

JEAN PAUL SARTRE AND THE CONCEPT OF DETERMINISM

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ABSTRACT

Existentialism lays stress on the existence of humans and Sartre believes 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 since 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 has no escape from anxiety and fear. Sartre says that existentialism does not aim at plunging man into despair,; but rather its final goal is to prepare man through anguish, abandonment and despair for a genuine life. Existentialism is basically concerned with the human condition as a complete form of choice. The fundamental issue therefore, is an authentic meaning of human life. But our argument is that there are various elements that determine the actions of man contrary to Sartre view that man is condemned to be free. Such elements include among others; psychological factors, aggressive drives, instinctive drives, environmental factors, historical factor etc. This position establishes that existentialism goes beyond the limit of chance and uncertainty as emphasized by Sartre.

KEYWORDS: Human existence, Freedom, Choice, Responsibility, Determinism, Human Life.

INTRODUCTION

The primary task of this paper is to explore the various attempts to explain the deterministic elements in Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism. I shall equally examine the views of other theorists of Human nature and their deterministic interpretations about the nature of man aside the existentialist conception that the only attribute of human nature is freedom. Some of these theorists include; Sigmund Freud, Konrad Lorenz, B.F. Skinner and Karl Marx to mention but a few. Finally, the paper shall discuss the contributions of Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism to the growth of knowledge.

Elements of Determinism in Jean Paul Sartre's Existentialism

In one sense, Jean Paul Sartre (an existentialist and a French philosopher) would deny that there is any such thing as "human nature" except freedom. Existentialism is the view or philosophy that only man exists in the world,

all other things are but do not exist. Jean Paul Sartre has expressed this by saying that man's existence precedes his essence; and that we have not been created for any purpose, neither by God nor evolution nor anything else. (Sartre, 1969-438).

We (man) simply find ourselves existing, and then have to decode what to make of ourselves. From the outset, Jean Paul Sartre refuses to accept anything other than existence precedes essence and this informs his view that God's existence is a contradiction. Like Nietzsche, he holds the absence of God to be of utmost importance for mankind. As Dostoevsky once put it, if God does not exist, everything is permitted. There are no transcendent or objective values set for man, neither laws of God nor Platonic Forms nor anything else. There is no ultimate meaning or purpose inherent in human life; in this sense, life is 'absurd', man is 'forlorn', 'abandoned' in the world to look after himself completely. J.P. Sartre insists that the only foundation for values is human freedom, and that

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there can be no external or objective justification for the values anyone chooses to adopt. (Sartre, 1985:93).

Jean Paul Sartre made some general statements about the human condition. His central assertion is of course that man is condemned to be free; there is no limit to our freedom except that we are not free to cease being free (Sartre, 1999:2). He reaches the conclusion that the only attribute of human nature is freedom via his notion of consciousness that consciousness is always conscious of something and can never be empty. He spoke of freedom in purely negative terms like nothingness, which lies at the heart of man like a 'worm' and says that the crucial role of this nothingness is to make a conceptual connection between consciousness and freedom. For, the ability to conceive of what is not the case is the freedom to imagine other possibilities, the freedom to suspend judgment.

However, our day to day experiences most often suggest that as human beings, we have the ability to decide, deliberate and conclude on what actions to perform, what decision to make at different times under different situations and circumstances. Thus, choice of actions are being made and expected to be made by individuals. But the question is, is man totally or absolutely free without any elements or factors that determine the choice of these actions? Or is man absolutely free as J. P. Sartre would want us to believe? Of course, there are various factors or elements that militate against human freedom contrary to J. P. Sartre's view that man is condemned to be free and that there is no escape from this condemnation. These factors will be examined in the later part of this paper.

Determinism is against the theory or statement that man is free and that he uses his freedom the way he pleases. More often than not, the determinists do assert that "human freedom is an illusion and that all human actions are caused or determined by certain forces" (Hospers 1970:332). In other words, whatever that happens in the universe at some specific moments is the outcome of something that has happened at a previous time, which means that the present is always determined by the past. According to Ebun Oduwale, "determinism is the principle of universal causality" (Oduwale, 1997:245) i.e determinism is said to be a presupposition of all intelligent explanations.

Since, it is believed that determinism is not compatible with freedom, that is, there is no meaningful sense in which we can say that we are free if determinism holds that every event is

caused by prior event, and then every human action follows from a prior cause. In other words, we have no control over what we choose; and that our choices are determined.

