming what is called their essence. Thus, existentialists aim to establish that in a human being, there is no such thing as a 'human nature' or a 'pregiven' essence. One does not enter this world as a product with a predetermined, fixed identity and a destiny that has been dictated beforehand; instead, one defines oneself through freely chosen actions throughout one's life in the world.

Sartre takes into account all these when he precisely avers, what do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and defines himself afterwards. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. Moreover, in this making of himself lies the awareness of his own concreteness and subjectivity, which his existence implies for him and which cannot be objectified and known by means of objective thought. His existence, therefore, instead of being a matter of speculation, is a reality in which his being is involved. The truth of his existence is not an objective certainty established by reasoning; instead, he encounters it in his subjective experience and defines himself in and through the formation of this subjectivity (Sinha, 1982, p.7).

4.The Modes of Existence: The World, The Individual and The Other

The history of philosophy is replete with discussions and conceptions regarding the nature of the world. We are often tempted to answer the question, 'What is the world?', by saying that the world is everything that is the case, as Wittgenstein claims. However, such an answer immediately raises difficulties. The world is not just everything that is, but everything that forms the human environment and provides the setting in which human life has to be lived. The very word 'world' is derived from the Old English compound, 'weor-old', in which 'weor means 'man' and 'old' means 'age' or 'era', so that, taken etymologically, 'world' is the era of man' (Macquarrie, 1972, p.79).

Strictly speaking, then, there is no world apart from humans. This is not to be taken for a moment in the sense of some subjective idealism, as if the material universe depended for its existence on the minds that perceive it (esse est percipi). If there were no human beings, there might still be galaxies, trees, rocks, and so on - and doubtless there were, in those long stretches of time before the evolution of Homo Sapiens or any other human species that may have existed on earth. However, the total sum of these things would not constitute a world, for we have seen that the world is not just 'everything that is'. When I say that there is no world apart from humans, I am not making a metaphysical pronouncement on the mind-dependent character of material things, but am simply making a linguistic point: whenever we talk of world, we talk at the same time of humans, for the expression world implies a human standpoint from which everything is seen as environment (Macquarrie, 1972, p.80).

Humans organise their world. Even to speak of 'world; is to imply some unity. A world is not chaos. The Greeks called the world Kosmos, 'order'. Humans give order into a world. Perhaps humans fail in wholly unifying the world. There will always be loose ends. This raises, in turn, the question of whether such unity as this is imposed by the human mind, or whether the mind can impose order and unity only because these are already, in some sense, present in and given with the phenomena. On both questions, existentialist philosophers differ among themselves. The line of division on this second question would follow a similar direction to that which it took in the beginning, with the atheistic existentialists stressing humans' part in bringing order and meaning into the meaningless manifold. In contrast, those existentialists with an orientation towards theism would agree that there is an important human factor in the concept of the 'world' and that we see the world from a definitely human point of view (Macquarrie, 1972, p.80).

Existence, being the central issue that concerned all existentialist philosophers, has been written about at great length. Across the existential stretch, we discover an acceptance of two modes of existence or being. First is the existence of the material world, which lacks free will, and the other is that Heidegger refers to as Dasein, a human existence that embodies freedom of choice. In Sartre's most seminal work, Being and Nothingness, the notion of existence has been worked out at great length with an astute perusal of its nuances. Sartre declares the presence of two modes of existence in the world. For Sartre:

The world as a totality has no meaning, and man, instead of having potentiality, is radically separated from the world in which he finds himself, precisely because he alone has consciousness. (Gill & Sherman, 1973, p.483)

From this, Sartre draws the primary distinction between what he calls en-soi and pour-soi or being-in-itself and being-for-itself. In short, Sartre admits of two modes of existence, where en-soi (nothingness) can generally be regarded as the world of objects, passive, silent, and that which can be said to have essences, which exists independently of any observer and constitutes all the things in the world. The pour-soi, by contrast, is the 'conscious human' - lacking a pre-determined nature or 'essence' but capable of creating meaning through free choices. It is the conscious being, whose consciousness renders them entirely different from other things, in their relation both to themselves and to one another and to those of other things. Since pour-soi is conscious, it does not encompass all conscious beings (including animals). The pour-soi is the human existence, since it is the only being that can raise questions about its existence.

