



Contemporary Philosophy

## **Existentialist Perception Of The Human Condition: With Special Reference To Sartre**

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**ABSTRACT:** Existentialism lays stress on the existence of humans; Sartre believed that human existence is the result of chance or accident. There is no meaning or purpose of our lives other than what our freedom creates, therefore, we must rely on our own resources. Sartre thought that existence manifests itself in the choice of actions, anxiety and freedom of the will. In this way the responsibility of building one's future is in one's hands, but the future is uncertain and so one has no escape from anxiety and despair. We are always under the shadow of anxiety; higher responsibility leads to higher anxiety. The pursuit of being leads to an awareness of nothingness, nothingness to an awareness of freedom, freedom to bad faith and bad faith to the being of consciousness which provides the condition for its own possibility. Concluding his thought, Sartre says that existentialism is not pessimism. He says that existentialism does not aim at plunging us into despair: its final goal is to prepare us through anguish, abandonment and despair for a genuine life, and it is basically concerned with the human condition as a complete form of choice. The fundamental issue, therefore, is an authentic meaning of life.

Existentialism is a contemporary trend in the sphere of Philosophy. It lays stress on the existence of man. Existentialism was a protest against the traditional notions of man. It purports to form a 'just' concept of man, rejecting underestimation or overestimation of Man's personality. The Chief tenet of existentialism is "Existence precedes essence". It thinks that the existence of the individual is the highest truth. To it existence is more important than essence, for in essence; we are not able to find out the individuality. A particular man who is a moral entity, who fights against life, he should be the center of life, not his essence. Sartre says "Man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only afterwards, defines himself". "In other words, man first exists then he looks at the world, thinks" of it and acts in it as an individual." His contemplation and his actions are possible only because his existence: Existence, thus is the first principle from which all else flows. It is only later, by living, thinking and acting that man defines his nature and forms what is called his essence-that which he is and will be." (2) Consequently, man is like a blank sheet. He never comes in the world as finished product, as readymade, as well defined, rather he defines himself in course of his life. Sartre believe that human existence is the result of chance or accident. There is no meaning or purpose of his life other than what his freedom creates, therefore, he must rely on his own resources.

In the Philosophy of Sartre, there is an accord between the feeling of anxiety and freedom. He thinks that existence manifest's itself in the choice of actions, anxiety and freedom of

will. He does not accept any kind of determination. Our past does not determine the present and we build up our own future. Our existence is absolutely free and fit consists in developing our life in full freedom. Existence means separating myself from the world and understanding myself as such i.e. I have to realize that I am not the same with the objects of the world and through my freedom I determine my future. In this way the responsibility of building my future is in my hands, but the future is uncertain and so I have no escape from anxiety and despair. Sartre is of opinion that many paths are open before us and among them we choose one. But as we are not able to choose the other opportunities, we are always under the shadow of anxiety. Higher the man's responsibility leads to higher anxiety. It is deeply related to our existence.

Man is characterized by freedom. This free individual is also a creative individual i.e. we create our own personality, situation by interpreting our environment and in this way we are also responsible. Existence involves freedom - creativity - responsibility. Man is always responsible for his choice. He blames himself and not the society for the consequence of his choice. Man through his free acts determines his own destination. Man in making his personality, is never complete through out his life, he develops by his own free choice. In this sense, Heidegger has said that, "Dasein, it always its own possibility," (3) and Sartre said that "it is true that the possible is- so to speak - an option on being and if it is true that the possible can come in the world only through a being which is its own possibility, this implies for human reality the necessity of being its being in the form of an option on its being." (4)

Sartre has written a number of existentialist novels, dramas, stories, philosophical articles and books. Here we choose his great philosophical work "Being and Nothingness" and his famous novel 'Nausea' for the better understanding of his existentialist philosophy and the existential perception of the Human condition. In "Being and Nothingness", Sartre has explained the most significant aspect of human reality, i.e. consciousness as Nothingness. This concept of Nothingness is central to the philosophy of Sartre because it holds the key to the solution of the problem of the relation between the Being -for-itself and the Being-in-itself. The chief characteristics of Being-for-itself is Nothingness. Thus Sartre calls the human being Being-for-itself which may mean that for man, his being is to be realized. He calls material object Being-in-itself. It is through man that Nothingness comes into the world. The question then arises: What is it about the Being of man that occasion Nothingness? The answer is: freedom. Freedom is the nature of man. There is no difference between the Being- of man and his Being-free. This consciousness of freedom is disclosed in anxiety. There is thus an internal connection among nothingness, freedom and anxiety. These are inter related structural determinants of being of man.

Nothingness, freedom and anxiety provide the condition which make possible the movement of "bad faith". Bad faith is a form of self-deception which in making use of freedom denies it. Bad faith is again to lying, yet not identical with it. In lying one hides the truth from others. In bad faith one hides the truth from oneself. In the former there is a quality of deceiver and deceived: in the later there is a unity of single consciousness. Bad faith does not come from outside. Consciousness affects itself with it. In describing the pattern of bad faith Sartre develops the example of a woman who consents to go out with a man who loves her. She is fully aware of his intention and knows that sooner or later she will have to make a decision. An immediate decision is demanded when he caresses her hands. If she leaves her hand then she encourages his advances: if she withdraw it, she may preclude any future relationship with the man. She may decides, but she seeks means for postponing the decision. It is at this point that "Bad faith" comes into play. She leaves her hand in his, but does not notice that she is doing so. She becomes all intellect, divorces her soul from her body and transforms her body into an object or thing - into the mode of "Being-in-itself". Her hands becomes "a thing", neither consenting nor resisting. She

objectivizes her body and ultimately herself, as in-self , and thus stages a flight or an escape from herself as for-itself. She loses her subjectivity, her freedom and her responsibility for decision. She exists in bad faith.

