Understanding Sartrean Existential Ethics: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

In this paper, I will try to elucidate and critically analyze (1) Jean-Paul Sartre's ontology, the being-in-itself and being-for-itself, and nothingness (2) Sartre's rejection of a god (3) three famous quotations from Jean-Paul Sartre: (a) Existence precedes essence. (b) Each man is responsible for all men. (c) Man is condemned to be free. (4) Phenomenology of responsibility, in the hope of having an answer to why the contemporary world is having a damaged life as far as Sartre is concerned. This paper will also examine whether Sartre has something to do with the destruction of some values, be it directly or indirectly.

Keywords: *Sartre, Existentialism, Ethics, Freedom, Responsibility*

Introduction

Decades ago, people were courteous, respectful, helpful, generous, god-loving, god-fearing, selfless, and all kinds of positive attitudes you can attribute. Laws are enforced, and people have a sense of respect. However, what do we have right now? People are doing whatever they want to do without even considering the consequences of their actions. Before, the elders were treated with the utmost respect. However, as time goes by, do we even understand what respect is? What happened to our values? The role of philosophy is to guide humanity in living life to the fullest. However, is philosophy also to be blamed for the destruction or devaluation of values? Jean-Paul Sartre opened our eyes to a modern approach to living. He advanced existentialism to the frontier, giving his insights on freedom, responsibility, the human condition, and inauthentic existence. However, is he also responsible for the upshot of his philosophy? In his earlier life, he emphasized freedom, even to the point of being self-centered. Only to be enlightened later in life that he needed others in order to survive.

From an existential perspective, freedom cannot be separated from responsibility. It is inevitable that with freedom comes responsibility. Many people want freedom but avoid responsibility. Often, many people succeed in having freedom yet avoid responsibility. This leads to psychological consequences. Albeit often not noticeable, this consequence may find expression through guilt, anxiety, despair, forlornness, and anger, which Sartre calls human conditions.

Existential freedom is not to be taken as political freedom where people demonstrate in the streets to show their opposition to the ideals and goals of their government, as what we had when we ousted then President Marcos in the EDSA Revolution 1 in the Philippines. In fact, political freedom could be a shallow type of freedom. A person can be existentially free even if he is not politically free. Even if a person chooses not to be free, it is still a manifestation of his freedom.

Sartre's Ontology: Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself

Simply put when you throw something, and there is no response, that is being-in-itself. But when you throw something, and it dodges, that is being-for-itself. Sartre's ontology is explained through this analogy. The being for itself is conscious. The being-in-itself lacks consciousness.

In "Being and Nothingness," Sartre elucidates his conception of existential philosophy as "an essay in phenomenological ontology." This work delves into the consciousness of existence. Ontology, the study of being, intersects with phenomenology, which pertains to perceptual consciousness. Sartre explicitly rejects Kant's notion of noumenon, distinguishing between phenomena, our perceptions, and noumena, the inaccessible essence of things. Contrary to Kant, Sartre posits that phenomena are pure and absolute appearances, rendering noumenon nonexistent. This perspective frames the world as an infinite array of finite appearances, dissolving dualisms like the interior-exterior dichotomy of objects (Sartre, 1972).

After discarding the concept of noumenon, Sartre introduces the binary division central to "Being and Nothingness": the contrast between unconscious being, en-soi (being-in-itself), and conscious being, pour-soi (being-for-itself), borrowing from Hegel. En-soi is concrete, immutable, and devoid of self-awareness, solely existing. Pour-soi, representing human existence, is conscious of its consciousness yet remains incomplete. Its defining feature is consciousness, devoid of predetermined essence, necessitating self-creation from nothingness. Nothingness, according to Sartre, characterizes pour-soi, marking its freedom in the world. He contends that pour-soi embodies the entry of nothingness and lack into existence, hence being itself a lack. Its essence lies in knowing what it is not, transforming this awareness into being, even if it only signifies the absence of attainable synthesis between itself and en-soi. Thus, knowing, even if solely of one's limitations, constitutes pour-soi's being. Man is a being-for-itself. Man is imperfect, not whole, and incomplete, but at the same time, he is conscious. From this, he presented his existential philosophy. Man has no predetermined essence. He has to create a meaning for his existence. Man needs to create his values because values are what define him. Man needs to define his future because he is the master of his life.

Sartre's rejection of God

Sartre said that the in-itself is complete, perfect, whole, and entire. The for-itself is incomplete, imperfect, not whole, and evolving. Consciousness, which is the basis of the for-itself, is a hole in being. Then he said that since god is complete, perfect, and conscious, he should be both in itself and for itself. God is fully conscious that is why he is for-himself. However, he should be complete because, by definition, god is perfect. So god is both in-itself and for-itself which means he is perfect and nothing at the same time. Therefore, he concluded that god is a contradiction.

