

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S ETHICAL THEORY OF FREEDOM

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Abstract

This work sought to analyse the ethical theory of Jean Paul Sartre. It adopts the analytic method in carrying out this work. One is free to do anything yet one is entirely responsible for every action taken. This work, explains, and defends in a restricted way the central thesis of Sartre's ethical theory; he asserts that man is at liberty. Unlimited liberty is the foundation of his ethical theory as it is the necessary presupposition for complete responsibility. This responsibility does not mean that the human being is blameable for his/her actions, but rather it suggests that there is some ultimate value that people are obligated to preserve. Therefore, it is noteworthy that human conduct is determined exclusively and fully by conscious factors.

Keywords: Ethics, ethical theory, Freedom, Responsibility.

Introduction

It is very necessary to know that Sartre's task as evident from the subtitle of his major work is to develop a phenomenological ontology. The idea of phenomenology simply posits the study of the way the world is revealed through the structures of consciousness. And so Lawhead (1967) believes that this will also provide us with ontology or better still an account of what the world must be like in order for our experience of it to be the way it is. Most consistent in his philosophy is the idea of extreme individualism or subjectivism, and it permeates all spheres of his thoughts. It is on this note that his writings returns most importantly to the human willing and action. His philosophy was basically a reaction and a revolt against the pretentious of reason, against the dehumanizing conditions of modern life, and against the attempts of sciences to reduce persons to simply one more type of object among others in nature. By this he laid emphasis strongly on human freedom. In a very obvious manner, he conceived of the world as being empty. It is this idea that strengthens and makes bare, his atheistic position which is fundamental to him wherefore he believes that God does not exist. Lawhead (1967) in his ethical theory, opines that we are responsible for what we are and, as well as others. As such is clear in asserting that morals are always first and foremost a matter of subjective and individual conscience. More so, in his aesthetics, he simply has the view that a work of art remains a subjective entity created by the artist until it is observed by a spectator and, thus, becomes objective. We shall against this backdrop, take a cursory look on some issues in Sartre's thoughts with more emphasis on his ethics and aesthetics views.

A Synopsis of Sartre's Philosophy

Existence Precedes Essence

In his very remarkable and famous work titled "Existentialism Is Humanism" a work, once influential and a popular starting-point in discussions of Existentialist thought, Sartre avows his memorable and unforgettable statement, "Existence precedes essence." And this subsequently stands as a maxim of the existentialists' movement. In clear and simple terms, this means that there is nothing else to dictate a person's character, goals in life, and so on; it is prerogative only of the individual to define his/her essence. By this Sartre (1956) means that "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards". The essence of something is the set of its defining properties. It is what makes a thing the sort of thing it is. He strengthened this idea by stating that an entity's essence precedes its existence if it is a manufactured article. According to Sartre there is no human nature because there is no God. There is as a matter of fact for him no idea as determinism, by this he avows that an individual is responsible for his actions and all that he experiences. He went further by defining anguish as the emotion which people feel immediately they realize that they are responsible for all humanity and not only for themselves.

It is this anguish that spurs people to the realization that their actions guide and consequently allows them to make judgements about others based on their behaviours in relation to freedom. His concept of anguish is placed side by side with his notion of despair, which for him is defined as optimistic reliance on a set of possibilities which makes action possible. It is good to know just as we may be inspired to ask how possible he can speak of human existence yet neglecting common human nature. It will interest you to know that for Sartre nothing at the core of actually defines that they are, rather humans can for the most part be described as naturally selfish, aggressive, good, social, rational, nor can we appeal to any sort of defining essence, we are nothing but social if we intend to engage in social activities, a view which may be contradictory by Aristotle's view in the Ancient period of Philosophy who defined man as wholly a social being. For Sartre, although there is universal nature, yet we share a common human condition. That is we face same challenges, same questions, as well as limitations. And so Lawhead (2001) the existential frame work or structures of human existence are the same but we uniquely respond to them.