J. P. Sartre asserts that 'Anguish', the consciousness of our freedom is painful, and we typically try to avoid it. But such 'escape' is illusory, for it is a necessary truth that we are free. Such is J. P. Sartre's diagnosis of man's condition. The crucial concept in Sartre's diagnosis is that of 'self deception' or 'bad faith' – "an attempt to escape anguish by pretending to ourselves that we are not free" (Sartre, 1969:440). But our attitudes and actions are determined by our character, our situation, and our role in life or anything other than ourselves. Therefore, man is not free completely or absolutely as J. P. Sartre exaggerates.

Sigmund Freud is of the Opinion that all phenomena are determined by the laws of physics and chemistry, and then even man himself is a product of natural evolution, ultimately subject to the same laws contrary to Sartre's view that man is neither created by God nor by evolution. Freud argues that there are many factors that determine man's freedom like 'instinctive drives' that are internal in man, psychological factors like environment, parental influences, hereditary endowment and some genetic variants which deny the action of man and his freedom. (Freud, 1980:171).

J. P. Sartre gives two famous examples of bad faith. The first is that of a girl sitting with a man who she knows very well would like to seduce her. But when he takes her hand, she tried to avoid him by pretending not to notice, leaving her hand in his as if she were not aware of it. She pretend to herself that she is a passive object, a thing rather than what she really is, a conscious being who is free. Can we really say that girl is absolutely free? The second illustration is of the café waiter who is doing his job just a little too keenly; he is obviously 'acting the part'. If there is bad faith here, it is that he is trying to identify himself completely with the role of waiter, to pretend this particular role determines his very action and attitude. While he has chosen to take on the job, and he is free to give up at anytime. He is not essentially a waiter, for no man is essentially anything? (Sartre, 1969:50).

J. P. Sartre believes that man is free to choose and whatever choice he makes, he must be responsible for the outcome. But B. F. Skinner is of the opinion that man is not free absolutely as Sartre would want us to agree. B. F. Skinner is of the opinion that genetic factors influence and

determine the actions of man because they cannot be manipulation. He further posits that;

There are two things that determine the action of man; that human behaviour is governed by scientific laws of some kind; i.e. our behaviours are determined. And the second is that those laws state the causal connections between environmental factors and human behaviour. (Skinner, 1985:96).

For example, if I intend to perform an action despite the fact that I am free to perform or not to perform such an act, there are some internal factors or dispositions that will still militate against my freedom to carry it out or not either seen or unseen. But the question is do we have to assume that all human actions or behaviours are governed by casual laws? B.F. Skinner equally believes that all human behaviours are a function of environmental variables (past or present) i.e. is the mechanism, of conditioning that determine the action of man (ibid).

All what J. P. Sartre calls bad faith in terms of unconscious mental states are what Freud will describe as examples of repression in the case of the girl, she is repressing the knowledge that her companion has made a sexual advance to her. In the case of the waiter, he is repressing the knowledge that he is a free agent who does not have to continue acting as a waiter a moment longer than he wants to be. (Sartre, 1969:441).

Konrad Lorenz, equally a theorist of Human Nature, holds that man's actions or behaviours are determined by "hereditary coordinations" or instinctive movements which are innate rather than learned and these causes behaviours or actions spontaneously. (Lorenz, 1980:220). Konrad Lorenz further stressed that human beings like other animals have an innate drive to aggressive behaviour toward our own species. (ibid: 221). He believes that this is the only possible explanation of the conflict and wars throughout all human history, of the continuing of unreasonable behaviour of supposedly reasonable beings. Thus, Lorenz explains the existence of what he calls "Militant enthusiasm" in which a human crowd can become excitedly aggressive and lose all rationality and moral inhibitions, and these to a great extent determine the actions of man in the world. But the question is how essential are these aggressive drives or forces to the make up of man or human personality? Konrad Lorenz answered the

question by saying that if we eliminate aggression, we might destroy at the same time many of the highest forms of human achievement. (ibid). Lorenz concluded that it is this instinctive drives of aggression that contributes to the denial of human freedom contrary to J. P. Sartre's view that man is free absolutely.