In his essay "Existentialism is Humanism," Jean-Paul Sartre clarifies the nature of existentialism by addressing misconceptions others have attributed to this philosophy. Sartre commences by asserting that the foundational premise of existentialism is the precedence of human existence over human essence. Contrary to the notion of a predetermined human nature crafted by a divine entity, Sartre contends that there exists no such a priori essence, as there is no deity to conceive it. Herein lies his rejection of the existence of God, a central tenet of his philosophy (Sartre, 2007).

Following the Heideggerian line of thought, Sartre posits that only one being can precede essence with existence—man. According to Sartre, man exists first and subsequently forges his essence. Absent a divine creator, there is no inherent human identity; it is the existentialist who imbues man with meaning. Sartre underscores this notion by asserting that man is initially nothing until shaped by existentialist principles.

Man's primordial standpoint, therefore, is subjectivity, wherein he defines his essence autonomously and enjoys the freedom to select his path. The realization of this freedom from any objective moral framework burdens man with significant responsibility. Sartre identifies the anguish stemming from the awareness of our profound freedom as crucial, compelling us to assume accountability for our choices. He refutes the possibility of abstaining from choice, arguing that even indecision constitutes a choice. Thus, he rejects deterministic rationalizations and advocates for individual responsibility (Sartre, 2007).

In Sartre's view, there exists no universal ethics to dictate proper conduct; instead, man's interpretation guides his actions. Emotions attributed to a particular deed are consequent to the action itself, emphasizing the subjective assessment of actions as the arbiter of their worth.

The three themes of Sartre's existentialism

After his discussion of the being-in-itself and the being-for-itself, including nothingness, he presented his existential philosophy by rejecting the idea of a god who created the universe and man and proceeded to explain why and how.

1. Existence Precedes Essence

Sartre said, "We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world- and defines himself afterward" (Sartre, 2007). We are reminded of The Door's 'Riders on the Storm' "into this world we are thrown." Just that line captures where Sartre is getting at, and we are thrown into this world. We are thrust into this world. Our existence surges up when we are born. We did not choose to be born, but here we are. Sartre's argument here is that there is no human nature that precedes our existence here on earth. There is no implied essence of what man is. There is no grand design. Indeed, there is no plan emanating from god that defines man, gives him human nature, and gives him essence. In many ways, Sartre's existentialism is an attempt to forge a kind of coherent atheism. Sartre did not, in fact, believe in god and attempted to show how we can nevertheless exist here on earth in some coherent fashion.

Let us use a letter opener as an example of what he means. A letter opener is a thing whose essence definitely precedes its existence. Whoever made the letter opener had the design and the function of the letter opener in mind before he made it. The essence of it, what it is supposed to be, existed before the letter opener was made. The role of its function in this world is to open letters. It is the same with the pair of scissors. Its essence is made before its existence. So Sartre argues very strongly that this is not the case for man.

There is no god; there is no design. Instead, we suddenly are in existence, and we must define ourselves after that. It is as attractive as it may seem. He compares human life to that of a painter's blank canvas. As the painter approaches the canvas, there is no telling what the painter will make out of it. There is no preceding essence. Little by little, the painter does come up with a specific idea. The painter itself does invent what eventually appears on the canvas, and that way, our life is a work of art. Our life is a blank canvas, and every action we take defines our worldview. Every decision we make defines our values. Every single thing we do is what defines our essence.

However, seeing it from a critical standpoint, the painter definitely knows what he is doing. He is the one giving essence to the blank canvas. The blank canvas can be likened to the human life. But what about the painter? Since he is the one who painted and made sense out of a blank canvas, can he be compared to a god? If that is the case, then the painting has a pre-defined essence that exists in the mind of the painter. Then, from this, we can say that god created man and has a preexisting essence as to that of a painter who had a preexisting idea of what the outcome of the blank canvas would be.

Indeed, according to the existentialist perspective, man is indefinable because, initially, he is devoid of inherent essence. He remains undefined until he actively shapes himself. Sartre encapsulates this notion by stating, "Thus, there is no human nature because there is no God to have a conception of it." Man exists as "nothing else but that which he makes of himself." This constitutes the fundamental principle of existentialism.