Human Existence and its Paradox

In one of his typically enigmatic phrases, Sartre opines that a feature of human existence is that *I- am –what- I- am-not* and *I -am -not- what- I-am*. It is clear that from a literally view these assertions appear contradictory. But critically speaking they are not, in fact a great deal of Sartre's thought is an offshoot of the idea contained herein. By the first half of the statements *I- am –what- I- am-not*, Sartre speaks of the quality of transcendence which we possess as humans which simply implies that we are oriented towards the future. It means we are but an unfinished project moving towards actualization. I am not yet a-being-for-itself because to achieve it requires my constant striving and so I am only but someone trying to be *what I am not*. And so it is

those activities in which we seek to transcend what we are currently, that continually defines us. By this Sartre (1956), “what we mean to say is that a man is no other than a series of undertakings, that is the sum, the organization, the set or relations that constitute these undertakings. The other half which is; *I -am -not- what- I-am* and simply connotes the roles which we are actually playing out in the drama of life which do not actually define us, they more or less accident which forms no real portion of who we are they are not an imprint of our being. For instance I may be labelled as a being a Priest, but it does not suffice to say that I am a priest already, for I am actually striving in relation to different recorded successes in my seminary formation. Meanwhile, as this is important, it is also good to know that being a priest is not part of my essence. Because is it something I am continually choosing to be or not to be. It is not the same as a chair which is defined as being a chair because it didn’t choose that for itself. But for me, I choose to identify myself with one role in life or the other.

Jean-Paul Sartre’s Ethical Theory

According to Sartre, through our choices, we determine or create what we will be and those choices, we choose according to what we believe we ought to compare this view to others that we are unable to choose badly. Consequently, we are creating ourselves according to what we think a person ought to be. Forrest & Kirkpatrick (1962) are of the opinion that these images are then what we think man ought to be. You are responsible for what you are and, as well. You are responsible for everyone since you choose for mankind you also create an image of man as it ought to be, since we are unable to choose the worse. In a sense, in deciding, I’m putting universal value to my act by deciding in accordance with the belief that all person in this situation should act in manner. Sartre was a moralist but scarcely a moraliser. His earliest studies, though phenomenological, underscored the freedom and by implication the responsibility of the practitioner of the phenomenological method. Thus his first major work, *Transcendence of the Ego*, introduces an ethical dimension into what was traditionally an epistemological project by asserting that this appeal to a transcendental ego conceals a conscious flight from freedom. The phenomenological reduction that constitutes the objects of consciousness as pure meanings or significations devoid of the existential claims that render them liable to sceptical doubt-such a reduction or “bracketing of the being question” carries a moral significance as well. In his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, Michelson (1962) talks about living without an ego, whether transcendental or empirical, in the sense that the transcendental ego is superfluous and the empirical ego (of scientific psychology) is an object for consciousness when it reflects on itself in an objectifying act that he calls “accessory reflection.” His works take pains either to ascribe moral responsibility to agents individually or collectively or to set the ontological foundations for such ascriptions.

Authenticity is achieved, Jameson (2006) claims, by a conversion that entails abandonment of our original choice to coincide with ourselves consciously (the futile desire to be in-itself-for-itself or God) and thereby free ourselves from identification with our egos as being-in-itself. In our present alienated condition, we are responsible for our egos as we are for any object of consciousness. Earlier he said that it was bad

faith (self-deception) to try to coincide with our egos since the fact is that whatever we are we are in the manner of not being it due to the “others” nature of consciousness. Now his mention of “conversion” to authenticity via a “purifying” (non-objectifying) reflection elaborates that authentic project. He insists that we must allow our spontaneous “selfness” (what he terms *ipseity* here and in *Being and Nothingness*) to replace the “Me” or Ego, which he criticizes as an “abusive intermediary” whose future prefigures my future. According to Anderson (1993), the shift is from relations of “appropriation” or being where I focus on identifying with my ego in a bad-faith flight from freedom, to relations of “existence” and autonomy where I attend entirely to my project and its goal. The former is egoistic, Sartre now implies, where the latter is outgoing and generous. It assumes that we live in a society of oppression and exploitation, the former is primary and personal, the latter structural and impersonal. While he enters into extended polemics in various essays and journal articles of the late 1940s and ‘50s concerning the systematic exploitation of people in capitalist and colonialist institutions, Sartre always sought a way to bring the responsibility home to individuals who could in principle be named.

