



Jean-Paul Sartre and His Theory of Individuality **Nabanita Deb Ghosh**

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Abstract

Existentialism is a style to discuss different philosophical thoughts. They focus on individuality and integrity of a human being. Thus, they refuse to accept the universal notion of any truth or fact. The followers of this notion think the notions like objectivity or universality can hamper the existence of an individual. In this paper I am going to discuss existential notion of Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre accepts an individual as a fundamental mode of existence. According to Sartre, creating meaning for each of our lives is essential to what it is to exist. Our fate is our responsibility. Our intentions shape the way we live. According to him, nothing can be described in terms of a fixed and permanent human nature if reality truly comes before essence; in other words, there is no determinism, man is free, and man is freedom. The revolutionary aspect of the existentialist position, according to Sartre, is that it starts with a radical humanism that transfers divine power – which in this context is simply to be defined as the existence of a subject that has the capacity for free choice and is thus directly to be regarded as something that results from free choice – to the shoulders of people. So, the ultimate responsible being is man or individual.

Keywords: *Existentialism, Freedom, Individuality, Responsibility, Existence precedes essence*

Introduction:

Existentialist philosophy became urgently relevant during World War II as Europe faced both physical devastation and moral breakdown. In such uncertain times, the optimistic image of Romanticism – that some great, unstoppable force like Reason or the Absolute guides and protects humanity's destiny – felt dangerously foolish. In contrast, existentialism directly addressed the unpredictable nature of human existence. It emphasized that people are thrown into the world, allowed to make their way through a world where their freedom is frequently restricted and their choices might be hindered by uncontrollable circumstances. Accordingly, freedom itself is brittle, its significance dependent on events that might at any time make it meaningless. Suffering, frustration, disease, and death were all seen by existentialists as essential features of being human. The optimism of the 19th century, which tended to ignore such unpleasant facts in favour of an idealized picture of human potential and development, contrasted sharply with this viewpoint. I will use Jean-Paul Sartre's theories to examine existentialism in this essay, looking at how he dealt with the difficulties and ambiguities of human existence.

French existentialist author and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre was a prominent figure in the 20th century. His concept of freedom serves as the foundation for his existential theory.

In order to demonstrate human freedom, Sartre offers a number of arguments that establish an ontological division between what he refers to as being-for-itself (*pour soi*) and being-in-itself (*en soi*).¹ This distinction highlights the distinction between an individual or person and an object. Being-in-itself and being-for-itself are the two kinds of existence that Jean-Paul Sartre differentiated. The term "being-in-itself" describes items that have a stable identity, such as rocks, chairs, or can openers. For instance, the purpose of a can opener defines it: it opens cans. Its core remains the same regardless of how you utilize it. In a similar vein, no matter how it is handled, a rock will always be a rock. These things just exist without the ability to change who they are; they are locked into their essence. But humans are more complicated. Both a being-in-itself and a being-for-itself are possible for an individual. When we are just seen as biological beings or as members of a group – defined externally by our tasks or functions – we exist as being-in-itself. However, we have the freedom to define our own essence, make decisions, and decide what we stand for since we are being-for-itself. We are future-focused and continuously project ourselves toward possibilities, unlike things, who are constrained by a fixed identity. Self-awareness is also made possible by this freedom. We realize who we are by realizing that we are different from other people and things. According to Sartre, the comprehending human reality is this way of being-for-itself – the deliberate, decision-making part of human life.

Difference between individual and a thing:

Sartre uses the phrase no-thing-ness² to imply that humans are not like objects like rocks or can openers. This phrase means that a human being is nothing at birth. Man is nothing at start, which implies that he is indescribable. He won't be anything till later. Since Sartre rejects the idea that God created humans, we are nothing when we are born. He believes that a guy is merely what he chooses to be. Human nature does not exist since there is no God. Both Sartre and Kierkegaard are fervently committed to the existence of the person, even if Sartre rejects the idea of God in order to firmly establish his conception of existence. Like Kierkegaard, Sartre also believes that man realizes his existence from different situations of his life. He also thinks that choices can be treated as proper choice if they are backed by personal deliberation and ownership. For Jean-Paul Sartre, because humans lack a fixed or inherent essence, they are essentially different from objects. Certain items, like can openers, are made with a specific use in mind. A designer determines the purpose of a thing before it ever exists. As a result, its essence – its purpose or function – comes before its existence. The purpose of the can-opener is to open cans, and this function characterizes it. However, such a fixed strategy was not followed in the creation of humans. Sartre disagrees with the notion that human life has a predetermined purpose because of an all-powerful creator or divine designer. Therefore, our nature is not predetermined. Humans don't have an innate essence as objects do; instead, they are created and then define themselves by their choices and behaviours. One of Sartre's most significant contributions to existential philosophy is the notion that existence precedes essence. To put it another way, we exist first, and through the choices we make in life, we develop our identity, values, and purpose. Our essence is something we constantly mould; it is not something that is predetermined. Sartre famously

¹ Ralph Harper, *Existentialism: A Theory of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948).