When asserting that man chooses himself, it signifies not only individual self-determination but also collective significance. Each individual's choice resonates with universal implications, as in choosing for oneself, one also chooses for all humanity. Consequently, our responsibility extends beyond personal boundaries; it encompasses the fate of humanity. So, what follows from this realization? It leads us to the second slogan.

2. Man is responsible for all men.

Sartre actually puts it this way: "And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his individuality, but that he is responsible for all men" (Sartre, 2007). In my point of view, the most interesting consequence of this kind of ontology is the ethical dimension. Sartre argues that with no priori system of ethics and no divine code to follow, man must forge his moral worldview. It means that our actions are equal to our values. In his essay "Existentialism is Humanism," he defends existentialism against its critics. He used a famous example of a young man who decided either to go to war or stay with his mother (Sartre, 2007). Sartre points out that there is no moral code, and this young man can rely upon his decision. He could choose devotion and stay with his mother, or he could choose to fight for a cause for his country and fight the war, but he must decide for himself even if he seeks advice. Sartre's point is that there is no preexisting set of ethics to help us in this world. There is nothing to lean upon. We must make our own decisions, and ultimately, our actions define our values. Again, in this part, existence precedes essence. If this man goes to war, then we know what he believes in. If he stays with his mother, then the facticity of his decision tells us about his values. This is a very compelling idea. However, Sartre was criticized because it seemed as Dostoyevsky once wrote that now that god is dead, everything is

permitted. If there is no moral code for us to obey, then everything is permitted. Sartre affirms it, but he makes an argument: one's actions must define right. In that way, it defines the rights of all men. So, if this young man goes to war, that would mean he thinks that this is the right thing for all men. Does it necessarily mean that he wants to force that decision upon us? However, this is an easy way to misread him. The thing is, this young man made the decision for himself, and that defined his values. It may be likened to an argument that no one, with proper knowledge, would ever make a wrong decision; no one does evil. The reason is that when we know what is right and what is good for us, we make good decisions. We make the right decision. What we do defines our values. It makes morals and values in that way a matter of personal taste (Sartre, 2007).

Man bears complete responsibility for his existence, devoid of any predetermined notions or ideals to adhere to. He enjoys absolute freedom to shape himself according to his will, yet this freedom also entails responsibility not only for oneself but for all humanity. As man selects how to conduct himself, he simultaneously crafts the collective image of what it means to be human. Sartre elucidates that these choices of behavior are inseparable from affirming one's values; one cannot opt for what is deemed inferior. Thus, while individual choices are pertinent, they also hold relevance for humanity at large, as what is beneficial for one must also be beneficial for all.

Sartre's reasoning stems from the absence of a fixed human essence. Each individual's actions reflect their conception of what it means to be human, contributing to the collective portrayal of humanity. In the existentialist worldview, devoid of a divine blueprint, man's self-image is solely fashioned through his actions and those of his peers. Consequently, Sartre posits that in choosing for oneself, one chooses for all humanity. Our responsibility transcends personal boundaries to encompass the fate of humanity as a whole (Sartre, 2007).

In essence, every individual choice resonates universally, implying that one's actions should be such that all of humanity could replicate them.

3. Man is condemned to be free.

For Sartre, we must choose one or the other (Sartre, 2007). Even if we choose not to be free, we are free because the mere fact that we choose not to be free, we have freedom. We cannot avoid making choices, and that is a manifestation of our freedom.

Up to this point, I have emphasized Sartre's belief in absolute and unrestricted freedom. However, upon delving into this third theme, it becomes apparent that this freedom may be boundless after all. How do we reconcile these seemingly contradictory notions? The crux of the matter lies in the recognition that while I possess the freedom to choose anything, I am not afforded the option to refrain from choosing altogether. Sartre underscores this as an irrefutable reality. We exist, and as such, we bear the weight of responsibility for our decisions. However, crucially, we are not accountable for the fact that we are endowed with this responsibility. We should have been consulted about our desire for existence. This concept is succinctly captured in the third slogan: "Man is condemned to be free." As he puts it, "Condemned because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world, he is responsible for everything he does" (Sartre, 2007). In "Existentialism Is a Humanism," Sartre calls the

human condition the realm of "brute fact" over which we have no control (Sartre, 2007).