J. P. Sartre equally goes to suggest that sincerity, the antithesis of bad faith, presents just as much of a conceptual problem. For as soon as we describe ourselves in some way (e.g. I am a water), by the very act, a distinction is made between the self doing, the describing and the self described, the ideal of complete sincerity seems doomed to failure, for we can never be just objects to be observed and accurately described. (Sartre, 1980:97)

Equally, contrary to the view of J. P. Sartre that man's place, death, environment, existence of others etc. have no role in man's life is the view of Karl Marx that human nature is determined by historical events and economic or productive forces". (Marx, 1980:190). To Karl Marx, history moves in the direction dictated by productive and economic forces and this determines man's action in the society. Our past, place, death, environment and the existence of others influence the choice of actions that man makes. Our past achievement as well as failures occupy dominant positions on both our present and future actions. This is because my success or failure in the past determines the kind of project or action I embark on, the help I render to the public and in fact, my plans for the present as well as for the future and the new approaches to adopt to escape the pitfalls of the past. (ibid: 191). Karl Marx concludes by saying that the nature of individual thus depends on the material conditions that determine his production.

John Hospers, in one of his articles titled, "Human Beings as controlled puppets" argued that;

Man has been molded by influences which in large measure at least determine his behaviour; this is to say that man is literally the product of these influences stemming from periods prior to his years of discretion giving him a host of character traits that cannot be changed even if he would. (Hospers, 1994:725)

This informs the saying of some philosophers that man is not the master of his fate. Hospers, therefore, says that the influence of

man's environment is a factor that man has no control over and he liken man to a machine which cannot act freely unless to the deterministic purposes with which it is constructed or manufactured.

It is on this note we want to conclude with the assertion of Ndubuisi that since man is not the master of his fate, in every respect because there are many things that we want to do but since nature is more powerful than man, he is unable to do such things, men cannot disobey the laws of nature without the danger of reprisals. (Ndubuisi, 2000:129). The choice that man makes which made J. P. Sartre to believe that man is free is nothing but a determined choice. It is in fact a choice or a freedom based, most of the times, on deterministic tenets.

The Contribution of J.P. Sartre's Existentialism to Knowledge

The philosophy of J.P. Sartre, that is, his existentialism contributes to knowledge in various ways. The philosophy no doubt has made a remarkable and an indelible mark or landmark in the area of human freedom because J. P. Sartre discusses the issue of human freedom more than any other existentialist philosopher thereby bringing existentialism to its logical conclusion.

It is worthy to note that J.P. Sartre's philosophy shows how deceptive man could be most times, since, it is a fact that man always resort to cheap excuses even in the face of an action he carried out willingly. In this kind of situation, man tries to blame his misdemeanor on one force or another. But he that was fully responsible for such will refuse to take blame for his shortcomings. This is where Sartre's idea of bad faith or self deception is most useful.

J.P. Sartre equally made frantic effort to defend the concept of freedom. In this regard, obstacles are not enough to stop man's projects because, according to him, there is freedom only in the resisting world; freedom is the freedom to change our environment, to surmount obstacles. Also, his inflated belief in man's capability blinded him to the realities of the limitations of man in the exercise of his freedom. Hence, he fails to see some crucial factors that determine man's action which obviously enslave their freedom. (Ibid: 130)

J.P. Sartre's philosophy equally contributes to knowledge by emphasizing that man has to pattern his life the way he pleases, for according to him, each man has a virgin future which he is expected to fill by his action" (Ibid). the philosophy no doubt breeds hope, courage and optimism which show that it is man alone

that gives meaning to his life, and this is done with the type of action one undertakes in life. According to Sartre, each man has a virgin future which he is expected to fill by his action, so our failures and successes can only be traced to us not to any force seen or unseen. The realization of this fact will obviously push man to action for it is only man's action that constitutes his personality.

The existentialist philosophy of Sartre also contribute to knowledge by showing man that, the dark side of life such as sickness, disease, accident, earthquakes and other natural disasters are real. It also declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectively. He equally recommends authenticity, meaning that the individual choices are always with full awareness and that nothing determines them for us. We must accept our responsibility for everything about ourselves, not just our actions alone but our attitudes, our emotions and even our character.

Sartre equally repudiates the view that there are objective values in the World thereby making man to have a 'spirit of seriousness' which is the illusion that values are objective in the world. Thus, there is no escape from the anguish of freedom; to flee responsibility is itself a choice. The philosophy however prepares man through anguish, abandonment, and despair for a genuine life. The philosophy is basically concerned with the human condition as a complete from of choice which shows that the fundamental issue is the authentic meaning of life.

Finally, because of his atheism, Sartre says that man is alone in the world, for not only is there no God to share the burden, but that there is no structure a –prior for values to rest upon and this makes the philosophy pessimistic.

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