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), 56.

claimed that humans are condemned to be free³ because of their freedom. This statement does not imply that freedom is a penalty in the traditional sense. Instead, it highlights the fact that we cannot avoid the responsibility of selecting who we are since there is no present human nature or divine design that directs us.

Choice is a controlling function in individual:

Choice is a governing role in the person. Sartre argues that although man is free to make his own decisions, he is condemned to be free since we must construct ourselves even if we are not in this world by choice. People must act freely to construct their own life and handle problems in accordance with their choices, even though they were placed on this planet against their will. Being free gives us the ability to choose, which leads to everything we do. The only option we lack is the ability to make decisions. We may select our essence, but we cannot choose our existence. Therefore, we have to take accountability for all we do. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, a person is entirely accountable for the decisions they make in life once they are born. Sartre asserts that people are thrown⁴ into the world without a set moral code or present purpose. This implies that there are no timeless principles, heavenly decrees, or innate tendencies that may completely dictate how a person ought to live. As a result, a person cannot really claim, that he must do that, or he cannot do that, as if there are no other option. In actuality, every human action is a decision. Sartre says that a person cannot assign blame to society, God, or even human nature. When someone behaves in a particular manner, it's because they made a decision. The ultimate choice still belongs to the individual making it, even if they are under pressure from other factors or expectations. Therefore, regardless of how unpleasant or uncomfortable the repercussions may be, every human must take responsibility for their actions. Additionally, according to Sartre, a human life's first meaning is ambiguous. Rather, meaning must be created by each individual by their choices, actions, and intentions. Therefore, forming one's own identity and purpose is an ongoing process of human existence.

Freedom in Sartre's Philosophy:

Sartre claims that freedom is one of the most significant aspects of human existence. He asserts that each and every person is free to determine their own essence via decisions and deeds. This freedom extends beyond human behaviour; it also encompasses how people react to circumstances and even mould their feelings and attitudes. This state, which Sartre refers to as radical freedom, implies that people are essentially free to choose the course of their life. Sartre clarifies that this independence is not always consoling, though. A person may experience uneasiness or agony upon realizing that life is not governed by a higher power, a set nature, or a planned destiny. A human being is aware that every decision has consequences and that one's life's purpose is solely determined by the decisions they make. In this way, a human being is a creature full of opportunities and untapped potential, continuously influencing their own destiny. Many people want to avoid this obligation since it might feel burdensome. This escape is referred to by Sartre as bad faith. When a person denies their own autonomy and acts as though circumstances, societal norms, or external

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 29.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), 72.

roles govern their life, they are acting in bad faith. By doing this, a person escapes the burden of finding and expressing their true self. However, Sartre contends that since human freedom cannot be completely eradicated, this denial is ultimately a kind of self-deception.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre uses the example of a waiter who is totally engrossed in his work to demonstrate this point. This waiter acts robotically and thinks that his work completely defines who he is, acting as though his identity is nothing more than a waiter. By doing this, he loses sight of the fact that he is first and foremost a free human being with the ability to choose his own course in life. According to Sartre, people limit their own freedom when they do this and don't think about other options. In the end, Sartre comes to the conclusion that each individual is accountable for their own development. People cannot hold society, God, or fate responsible for their decisions. In the notion of Existentialism Sartre says that humans are left alone without an excuse. He claims that humanism means that each individual must take ownership of creating their own existence and identity. Through this concept, Sartre highlights how freedom, accountability, and the never-ending quest for meaning characterize human existence.