As Merleau-Ponty observed, Sartre stressed oppression over exploitation, individual moral responsibility over structural causation but without denying the importance of the latter. In fact, as his concept of freedom thickened from the ontological to the social and historical in the mid ‘40s, his appreciation of the influence of facticity as conditions in the exercise of freedom grew apace. But he considered opinion excludes choices that oppress or consciously exploit others. In other words, authenticity is not entirely style; there is a general content and that content is freedom. Thus the “authentic Nazi” is explicitly disqualified as being oxymoronic. Sartre's thesis is that freedom is the implicit object of any choice, a claim he makes but does not adequately defend in his Humanism lecture. Ronald (1987) seems to assume that “freedom” is the aspect under which any choice is made, its “formal object,” to revive an ancient term. Though critical of its bourgeois variety, Sartre does support an existentialist humanism, the motto of which could well be his remark that “you can always make something out of what you've been made into” In fact, his entire career could be summarized in these words that carry an ethical as well as a critical message. The first part of his professional life focused on the freedom of the existential individual (you can always make something out of...); in Catalano (1980) view, the second concentrated on the socio-economic and historical conditions which limited and modified that freedom (what you've been made into), once freedom ceased to be merely the definition of “man” and included the possibility of genuine options in concrete situations. That phase corresponded to Sartre's political commitment and active involvement in public debates, always in search of the exploitative “systems” such as capitalism, colonialism and racism at work in society and the oppressive practices of individuals who sustained them. As he grew more cognizant of the social dimension of individual life, the political and the ethical tended to coalesce. In fact, Dobson (1993) explicitly rejected “Machiavellianism.” Detmer (1988) maintains that if Sartre's first and best known ethics corresponds to the ontology of *Being and Nothingness*, his second, “dialectical” ethics builds on the philosophy of history developed in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

In a series of posthumously published notes for lectures in the 1960s, some of which were never delivered, Sartre sketched a theory of ethics based on the concepts of human need and the ideal of “integral man” in contrast with its counter-concept, the “subhuman.” What this adds to his published ethics is a more specific content and a keener sense of the social conditions for living a properly human life. Sartre's third attempt at an ethics, which he called an ethics of the “we,” was undertaken in interview format with his secretary, Benny Levy, toward the end of his life. It purports to question many of the main propositions of his ethics of authenticity, yet what has appeared in print chiefly elaborates claims already stated in his earlier works. But since the tapes on which these remarks were recorded are unavailable to the public and Sartre's illness at the time they were made was serious, their authority as revisionary of his general philosophy remains doubtful. If ever released in its entirety, this text will constitute a serious hermeneutical challenge.

Evaluation

It is observed from time immemorial that there had never an existed theory(ies) without some elements of criticism. Consequently, Sartre's ethical theory cannot be left out. If ethical theory should be based on the subjective approach; how can we tackle the issues of absolute morality? We should note that ethics implies morality or standards that govern the conduct of a person.

As a way of exposing an understanding of Sartre, we need to know that he is most of all, an Existentialist and he is as well an atheist. Sartre believed in the essential freedom of individuals, and he also believed that as free beings, people are responsible for all elements of themselves, their consciousness, and their actions. That is, with total freedom comes total responsibility. He believed that even those people who wish not to be responsible, who declare themselves not responsible for themselves or their actions, are still making a conscious choice and are thus responsible for anything that happens as a consequence of their inaction. Sartre's moral philosophy maintains that ethics are essentially a matter of individual conscience. If ethics centres on individual conscience, what about some people that their conscience are dormant or inactive? Some of this might contributed in the formulation of moral relativity.

In sum, from this basic idea of Sartre that an individual exists merely subjectively until someone else considers this individual as an object in the world. Sartre's ethical theory calls for urgent blue print for it will rekindle the consciousness of an individual by being responsible for an act. It makes one to choose act in a manner that will introduce change to any situation surrounding him.

Conclusion

In sum, Sartre's existentialism in a particularly simplified manner, one may claim that human reality is action. Truth is subjective and therefore one's reality is subjective; but this reality is only actualized through action, whether that action is a choice or a physical event. The paradox of Sartre's concerns with the ethical existence of

humanity is that, on the one hand there is no objective morality since truth is a function of consciousness, yet on the other hand, one is obligated to act and create values as a result of possessing freedom. One is free to do anything yet one is entirely responsible for every action taken. This responsibility does not just mean that the human being is blameable for his/her actions, but rather it suggests that there is some ultimate value that people are obligated to preserve. Sartre argues that one is obligated by one's own freedom to act in a manner that preserves freedom for oneself and humanity at large.

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