

Chapter 37

Sartre's Conception of Human Existence

Key words:

Human existence, bad faith, essence, freedom, responsibility, consciousness, ego, phenomenology, existence precedes essence, universal human nature, abandonment,

This chapter will particularly focus on the conception of human existence advocated by Jean Paul Sartre and this 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. He was also a writer of short stories and novels and used the medium of literature and art in order to advocate his philosophical perspective.

Sartre affirms that human existence is characteristically different from the existence of other things in the world. He uses the term being-for-itself to distinguish human existence from other things, the existence of which can be understood as being-in-itself. Unlike other things, man's existence emerges and comes into being by negating its essence; by negating the being-in-itself. Hence according to Sartre, freedom and negation are central to the conception of man.

Sartre on Human Existence

Sartre in his monograph *Existentialism and Humanism* announces that *existence comes before essence*. As stated before, there are many factors that differentiate existential philosophers from each other. But this doctrine is acceptable to almost all of them. Both the Christian existentialists and the existential atheists subscribe to this fundamental doctrine. But Sartre's position is unique. He develops an extreme atheistic existentialist position from this basic premise.

In the development of his thought, many thinkers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger influenced Sartre. Kierkegaard with his idea of "truth as subjectivity" has protested the omission of man by philosophers in their

systems that emphasized on essence or totality. His philosophy has endeavoured stressing the individual man here and now and viewed man who has passions and anxiety. He has emphasized on personal experience.

Nietzsche's influence was arguably more significant than anyone else's in Sartre's intellectual development. Sartre says that Nietzsche was an existentialist in his almost romantic emphasis upon the passion, anxiety and decision of individual man and had a sense of the tragic predicament of humanity in modern civilization. He was particularly fascinated by Nietzsche's criticism of religions in general and Christianity in particular. Sartre says that, he was inspired by Nietzsche's conception of the transcendence of passion and intellectualism through the power of some purely inward integrity of mastery. Again, Sartre who refuses to accept the validity of any transcendental values, finds in Nietzsche's approach which estimates values based on purely subjective criteria the essential attitude of an atheist existentialist.

Sartre in *Existentialism and Humanism* observes that, though Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are poles apart, the world of ideas, which their relative positions define is recognizably the same world. Sartre adds that, Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity with regard to its negative bearing upon man's complete individuation, has points of relation to Kierkegaard's sublime anti-clericalism. Nietzsche's Superman and Kierkegaard's Knight of-Faith, according to Sartre, are both conceptions of the transcendence of passion and intellectualism through the power of some purely inward integrity. [*Existentialism and Humanism*, p.9]

Another important thinker who has influenced Sartre is Edmund Husserl. Husserl's Phenomenology has introduced a new method, style and approach of philosophizing in European thought. Husserl starts with the observation that the European sciences are encountering a crisis as it advocates reductive scientism and naïve empiricism (Moran, 180). Husserl's phenomenology suggests an understanding of consciousness from a totally different light by arguing that consciousness is essentially intentional in nature; every consciousness is first and foremost a consciousness of something. Consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than

itself. Consciousness is always about something. This aboutness points to an existence other than its own and to its own existence as a question.

Husserl then goes on proposing a method of reduction, by means of which initially the natural world is bracketed and set aside and afterwards with a series of reductions finally isolates the consciousness with all its pure contents. There the contents are those things, which are directly and immediately given to it in its encounter with the world. Husserl's project envisages a transcendental reduction, where the pure consciousness—the transcendental ego—is isolated at the end.

Sartre accepts Husserl's intentionality principle but argues that the latter has mystified consciousness. He thus tries to demystify it by rejecting the transcendentalism proposed by Husserl. According to Sartre, consciousness is nothing but a consciousness of being conscious of the object before it. It is a being, the nature of which is to be conscious of its being. If there is anything as knowing consciousness, then it is knowledge of an object. He opposes the abstraction and the isolation of consciousness from the world of objects about which it is conscious of and elevating it to a transcendental realm. According to Sartre, the individual finds himself in the world of objects, which constitute the unity of his consciousness. The "I", or the ego appears indistinct through consciousness and is not a pure transcendental ego. He does not entertain an ego-consciousness distinction. When I am conscious of an object, for instance of a pen, I may express it in two ways.