Existentialism and Sartre:

In the course that follows, Sartre strikingly concretizes the primary notion of existentialism, which is basically to find a proper phrase for the situation that man faces—an inescapable decision to make. In fact, everything is acceptable in the absence of God, and as a result, man is left on his own as he has no support from either the outside or the inside. He doesn't find any justifications, to start. Nothing can be explained by reference to a fixed and unchangeable human nature if existence truly comes before essence; in other words, there is no determinism, man is free, and man is freedom. Second, if God doesn't exist, we wouldn't have any morals or guidelines to support our actions. Therefore, in the light domain of values, we find no excuses or justifications either in front of us or behind us. We have no justifications and are by ourselves. The phrase man is condemned to be free is how one would like to put this. He is both free because he is accountable for all he does after being sent into the world and condemned since he did not create himself. Existentialists don't think passion has any power. He will never believe that a lovely desire is an all-carrying wave that compels man to act in a specific way and serves as an explanation. He is saying that man is accountable for his desire.⁵

A closer reading of this paragraph reveals the normative dilemma that defines human life. On the one hand, there is a clear emancipatory quality to the extreme rejection of humans upon themselves. No prevalent ideology based on a particular conception of man predetermines human beings. Therefore, there is no supernatural order whose normative requirements might restrict human life in the notion of existentialism. And after taking these few things into account, it becomes clear that nothing is more unfair than the criticisms levelled at us. Existentialism is nothing more than an attempt to deduce every implication from a consistent atheistic stance. In no way does it aim to make man hopeless. But if one refers to all disbelieving attitudes as despair, then it begins with primal despair. Existentialism differs from atheism in that it does not exhaust itself in demonstrating the nonexistence of God. Instead, it asserts that, from our perspective, nothing would change

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 150.

even if God existed. Not because they think God exists, but rather because they feel that man needs to rediscover who he is and persuade himself that nothing can save him from himself, even if it is a convincing argument for God's presence. In this way, existentialism is an optimism and a theology of action. Sartre's observation that the fundamental idea of existentialism is to draw all possible conclusions from the atheist position suggests that it is about a type of transcendental relief, which also explains why freedom can undoubtedly be seen by humans as a burden because this very relief is transferred to humans themselves. Sartre's suggestion that the existentialist is not mainly interested in an ontological argument that seeks to demonstrate the (non)-existence of a divine entity is crucial, nevertheless. Instead, the existentialist theory holds that the existence of God is irrelevant. Humans would not be saved from themselves in the slightest even if God existed or if his presence were established. According to Sartre, the emancipatory quality of the existentialist stance lies in the fact that it begins with a radical humanism that transfers divine power – which in this context is simply to be defined as the existence of a subject that has the capacity for free choice and is therefore directly to be regarded as something that results from free choice – to the shoulders of people. So, the ultimate responsible being is man or individual.

Conclusion:

Sartre claims in *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, that even slaves are free since they could choose to run away or end their own lives. Thus, he opines that a human has no essence. He is not wholly determined, but free to fill the internal gap in his nature by his own actions, thought and perception. Thus, according to Sartre nothingness is internal to the Being –for –itself. It is an emptiness that is experienced by man and his aim in life is to fill this emptiness. Due to this emptiness in himself a man can perceive the world, can act in it, and can determine his course of action on the basis of his imagined future. He believes that values are also created by own choice. Values are not prescribed to us, but we make something good by considering it as good. Thus, his full involvement is required.

Comparing the philosophical views of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre we may claim that though there are several issues of difference in their understanding of life but it is true that their main concern is human existence in this world. They are the first who think it is necessary to understand the meaning of the existence of human as an interacting being, as an acting being and as a decision maker. Some basic tenants of their existential style are that they start their discussion by denying the conventional concept of rationality. They believe in becoming so they do not think that the definition of anything will remain unchanged forever. They do not ready to divide everything according to the dichotomy of truth and falsity. So, their epistemological viewpoint is quite different. They claim that human experience is the maker of knowledge. They never accept fixed authority or morality as a sustain reality. As they opine that human existence is anything permanent so according to them human existence is also not fixed and given. Existentialists hold that nature or essence of man is not anything that is that is simply given, but rather individual being makes himself what he wants to be by his own deeds and decisions. If a universal pattern of genuine humanity would be imposed that would demand conformity, it would destroy the possibility of a genuine human existence for the particular individuals. They portray humans as existential beings that construct their own nature based on the opportunities that are presented to them. Therefore, it is hard to appreciate the potential and inherent qualities of man if we take any authority as a given. An authority will restrict man's ability to establish

his own entity since man is a center of limitless possibilities and can build whatever transcendent entity he imagines. Their primary recommendation is to select the option and build an environment that allows people to experience their true selves. All existentialist philosophers emphasize freedom, individuality, and subjectivity. Thus, their views project a change in philosophical thought. They try to free an individual from the notion of universality and add essence of individual freedom in life. For them existence means carry on one's integrity in every moment.

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