Sartre, furthermore, discusses a third mode of existence, which he calls being-for-others or pour autrui, in his book Being and Nothingness. This section stands out as one of the most absorbing parts of the book, offering profound insights into human relationships and the notion of intersubjectivity. Sartre introduces the concept of being-for-others as a fundamental mode of existence in our experience of the world, as well as in our relationships with others and individuals. The other is the conscious being, such as the pour-soi, which makes us aware of ourselves. Describing the relation between being-for-itself and being-for-others, let us take the example of 'shame'. Here, we are dealing with a mode of consciousness that has a structure identical to all those we have previously described. Shame is a non-positional self-consciousness, and it is accessible to reflection. In addition, its structure is intentional.

It is a description of someone who is eavesdropping, wholly absorbed in the act of peeping inside through the keyhole, conscious of himself, only in a way in which he barely distinguishes himself from his surroundings. However, suddenly, while he is thus engaged, he hears footsteps in the hall and becomes aware that someone is behind him, observing him. Immediately, the awareness of his existence to himself shifts; he begins to see himself as an eavesdropper, and feels the shame of the action he was indulging in to an extent that he perceives himself as an objectification of shame, or, further still, as shame itself.

Shame reveals to me that I am this being, not in the mode of 'was' or of 'having to be' but in-itself. When I am alone, or unaware of the judgmental look of a passerby, I am devoid of any thoughts about myself and do not realize I am seated near the door, peering through the keyhole. And once I realize being looked at in that situation, shame overcomes me and takes over my entire being.

Certainly, my shame is not reflective, for the presence of another is my consciousness, even as a catalyst is incompatible with the reflective attitude. In the field of my reflection, I can never encounter anything but the consciousness which is mine. But in this case, the other becomes the indispensable mediator between myself and me. I am ashamed of myself because of how I appear to the other. I look upon myself through the eyes of the other and feel nothing but shame.

Thus, it has been seen that it is by the mere appearance of the other that I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the other. But, if the other was not present there, it would not have happened, for nobody can be vulgar all alone. It is visible only through the eyes of the other.

Thus, the other has not only revealed to me what I am, but he has also established me as a new type of being, a being that was not me before the appearance of the other on my scene. Thus, shame is shame of oneself before the other; these two structures are inseparable. However, it becomes clear that I need the presence of the other in order to realize the potential dimensions of my being.

The other is the one who is not me and the one who I am not. This does not indicate a nothingness as a given element of separation between the other and myself. On the contrary, as a primary absence of relation, it is originally the foundation of all relations between the other and me. This is why the other appears to me empirically on the occasion of the perception of a body, and this body is and in-itself external to my body; the type of relation which unites and separates these two bodies is a spatial relation,

the relation of things which have no relation among themselves, pure exteriority in so far as it is given.

I am ashamed of what I am. Shame, therefore, realizes an intimate relation of myself to myself. Through shame, I discover an aspect of my being. I have just made an awkward or vulgar gesture. This gesture clings to me; I neither judge it nor blame it. I simply live it. I realize it in the mode of for-itself. Thus, in Sartre's view, being-for-others is as fundamental as the being-for-itself. It is the new structure of being for-itself erected by the other.

5.From Existence to Freedom

The distinction between en-soi and pour-soi leads us to the notion of freedom - the most seminal issue of Sartre's philosophy. Action implies freedom, and there can be few themes, if any, nearer to the heart of existentialism than freedom. This theme is expressed in the work of all existentialist writers. Amongst all the existentialists, we note that Sartre's entire philosophical trajectory was guided by his unrelenting concern for freedom. With great precision, Sartre outlined the notion of freedom in his book Existentialism is a Humanism (1946), where he claims:

There is no determinism - man is free, man is freedom. We have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that - Man is condemned to be free. (Sartre, 1946, p.34)

He says, man is the maker of his own destiny. Sartre further states that since we are free, we are also responsible for our actions. Freedom comes with responsibility, Sartre says; freedom is an essential condition of man. Freedom is the central and unique potentiality that differentiates man from the being-in-itself. He argues that if man were to be predetermined, man's future and all his actions would be predetermined, in which case man would never be held responsible for his actions and the results they would invoke.

