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Prahallad Chandra Biswas
Assistant Professor,
Department of Philosophy, Dr.
B. R. Ambedkar College,
Nadia, West Bengal, India

Choice, responsibility and bad faith in Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy

Prahallad Chandra Biswas

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Abstract

Existentialist philosophy portrays the human being as a being who stands out from the rest of the universe simply by being. Man is a being who is existence rather than possessing it as a property. In his book being and Nothingness, Sartre demonstrated that man is not a self-identical being in the same way that other beings are. All other beings in the world are self-identical entities, meaning they are immobile and closed. They constantly remain what they are, with no prospect of expanding or changing into something different. In contrast to these beings, humans are distinguished by an openness that has a split within it.

Keywords: Human, existence, freedom, anguished, possibility, essence, choice and responsibilities, being and nothingness

Introduction

In this paper, I intend to bring out the exact significance of man as a responsible being as portrayed in Existentialist Philosophy. Here I shall restrict my review mainly to Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy. The human being is portrayed in existentialist philosophy as a being who stands out from the scale of other beings by virtue of his existence. Man is a being who does not possess 'existence as one of his properties but who is existence. Sartre in his 'Being and Nothingness has shown that man is not a self-identical being in the sense in which other beings are self-identical. All other beings of the world are self-identical entities in the sense of being static and closed. They always remain what they are having no possibility of developing or growing (except physical growth of change) into something else. In contrast to these beings, human beings are characterized by a sort of openness- it has a division in itself. He is separated from his being by an abysmal nothingness within him. He is not 'what he is' and is 'what he is not', which means human consciousness does not remain satisfied with 'what it is'-it always aspires for 'what it is not'. His being is always kept as a possibility before him so 'to exist' is 'to live in terms of one's inmost possibilities'. Man, thus always transcends what is given to him.

Man has to strive constantly in order to bring out the exact significance of his being which lies as a 'possibility' before him. The principle that the existing subjective thinker is constantly occupied in striving does not mean that he has a goal towards which he strives and that he will be finished when he has reached his goal. He strives infinitely. He strives ceaselessly because his true being always 'slips off' from him as a 'possibility'. In the quest for his 'being' man has to engender his striving through the act of choice. He has to choose between the alternative courses of action and has to make a constant renewal of his choice or decisiveness so that he can maintain his status as a possible existence. He has to renew his choice because if he ceases to choose, he gets stuck to a point beyond which he can never go and this is very much contrary to the notion of a being who as existence transcends the given state.

The man who thus constantly renews his choice in the process of realising his 'being-as-freedom' finds himself as the maker of his own destiny. Because it is through his acts of choice and decision he determines the course of his life. He discovers that whatever decision he takes he has to decide it all by himself. He cannot appeal to any principle or authority for

Correspondence
Prahallad Chandra Biswas
Assistant Professor,
Department of Philosophy, Dr.
B. R. Ambedkar College,
Nadia, West Bengal, India

his guidance. He is absolutely free from any causal determination or any rational coercion. There is no universal human nature which can causally determine his choice, and neither is there any rational system of values which can justify his choice. Different alternatives are open to man and in his projection of possibilities he bestows values upon these alternatives according to his own choice. Man is indeed born into a social system where there is a given set of values. Regardless of how forcefully this set of values is imposed on the individual, it cannot influence his choice since, even if he chooses to accept them, he has done so freely. Thus, a particular value system because he chooses it for himself. By choosing and creating values for himself man becomes conscious that it is he who has to bear the sole responsibility for making his own destiny. He carries out the weight of responsibility all by himself without there being anything or any person to lighten his weight.

The recognition of the burden of the sole responsibility upon his shoulder leads man to a state of anguish. According to the existentialist thinker's 'anguish' is the mood which discloses before man his true being by revealing his absolute freedom and endless possibility. It is in his anguish man discovers that he is a being who has a constant possibility to outgrow into something else. Man, when becomes aware of his endless possibility in his free projection, feels anguish. According to Kierkegaard's anguish in the face of freedom. Heidegger, on the other hand, holds that anguish is 'the apprehension of nothingness' -in anguish man apprehends his being nothingness. Sartre, in his 'Being and Nothingness', has said that Kierkegaardian description of anguish as anguish in the face of freedom and Heideggerian description of it as an apprehension of nothingness are in fact identical because in man freedom is identical with nothingness. As a free being, man transcends all sorts of determination; hence he is characterized by 'nothingness. He is an unfathomable being who lives in an endless possibility. The apprehension of this fathomlessness of his being and the recognition of his freedom in the face of endless possibilities arouse in man the mood of anguish.

