

The Concept of Freedom in Sartre

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The Problem of freedom may be considered as the central problem in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, because the main objective of this philosophy is to establish human being as a free being. Really speaking, Sartre is trying to show that there is no difference between man and his freedom, that man is identical with his freedom.

In the treatment of freedom Sartre appears to proceed from existential, that is individualistic standpoint to sociological standpoint. The treatment of freedom from existential standpoint is presented by Sartre in his early writings like *Being and Nothingness* and its treatment from sociological standpoint has been presented in his later writings like the *Critique of dialectical Reason*.

In his *Being and Nothingness* Sartre tries to show that the being of man consists in his freedom and that it is the foundation of all actions and values. Man as a solitary being in a hostile world makes his own destiny only due to his freedom. But in the later period of his life, in his days of maturity, coming in contact with Marxism Sartre has realized that man cannot materialize his freedom without help and co-operation from others. So, Sartre's conversion from 'I' to 'We', from individual to community, from individualism to socialism is obvious. Now the problem is—if man is by nature free why does he everywhere appear in chains? Sartre's later writing reflect an attempt to solve this problem.

Freedom is the Being of Human Reality :

According to Sartre freedom is identical with human reality. It is impossible to distinguish freedom from the being of human reality. Freedom is not a property which belongs to the essence of the human being. Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre portrays the relation between freedom and human reality as follows:

“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 does not exist first in order to be free subsequently; There is no difference between the being of man and his being free.”¹

Sartre holds that human reality is its own nothingness. In case of for itself to be is to nihilate the in-itself which it is. So, freedom can be nothing other than this nihilation. In Sartre's own language “I am condemned to be free.”² This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself. In other words ‘we are not free to cease being free’.

Freedom in its foundation, according to Sartre, co-insides with the nothingness which is at the heart of man. Human reality is free because it is not full and sufficient like in-itself. Man is free because he is not himself but presence to himself. “Freedom is precisely the nothingness which is made to be at the heart of man.”³

Thus, “freedom is not a being, it is the being of man, i.e. his nothingness of being”.⁴ Man, as Sartre argues, remains free even when it chains.

Freedom is the foundation of Action:

Sartre maintains that the fundamental condition of all human actions is the freedom of the agent. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre proclaims : “We must recognise that the indispensable and fundamental condition of all actions is the freedom of the action being.”⁵

According to Sartre every action must be intentional; each action must in fact, have an end and the end in turn is referred to a cause. In his view the for-itself must confer on action its value as cause or motive. He holds that it is impossible to find an act without a motive, but this does not mean that the motive causes the act. The motive actually is an integral part of the act.

Thus in his view, freedom has no essence. We must say of it what Heidegger said of the *Dasein* in general : “In its existence precedes and commands essence”⁶ So, for Sartre freedom makes itself an act and we attain it across the act which it organizes with the cause motives and ends.

Very significantly Sartre argues : Thus, human reality does not exist first in order to act later, but for human reality, to be it to act, and to cease

to act is to cease to be.”⁷ Therefore, for Sartre, freedom is the freedom of Choosing, but not the freedom of not choosing.

Freedom and Responsibility:

According to Sartre there is no indispensable relation between freedom and responsibility. Human reality being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders”.⁸

The ethical consequence of Sartre’s metaphysics is a recurrent theme on his novels and plays. There is, for instance, Mathieu, the professor of philosophy who finds himself an adilemma :... He was alone in a monstrous silence free and alone, without help, without an excuse, condemned to decide without any possible recourse, condemned for ever to be free.”⁹

Further, in a similar way, in the tragedy, “The Files” another Sartre’s hero Orestes explains: “Suddenly, freedom dashed upon me, as penetrated me.... I am condemned to have no law other than my own ... For I am a man and each man has to invent his own way.”¹⁰

It is only because of man that whatever happens in the world has got its significance. Our surrounding world is built up by our own actions. Man himself is responsible for all the wars that bring panic and devastation to the world. Thus from Sartrean standpoint there is nothing non-human in this world. Absolute responsibility of a man for what he does is simply “the logical requirement of the consequences of our freedom.”¹¹

Sartre maintains that one never encounters anything except one’s responsibility. “I am condemned to be wholly responsible for myself” because there is no chance of escape from this responsibility.

Under such circumstances the responsibility of the for-itself extends to the entire world as a peopled-world. Thus it is precisely that the-for itself apprehends itself in anguish. A man is one who realizes in anguish his condition as being thrown into a responsibility. A man for Sartre, is nothing but a freedom which perfectly reveals itself and its being consists in this very revelation.

In ‘Existentialism and Humanism’ Sartre says that in exercising his freedom man is not only committed to himself but also is committed to the whole of mankind. “When we say that man is responsible for himself we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that

he is responsible for all men.”¹²

Thus, Sartre has extended our responsibility from the realm of individuality to the realm of entire humanity.

Freedom and Facticity : Situation

We know that Sartre is the proponent of absolute freedom, but at the same time he also maintains that there are many things which obstruct our exercise of our freedom.