(a) There is consciousness of the pen

(b) I have consciousness of the pen.

When I say (b), I separate or isolate my ego from the "consciousness of the pen" and from the actual pen that exists in the world. But (a) implies that there is no ego that can be isolated or abstracted from the process of being conscious of a pen or any other object in the world. Sartre affirms that the phenomenon of being is disclosed to consciousness. He here introduces the concept of the "being-in-itself", in order to distinguish the being of objects in the world like pen and knife. The being of phenomenon, according to him, is radically different from the being of consciousness, which he designates as "being-for-itself."

Another important thinker who had exerted significant influence in shaping Sartre's ideas about existentialism is Martin Heidegger. Though the problem of being occupies the central place in Heidegger's scheme of things, even this central problem has the source of its meaning in the being of man, which according to Heidegger is a being-in-the-world or *Dasein*. Heidegger had contended that there is nothing beyond man himself that can solve the problem of man's existence. The concept of being-in-the-world and the question of *Dasein's* authentic existence therefore, occupy very significant places in his philosophy. Heidegger even says that *Dasein* is Being's destiny. Truth and knowledge are possible because of *Dasein*.

Existence Precedes Essence

Sartre was specifically influenced by the account of human existence as both free and situated. His account of the being of man asserts particularity, individuality, concreteness and contingency. He thus rejects the Platonic idea of an ideal human being, which determines what we are. Hence man is free from any pre-given models or archetypes that would shape his destiny. Man first is, asserts Sartre, and then he makes his essence through the choices he makes. Man is what he conceives and wills himself to be. Hence it is impossible for Sartre to conceive a God who is man's creator. If there is a God, then man is not free. Atheism is natural for such an existentialist like Sartre. *Existentialism and Humanism* affirms the first principle of existentialism in the following manner:

"Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. And this is what people call its "subjectivity," using the word as a reproach against us. For we mean to say that man primarily exists--that man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so. Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus or a cauliflower. Before that projection of the self nothing exists; not even in the heaven of intelligence: man will only attain existence when he is what he purposes to be." [p. 28]

As mentioned above, the being of man is not just a being-in-itself, whose essence is externally fixed by some metaphysical principle like universal human nature or a divine creature like God. Man is a being-for-itself, who is free. The human individual is a subject rather than an object. He is a person rather than a thing.

Since as Heidegger stated, man's being is a being-in-the-world, once he comes into being, he and others will start defining him. In other words, he is not created according to any pre-given metaphysical model. He does not have a fixed and predefined essence in terms of which he understands himself. Hence his being is different from the being of a pen or a table. Sartre affirms that man makes himself through his choices and actions: he creates an essence for himself.

In the case of man, it is existence that precedes his essence. Essence is a product of a person's mode of existence. One may say that man makes his essence. Sartre asserts that each man is different and there is no common essence pertaining to all men. The essence of man therefore, depends on his subjectivity.

As mentioned above, the existence of things in the world is of different nature than the existence of man. Objects like a paper-knife has been made by an artisan who had a conception of it. The paper-knife's essence, which is the sum of the formulae and the qualities which made its production and its definition possible precedes its existence. If there is a God who had created man, then he is like this artisan who made the knife. Then God's relation to man would be comparable to the artisan's relation with the knife he had made. He would have defined its uses and in this sense its essence. God would have made man according to a procedure and a conception and out of a blueprint that existed in his mind. Under such circumstances the essence of man would precede his existence. God can be conceived here as supernatural artisan. When God creates he knows precisely what is he creating and each individual man is the realization of a certain conception, which dwells in the divine understanding.