Although Sartre gives great importance to human freedom, he qualifies it by saying that 'freedom is a burden'. Sartre held freedom and responsibility as twin notions. By responsibility, he meant that when we choose for ourselves, we implicitly choose for everyone. Thus, what I freely opt for myself, I must also opt for all. This free choice that involves the entire mankind is not an easy one, but instead a huge responsibility - a burden. A burden that a human being cannot forfeit - much as he may wish to because, as Sartre further states, "man is condemned to be free" for even in trying to throw away his burdensome freedom, he is using his free choice - his freedom. Thus, a human being is even trapped in the dynamics of a freedom that requires them to act responsibly. Presenting the intricate relation between freedom and responsibility, Sartre concludes that "man finds himself thrown into the world, yet free, but he is responsible for anything he does. "

In connection with freedom, Sartre provides a clear exposition of what follows from denying one's freedom. Bad faith is an existential phenomenon, connected with the concept of freedom which Sartre posited with a view to demonstrating that negation or negativity is at the heart of human existence. Bad faith (mauvaise foi) is a kind of self-deception; for Sartre is not merely a lie to oneself, but a lie about one's freedom. A person in bad faith adopts a negative attitude towards themselves, i.e., with respect to the freedom that cannot be dispensed with. Sartre illustrates that human reality lies in the intricate balance between freedom and responsibility. Bad faith is a refusal to acknowledge and put into practice the demands of freedom and responsibility. It is an attempt to evade responsibility for what one has freely chosen, by pretending to oneself and others that the course of action is predetermined and could not have been otherwise. A person who falls into the bad faith regards himself as merely a passive construct of outside influences. A person in bad faith messes up on the factor differentiating him from the world of objects; the fact that human beings are self-determining and hence responsible for the creation of their own world. Bad faith is rooted in our freedom of consciousness and is possible because human consciousness brings nothingness and non-being into the world. The phenomenon reveals the discrepancy inherent in the human condition and human behaviour, between our abstract awareness of our nature and our concrete acts. According to Sartre, a person in bad faith is playing, and the instability of play makes bad faith possible in the face of the apparently paradoxical nature of self-deception. In contrast to bad faith, good faith acknowledges oneself as a self-conscious human being freely and responsibly acting within the world.

6.Conclusion

The philosophical development from consciousness to freedom leads us towards at least two significant outcomes. First, Sartre, through his conception of freedom, sets the ethical project for human life. How can we make our existence meaningful? Going against the traditional views of human life, Sartre claims that exercising freedom gives the ultimate end to human life. As a result, authenticity becomes the fundamental ethical philosophy, which suggests the acceptance of one's status as free. Authenticity is thus opposed to bad faith (self-deception), which involves the effort to deny or escape from one's freedom.

Secondly, the humanistic turn in existentialism opens up a potential site for scholarship. In the autumn of 1945, Sartre delivered a lecture in which he claimed that his existentialism is a humanism. According to him, existentialism, at the very least, contrasts with the claim that it is a kind of humanism that attempts to bring back man's passionate and aesthetic nature from the turmoil of existence. It uncovers the complex realities of life, which are, in fact, expressed through feelings of anguish, love, guilt, despair, dread, and a sense of inner freedom. It recognises man's predicament, believes in the primacy of existence, focuses on man's subjective experience, his freedom, and responsibility. It is humanism by virtue of its attitude toward life. It begins with the problem of human existence, holding close the conviction that to be a man is to become a man.

Although Sartre's philosophy dominated French thought, a staunch criticism was raised against his views, led by thinkers often labelled as structuralists and poststructuralists. Both rejected the essentially subjective viewpoint of life, existence, and freedom, arguing that things have no meaning outside the structures.

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