To clarify the nature of anguish Sartre carefully distinguishes anguish from fear-anguish is distinguished from fear in that fear is fear of beings in the world whereas anguish is anguish before myself. A situation provokes fear if there is a possibility of my life being changed from without my being provoked anguish to the extent trust myself and my reaction in that situation. Anguish is anguish before one's own self feels anguish when he realises that there is nothing in him which can determine him. Fear, on the other hand, is fear before something which transcends the self, which has its source in the outer world. A situation causes fear in me if I anticipate my possible danger from without, but it provokes in me anguish when I distrust myself as I do not assuredly say what will be my reaction in a specific situation at the next moment. Again, fear is always directed towards a specific something but anguish is not so specifically directed- it pervades throughout the whole life of the individual. It is the awareness of man's incapability of determining his future. Man's future is in a sense determined because he does not have any prior knowledge about the consequences of his choice, he does not know what his future will reveal to him and what will be his reactions in the face of the coming future. Sartre says that we feel anguish not only in the face of the future but also in the face of the past. He speaks of a gambler who has

taken a resolution not to gamble again, and he does not gamble at present. But he safely avoids the gambling table lest he would break his past resolution. The state of this man can be described in terms of anguish before his past resolution. He is in anguish because of the uncertainty of his possible behaviour. Sartre points out that in his anguish man realises that he is alone in this world-there is none to share his responsibility and to lighten the burden from his shoulder.

Here a question may arise is a man always ready to accept responsibility and thereby suffer anguish by recognizing himself as a possible being? Generally, man cannot bear the tremendous burden of responsibility and the painful suffering of anguish. He tries to flee anguish and responsibility by accepting a mode of existence which is borrowed from the outer world. He makes himself believe that his being is just like the being of an inanimate entity whose fate is determined at the very moment of its production and has no decision. Thus, he loses his individual self and the 'public' self dominates over him. In this state, man fails to recognize his true being and indulges himself to 'live a life' which is not his own. This is a fallen state of existence which is described in existentialist philosophy as an 'inauthentic state of existence'. It is a state in which the individual utterly forgets the true features of his existence. In this state of inauthenticity, man fails to maintain his status as an individual existent. Thus, man loses his power of judgment, his freedom and his individuality. By taking refuge in the average everydayness the individual enjoys some sort of sluggish contentment as he is delivered from the impact of the restlessness engendered by dread.

In his 'Being and Nothingness' Sartre has spoken of a life living in 'bad faith' which directly corresponds to the inauthentic state of man's life. According to Sartre, 'bad faith' is man's 'negative attitude with respect to himself'. In this respect, bad faith resembles lying which is also a negative attitude. The essence of the lie implies in fact that the liar actually is in complete possession of the truth that he is hiding. By the lie, consciousness affirms that it exists by nature as hidden from the other. To be sure one who practices bad faith is hiding a truth or presenting as truth a displeasing pleasing untruth. Thus, both in lying and bad faith a truth is hidden of which consciousness has full knowledge but whereas in lying the truth is hidden from the other person, in bad faith it is hidden from one's own self. Sartre has given a very beautiful example of bad faith in his 'Being and Nothingness'. He has told us about a young woman who has gone to a cafe with a gentleman. The woman knows very well that the gentleman has fallen in love with her and he may propose to her that very day, but she does not want to come to a final decision so quickly. So, she tries to keep her companion engaged in an intellectual conversation connected with everything under the sun except any personal discussion regarding herself. When her companion takes her hand in between his warm hands she just ignores it. She rests her hand in his as if it were an inert thing 'neither consenting nor resisting'. This attitude of the young woman has been described by Sartre as 'bad faith'. She is in bad faith because she is trying to hide from her the very truth of which she is well aware and thus hiding she simply avoids the responsibility of making a decision. She pretends to herself that she is all intellect and is thus lying to herself.