In "Existentialism Is a Humanism," there is not much discussion of how this can be reconciled with his emphasis on our unconditional freedom. However, he discusses it with great length in Being and Nothingness, which is one of the main themes. Here, he means absolute freedom, as we can see in "Being and Nothingness." We do not choose our existence. We did not choose to be born. We are condemned to absolute freedom. We can express ourselves. We can live our lives as if our lives are works of art. The emphasis is that we are being condemned to be accessible at once. However, within this freedom, there is an absolute responsibility, and we must take responsibility for our decisions. The condemned comes in the emotions of what Sartre calls "The Human Condition." He says that there is a kind of nature that is universal, and from this, we are thrown into the world. He says that the feeling of responsibility makes us feel anguish, anxiety, and despair (Sartre, 2007). The term used by Kierkegaard is forlornness, which says 'god is dead,' and we have to face the consequence of that. That causes us to feel forlornness and abandonment and then despair. All the emotions of the past century, including this current century, are captured here. The despair comes from the notion that man is nothing but his life. He is not part of a grand design or god's plan. He is the vision of his future. It is ourselves who design our fate. We are the ones creating our reality. Let us use Munch's "The Scream," which captures anguish, as an example of the human condition that Sartre is talking about.

The concept of the human condition, or facticity, refers to the framework within which one exercises their freedom. Freedom is never abstract; it exists within a specific context. While individuals have the liberty to make choices within these circumstances, they are not able to disregard or escape from these circumstances altogether. Indeed, the decisions one makes today will inevitably shape the circumstances one encounters in the future. Thus, while individuals may not have had the freedom to choose their initial circumstances, they may have possessed agency in the past to influence or alter their trajectory. However, this opportunity may no longer be available. Sartre extensively examines this interplay between facticity, freedom, past, and future in his discussions on time within "Being and Nothingness."

Sartre on Responsibility

Breaking down the term "responsibility" denotes the capacity to respond. However, what exactly does one respond to? According to Sartre, as autonomous beings, humans are accountable for their actions, setting an example for others. Sartre dismisses relativism, positing that what is deemed morally suitable for one individual in a given situation holds for all. Thus, not only do individuals bear responsibility for their choices, but they also shoulder the responsibility of being exemplars for others.

From this sense of responsibility, Sartre delineates three existential states. Firstly, there is anguish, the weight of bearing the consequences of one's actions and being a model for others, coupled with the acknowledgment that one's choices are solely their own. In this paradigm of freedom, individuals are liberated to make their own decisions. Secondly, there is abandonment. Sartre's atheistic stance leads to the belief that there is no divine guidance, leaving individuals to navigate moral terrain independently. The realization of this absence of a higher authority can evoke feelings of abandonment. Lastly, there is despair—a profound sense of anguish compounded by the recognition of total responsibility for

one's actions and the existential loneliness of charting one's moral course in the absence of divine guidance.

Last Thoughts

Freedom and responsibility serve as the cornerstones for understanding the human condition. Sartre posits freedom as the essence of human existence, manifesting primarily through the act of making choices—an inevitability from which individuals cannot escape. Sartre's conception of choice is elucidated through the lens of an individual's original project, a fundamental decision that shapes their entire life trajectory. This original project unfolds over time, serving as a framework within which specific choices are made. While individuals may not possess full awareness of this project, they continually interpret and revise it throughout their lives.

Central to Sartre's philosophy is the idea that existence precedes essence. In other words, individuals exist first and foremost, devoid of any predetermined essence or fixed human nature. Freedom, therefore, is boundless, unconstrained by inherent attributes or external dictates. However, Sartre acknowledges the practical constraints imposed by the physical limitations of the world. Despite this acknowledgment, the essence of freedom remains untouched, serving as a guiding principle that permeates human existence.

However, seeing it from a critical standpoint, is our freedom absolute? Alternatively, that man's absolute freedom ends with the exercise of another person's freedom. So how free are we? Sartre said that man is free and, therefore, man has responsibility. On what is the basis of responsibility? What is it based on being responsible or answerable for the result of a person's actions to other human beings? Sartre tried to analyze the behavior of a person in relation to his environment using the approach of Husserl, which is phenomenology, only to come up with obfuscatory language that needs to be explained in the form of actual situations. He used languages that are broad, categorical, and generic terms.

Sartre's existentialist perspective on human existence can be succinctly encapsulated in his assertion that the fundamental drive behind human action lies in the nature of consciousness—a longing for existence. Each individual is tasked with wielding their freedom in a manner that preserves both their existence as a concrete reality and their status as autonomous beings. By navigating existence with this awareness, one gains insight into the original choice that shapes one's entire life trajectory and the values inherent in it. This profound understanding can only be attained through actively engaging with the particulars of one's own life and eschewing the temptations of self-deception, such as engaging in bad faith.

Authentically embracing the complexities of human existence represents the embodiment of a universal truth within the unique context of an individual life. It is through this genuine engagement with existence that one achieves a deeper comprehension of the essence of being human.

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