Similarly, the idea of universal human nature suggests that there is a conception of human being found in every man and each man is a particular example of this universal conception. If such an essence exists, then it precedes his existence. Sartre opposes such suppositions and envisages demonstrating that there is no such universal human nature. He categorically asserts that human beings are different from other entities like the paper knife. He intends to show that while entities like paper knife have a creator, an idea before its production, man does not have a creator. Sartre outrightly rejects the existence of God and affirms that human beings have no model or blueprint. God does not

exist and hence in the case of the being of man existence comes before its essence. Man is understood as a being, which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it.

The implications of this atheism and rejection of essentialism are existentially significant. It underlines the absence of a model, which further suggests the absence of norms, standards, values and any pre-given meanings. While describing his existential position Sartre observes that the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is. It places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. Sartre adds that, all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be. [*Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 29]

According to Sartre, man makes himself through his choices. When we make a choice between alternatives, we are affirming that what we have chosen is valuable, as we cannot choose the worse. What we choose is always the better and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all. This implies the aspect of responsibility that is attached with the choices we make in our life. Since the choices we make are our own choices and since we always make the better among the alternatives, we are responsible for them and for what happens to others and us as a result of making those choices. We are responsible not only for our own individuality, but also for all men, as when we choose, we choose for everyone.

This situation causes anguish and anxiety. The awareness that our responsibility concerns mankind as whole results in anguish. When I know that I have to act in such a manner that humanity regulates itself by what I do, I become aware of my huge responsibilities. But Sartre reminds us that this is not an anguish that leads to quietism or inaction. This freedom, responsibility and anguish do not separate us from action. Instead, Sartre observes that anguish is a condition of action itself.

The freedom man enjoys is the cause of terrible anxiety and dread. It results in the experience of abandonment. As Dostoevsky says, "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted". Since we live in a Godless world—a world devoid of any transcendental values, meanings and guidelines—we have to find

or create our own values and meanings. The sense of abandonment is therefore, the starting point of existentialism. With the disappearance of God all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven too disappears. Sartre declares that there can no longer be any good *a priori*, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it [*Existentialism an Humanism*, p. 33]. Since there exists no “transcendental goodness” the so-called universal or social values have no sacred or metaphysical binding on us. We are therefore, not bound to follow any given moral imperatives or guidelines. Instead, we have to make choices that are individual and concrete.

Sartre thus proclaims; “man is condemned to be free”. We humans are completely free as there is no God who has given us any fixed essence. Hence we have to create our own essence. In this process of exercising freedom and by making free choices, we are completely responsible for our actions and as mentioned above, are responsible for everyone else’s too. Because we are free to create our values and our world, we must exist in anguish, forlornness, and despair. Hence freedom is not a pleasant gift, but is felt as a condemnation.

Quiz

1. Which of the following is not true of Sartre’s views about Husserl’s phenomenology?
(a) Accepts intentionality principle (b) Accepts the ego-consciousness distinction (c) Rejects transcendentalism (d) Opposes the abstraction and the isolation of consciousness from the world of objects.
2. Which of the following is true of Sartre?
(a) Essence is a product of a person’s mode of existence (b) Man’s essence depends on objective human nature (c) Existence of all men are of the same nature (d) Man is essentially a product of his circumstances.
3. Which of the following is not an implication of Sartre’s atheism?
(a) Rejection of essentialism (b) Absence of norms, standards and values (c) Man’s existence comes before his essence (d) God is a being-for-itself.
4. Which of the following more appropriately reflects Sartre’s view about responsibility?
(a) Man is responsible for everything that happens around him (b) man is responsible for everything that happens in his life (c) Man is responsible for what happens to him as well as to others as a result of making choices (d) Man is responsible for what happens to him as a result of making choices, but not to what happens to others.

5. Which of the following would Sartre advocate?
(a) We have to do our duty (b) We have to exercise our freedom while making choices (c) We have to be practical while making choices (d) We have to make choices that would benefit the society.

Answer Key

1. [b]
2. [a]
3. [d]
4. [c]
5. [b]

Assignments

1. Explain the nature of human existence according to Sartre.
2. Discuss the statement, "existence precedes essence".

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