Sartre points out that consciousness in spite of being translucent can manage to maintain 'bad faith' by a special mechanism of transcendence facticity. Man is a combination of facticity and transcendence-facticity is that which exists at present as a real fact for him and transcendence is that which exists as a possibility for him. In bad faith, man wilfully affirms his facticity as being transcendence and his 'transcendence' as being his 'facticity' and thus tries to flee from the responsibility that a situation calls forth from him. In the above example of the woman given by Sartre, the woman is well aware of the truth that her companion enjoys her company not because of her intellectual capacity but because of her loving appearance. Yet she hides the truth from herself by making herself believe that her companion desires her company only because he appreciates her intellectual conversation. Here she is capable of lying to herself with the help of the mechanism of transcendence-facticity. Similarly, she wants to take the 'transcendence' as 'facticity'. Her admirer's respect for her intellectual conversation is at this moment a mere transcendence for her but she tries to make herself believe that this transcendence now exists for her as her facticity. Thus, she manages to hide the real truth and is in bad faith.

There is indeed some sense of security and contentment in this inauthentic state of existence. But does man always remain oblivious of his true being This can never be the case because man is not an unconscious thing-like entity. He is a conscious being who is fraught with possibility. So, in spite of his strong inclination to live the inactive life of an inanimate being, he has every possibility to become aware of his status as a 'possible existent' who has to live by making choices and decisions. Now the question is how can man become aware of his true being as a decisive agent? We have seen that according to the existentialists, the mood of 'angst' or 'dread' makes man aware of his true being. Heidegger thinks that the awareness of the possibilities of impending 'death ensures the manifestation of angst before the man who has been lost in 'inauthenticity'. Moreover, Heidegger also adds that this awareness of impending death is ultimately responsible for the call of conscience in man which raises in him a sense of extreme guilt for neglecting his responsibilities as a free being and helps him to realise his being-as-freedom and thus compels him to live an authentic life. Sartre, however, thinks that death is an insignificant phenomenon for man. Man does not have to live with an awareness of his death. It is not the awareness of death but the anguish of freedom that makes man conscious of his lost self. When man discovers his endless possibility and freedom, he feels anguish and his authenticity lies in his acceptance of this suffering of anguish and the recognition of his responsibility as a decisive being.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear to us that 'authenticity' consists of having a true awareness of one's being as a possibility, accepting full responsibilities and risks involved therein, and agreeing to live a subjective life of decisiveness. An authentic man must accept the demands of his facticity upon him, he should not include the brute facts of his existence but at the same time should recognise his status as a transcending being who by virtue of his free choice can shape the givenness of his situation and thus transcend the boundary which seems to pose a limit upon him. Such a man has the courage to face his situation which the inauthentic man does not dare to face. The authentic

man is one who thus lives his freedom in no way allows himself to be carried away by the crowd mentality. He strives to maintain the uniqueness of his being in and through the attraction of the 'ownliness of the choice'.

The notion of authenticity will show us that it cannot lead to a state of alienation. The authentic man is one who is a responsible man. The logic of the word 'responsible' is such that it hooks the notion of others. Existentialism tells every man to become responsible towards himself in and through his choices and decisions. Man, always chooses in a situation where there are others. So, whenever he chooses for himself, he cannot help avoiding consideration for others who are there in his situation. In choosing for himself he also chooses for others because whereby he chooses something he thrusts a model which could possibly be obtained by his fellowmen. Thus, his responsibility towards himself in fact has a greater implication -it involves consideration for others. No doubt man is free to choose and to act accordingly but he is not free to do everything he likes to do because as Sartre points out one ought to ask oneself what would happen if everyone did as one is doing. Thus, the moment he becomes tempted to perform an act which would create inconvenience for others: for example, stealing, he would always consider what would happen. if everyone follows his steps. This consideration will act as a check upon his action. Here Sartre's tone sounds very much like Kant's.

We may now state that, in existentialist philosophy, the duty of an authentic man is not the same as the responsibility of an alienated man in light of the debate above. Humanity is a "being-in-the-world" in which other beings with similar statures are encountered. Hence, man cannot eradicate the people who are inherently linked to him in his quest for authenticity. Rather than engaging in a dispute with other guys, he needs to endeavour to establish a fresh bond with his fellow men. Sartre realises this point and so in his essay 'Existentialism and Humanism' he has tried to solve the problem of alienation and this attempt on his part is really appreciable. Whether he has been able to solve this problem is a different question but what his attempt proves is that to call existentialism a Philosophy of alienated man is not justified.

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