The pursuit of being leads to an awareness of nothingness, Nothingness to an awareness of freedom, freedom to bad faith and bad faith to being-of consciousness which provides condition for its possibility.

By illustration of 'bad faith' Sartre concludes that nothingness is the essential part of consciousness, since bad-faith would not be possible without it. Sartre says that bad faith is a risk built into the nature of consciousness. The act of bad-faith proves that we aim to evade our responsibility, but according to Sartre we are compelled to be responsible. For Sartre, thus absolute freedom means, absolute responsibility.

In his novel 'Nausea' Sartre contents that man as existent is a mystery, a paradox and his nature and purposes cannot be summed up neatly in any formula. Man does not live as pure existence, but he may become aware of himself as such in the experience of Nausea. Roquentin, discovers in Nausea: "the essential is contingency. I mean that, by definition, existence cannot be identified with necessity. To exist is to happen without reason.... Every thing is purposeless. This garden, this town and myself." (5) Here Roquentin is immobilized by the feeling that his own life together with all the world, is meaningless.

In 'Nausea' the hero comes to the conclusion that human life is a perpetual striving. Tried of taxing and ceaseless efforts, the worldly people falter in their struggle to achieve lucidity and make decisions, then things no longer have a meaning and their existence seems "dull, obscene, gratuitous" They feel that they are superfluous "I want to leave, to go somewhere, where I would really be in my place and fit in...But my place is no where: I do not belong". (6)

Sartre states that man has no paramount reality, no pre-determined text: he creates his own reality. He is a Roquentin, who says "I am in the midst of things, nameless things. Alone without words, defenseless, they surround them, are beneath me, along me. They do not impose themselves: they are there". (7)

Expressing the existentialist view the 'Nausea' portrays that we are "trapped in existence", leaving in a completely meaningless world. Not principles that we use for ordering or comprehending events have any basis. But we cannot escape having to deal with 'existence', having to make sense out of it. All that we can tell is that this world which are confronted with his utterly arbitrary when we realize the unintelligibility of the world, our inability to withdraw from contact with it, and our need for finding some principle of order or intelligibility, we are then ready for the existentialist message. One first has to be overpowered by the 'Nausea of existence', has to acknowledge that the pattern of our lives is due to totally arbitrary ways of living and that any others would do as well.

At this point, we are confronted with our "dreadful freedom", recognising that we are completely free to choose our world-view, our way of living in the world. More over since we are completely free, there is no way in which we can find guides for our choice, no way we can avoid making a choice and no way of escaping from the consequences of the choices - our basic decisions.

Thus, Nausea, Sartre's famous novel, Portrays most force fully this condition of man's plight . The hero has been moving through life on the basis of an unquestioned acceptance of a certain outlook. But his dis-satisfaction with events forces him to ask whether this is the proper outlook. The quest for some justification for his way of life brings about its disintegration into pure Nausea, as the arbitrary frame work into which he has previously

organised his word disappears. All that he is left with is the complete confusion of his inescapable existence and the realization that it has no meaningful order. When he becomes aware that only by his decision can he find a means of organising experience and a way of life, he is overwhelmed with the magnitude of the predicament that confronts him. He cannot avoid being a free agent. He cannot act unless he exercise his freedom and chooses some arbitrary outlook and order to make sense out of his world. Possibly most frightening of all, he is permanently burdened with all the consequences of his decision for which he and he alone is responsible, and this is a 'dreadful responsibility'. Man is involved inevitably in anguish because his decision is never grounded in an external authority upon which he can rest the responsibility for his action. He must bear it alone. And when Sartre says alone, he means absolutely alone, for not only is there no God to share the burden, but there is no structure a priori for values to rest upon. For Sartre, the God does not exist is a dreadful fact that makes an ultimate difference to the world and to man.

The philosophy of existentialism found a particular relevance during two world wars. The catastrophic collapse of Europe, the horrible experience of the Nazi dictatorship and occupation of France, have left people with a sense that their views and values are meaningless. The world in which they, and we, have to live no longer seems susceptible to rational examination. Instead, only arbitrary beliefs seem able to give us a key to how to live in the face of an unintelligible universe.

To the common criticism that Sartre's philosophy, and indeed existentialism in general, is pessimistic, he replies that such a charge can come only from those who are fearful of the truth that life is genuinely difficult. Sartre says that, "Existentialism is nothing else than an attempt to draw all the consequences of a coherent atheistic position". The discovery that there is no God and that man is alone, is the beginning of a genuine humanism that dignifies man as the free creature of all values of whatever meaning there is in human existence. Further, he clearly states that existentialism does not ignore the human society and that in taking a decision it decides on behalf of the whole mankind. Existentialism does not aim at plunging man into despair : its final goal is to prepare man through anguish, abandonment and despair for a genuine life, it is basically concerned with the human condition as a complete form of choice. The fundamental issue, therefore, is authentic meaning of life.

## Notes

- (1) Sartre, J.P., *Existentialism and Human* (Methuen, London, 1948).
- (2) Walter Odajnyl, *Marxism and Existentialism* (Garden City, New York, Double day and Comp, Inc, 1965).
- (3) Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time* (Harper Row Publisher, 1962), 68.
- (4) Sartre, Jean Paul, *Being and Nothingness* (Methuen and Company Ltd., London, 1969), 471.
- (5) Sartre, J.P., *Nausea* (Penguin Modern Classics, 1966), 238
- (6) Ibid , 159-160.
- (7) Ibid, 25.