In Being and Nothingness he proclaims:

I am not free either to escape the lot of my class, of my nation, of my family, or even to build up my own power or my fortune or to conquer my most insignificant appetites or habits,¹³

However, obstacles to freedom can be Categorized under five heads – my place, my past, my environment, other human beings and my death. “These Categories”, as Sartre comprehends, “may obstruct human freedom to a certain extent, but in all of them it is possible to construct a new situation.”¹⁴

Sartre tries to show that freedom gives meaning to the situation. If we accept man’s dependence on situation Sartre’s Conception of freedom cannot be characterized as absolute. But, in fact, when Sartre says that human freedom is absolute he does not mean by it that man can do whatever he wishes to do”.¹⁵ According to this theory of freedom we cannot say that a prisoner can go out of prison at any time. But what Sartre does mean is that the prisoner can always try to escape, that is to say, he can try to win his freedom.

Now, it appears that Sartre has given us a radically new concept of freedom : The pour-soi’s situation or status as it exists itself ontologically”.¹⁶ Through an analysis of the circumstances of my place my past, my environment, my fellowmen, and my death Sartre has presented before us an existentialist picture of the situation in which man has to exercise his freedom.

Sartre’s Conversion from Individual to Society:

Sartre’s account of freedom in Being and Nothingness is mainly

Concerned with the being of the individual man. But his writings after 1946 have shown a shift from the problem of individual ontology to social philosophy.

We have already seen that it was the freedom of others that enslaved Sartrean man, it was his own freedom that plunged man into anguish, it was freedom from which he fled, it was freedom that ultimately reduced his hopes for a stable identity to nothingness.¹⁷ It is the story of solitary man trying to exercise his freedom in a futile manner.¹⁸ Perhaps due to this very fact that Sartre has proclaimed at the end of his book ... we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion”.¹⁹

Early defence of absolute ontological freedom has eventually forced Sartre to a consideration of a social world—especially when he could comprehend the existence of a social bondage acting upon innate human freedom. Now, Sartre’s mission is to see-if a man is by nature free, why does he appear everywhere in chain?

Considered from a realistic standpoint it may be stated that Sartre could not discover authentic freedom in Being and Nothingness, because of his one-sided emphasis on individuality. But fortunately, later on after 1946 he came to realize his imperfection and took into account the role of society in ascertaining freedom of the individual man in the true sense the term.

In the ‘Problem of Method’ Sartre argues that Marx’s philosophy is to be considered as the true synthesis of Hegelian concept of man as objective and social being and Kierkegaardian concept of subjectivity.

Unfortunately, later day Marxism has deviated from Marx’s original synthesis. So, Marxism in his view is to be reinterpreted especially to the extent of Marxism has become involved in the objectivistic misunderstanding. Sartre has put forward ‘the Critique of Dialectical Reason’ from two interrelated but distinct perspectives. On the one hand his philosophy of absolute ontological freedom had to accommodate the fact of social freedom. On the otherhand Marxism had to be restored to its true roots in a dialectic which incorporated human agency as its ineliminable basis.²⁰

Class Struggle and Dialectical Reason:

Sartre, in the Critique of Dialectical Reason, has clearly portrayed the

working class as an exploited class in history. Just like Marx, he seems to recognise the fact of class exploitation as the cause of the formation of the Proletariat. The proletariat, according to him, is the suffering class, but above all it is the struggling class. Capitalist exploitation give rise to this class struggle. The capitalism of accumulation can be grasped as oppression and its real foundation is always elsewhere exploitation.²¹ The revolutionary outlook of the working class is the result of its class exploitation, of its class situation and of absolute necessity of transforming this situation.

In the conclusion of his investigation in ‘the Critique’ Sartre holds that the only possible intelligibility of human relations is dialectical and that this intelligibility can be expressed only as an antagonistic reciprocity. Class struggle necessarily leads us to dialectical interpretation and in the history of human multiplicities class struggle is necessarily produced on the basis of historically determined conditions. Sartre, therefore, proclaims : “Our history is intelligible to us because it is dialectical and it is dialectical because the class struggle produces us as transcending the inertia of a collective towards the dialectical combat-groups.”²²

Thus, for Sartre, class struggle which is the motor of history of a class society will continue so long as class exploitation and oppression will continue. Now, it becomes obvious for the above discussion that in Sartrean treatment of human freedom manifestation of the truth that “human reality is identical with freedom” can be possible only in communism, that is to say, in a classless society which is free from all kinds of exploitation and oppression.

Now, it follows from the above discussion that Sartre may reasonably be considered as one of the greatest exponents of human freedom in the modern world.

Reference:

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, Trans. Hazel E. Barner, New York, 1966.P.30
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3. Ibid, P. 538.
4. Ibid, P. 539.

5. Ibid, P. 533.
6. Ibid, P. 535.
7. Ibid, P. 583.
8. Ibid, P. 677.
9. Sartre, *The Age of Reason*, P. 249.
10. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothengness*, P. 681.
11. Sartre, *The Flics*, PP. 100-101.
12. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, P. 29.
13. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothengness*, P. 589.
14. M.K. Bhadra, *A Critical Survey of Phenomenology and Existentialism*, P. 369.
15. Ibid, P. 371.
16. Manrice Natanson, *A Critique of Jean-Paul Sartre's Ontology*, P. 52.
17. Jamse Miller, *History of Human Existence*. P. 158.
18. M.K. Bhadra, *A Critical Survey of Phenomenology and Existentialism*, P. 379
19. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothengness*, P. 574.
20. James Miller, *History and Human Existence*, P. 173.
21. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Trans Alan Sheridan Smith, Ed. Jonathon Ree, London, 1976, P. 749.
22. Ibid, P. 805.