

Fourth Chapter

Sartre's Approach to Freedom

Human freedom undoubtedly is one of the most fundamental ideas that have driven the development of modern societies in the last few hundred years. Freedom is taught in schools as one of the essential aspects of human life, and lack of freedom is thought to be a reason for meddling in the affairs of others. In our modern life, rarely does something as fundamental as freedom emerge as a contentious issue, and rarer still does it get redefined.

Many philosophers have discussed the concept of human freedom for many centuries. In the West, the theistic religious paradigm deeply influenced the process of this discourse. Eastern thinkers, in most cases free from the West's monotheistic dominance, developed complex explanations of 'the self' and its freedom in society and natural world. It was not until the nineteenth and twentieth century that a 'way of knowing' investigated the problem of radical freedom in an intense manner.

This 'way', labeled Existentialism, is not a formal systematic philosophy as such. As Kaufmann remarks: 'The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of anybody of beliefs whatever and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life-that is the heart of existentialism.'²²

The most celebrated existentialist Jean-Paul-Charles-Aymard Sartre was born in Paris on June 21, 1905. His father died the year after Jean Paul was born. In his autobiography, *Les Mots (the Words)*, Sartre wrote that the death of his father 'was the great event of my life'.²³ His life, without the burden of parental pressure, has possessed certain 'lightness'. Sartre writes, 'I willingly subscribe to the verdict of an eminent psychoanalyst. I have no superego.' The death of Jean- Baptiste, his father 'returned my mother to her chains and gave me freedom'.²⁴ In that time he first feels in his heart what freedom is.

'Man is condemned to be free' – this statement by Sartre both in his major work, *Being and Nothingness* and famous talk *Existentialism is a Humanism* has profound implications for all human beings. It involves such aspects of human existence as: freewill and determinism: moral values: the notion of God: and relationship with others.

Fundamental to Sartre's whole philosophy is his insistence that 'existence precedes essence' in the human being. He uses the analogy of artisan creating a utilitarian object such as a paper-knife to show that non-conscious objects are made with an inbuilt essence.

Descartes' view on freedom: According to Sartre "Man does not exist *first* in order to be free *subsequently*: there is no difference between being man and his *being free*."²⁵ So, he thinks that consciousness exists in temporal dimensions. Temporalizations of consciousness are possible because consciousness is free. Rather, freedom is the internalization of temporalization, because consciousness is freedom.

Sartre thinks that the concept of freedom primarily understood by Descartes. For him freedom depends on the rationality of the universe. Finite human being could not produce 'ex nihilo'. He had the freedom to accept the necessary order of the world by his understanding. But this was not all. He had the power to say "no" if in some cases his reason was not satisfied with the evidence to give his assent to what was thought to be necessary. This refusal to accept something which would be considered false is the essence of Cartesian freedom. Man's nature being finite, had the freedom, to agree with the divine order of things. Of course, he did it with

his power of reason. This freedom also includes the fact that the truths discovered by man are possible by the freedom of understanding.

Descartes was more interested in affirming the responsibility of man in the presence of the true. Before we make a judgment, in which we adhere to our will and make a free commitment of our being, there exist only neutral and floating ideas which are neither true nor false. Sartre says, “Man is thus the being through whom truth appears in the world. His task is to commit himself totally in order of existents may become an order of truths.”²⁶

Descartes shows that freedom does not come from man as he is, as a fullness of existence among other fullness in a world without lacunae, but rather from man as he is not, from man as a finite, limited being. But he did not push his theory of negativity to the limit, for truth consists in *being* and falsehood in *non-being*. Man’s power of refusal lies only in saying ‘no’ to non-being. We are able to withhold our assent to the works of the evil spirit, because they are not, in so far as they relate falsely to objects that do not exist. Cartesian freedom wavers between the identification of freedom with ----- negativity or negation of being and the conception of free will as a simple negation of negation.

It is a strange freedom, as it ends decomposing into two phases. At first, it is a negative one and autonomous, but its activity is confined to refusing our assent to error or confused thought. In the second, it is a positive adherence, but the will then loses its autonomy. The perfect clarity of understanding penetrates and determines the will. But it cannot be denied that Descartes had a true intuition of freedom, which he was forced to reduce to a merely negative power. Its function consisted merely in denying itself until it finally yielded and abandoned itself to the divine solicitude.

The Cartesian ideal of freedom – that human freedom is autonomous and its nature consists in negating being – finds its fulfillment in Sartre. According to him, the rise of man in the midst of being causes a world to be discovered. The most important element of this rise is negation, and “Man is the being through whom nothingness comes to the world”.²⁷ In other words, the being that conditions the appearance of nothingness is freedom. The condition due to which human reality can deny the whole or part of the world is that human reality carries within itself the nothingness which separates its present from the past. Consciousness constitutes itself in relation to its past separated from the past by a nothingness. Sartre express this condition in his metaphorical language: “Freedom is the human being putting his past out of play by secreting his own nothingness.....; Consciousness continually experiences itself as the nihilation of the past being.”²⁸

Concept of action: we shall try to give an exposition of Sartre's idea of freedom as it expresses the ontological dimension of consciousness. Sartre maintains that freedom can be best understood by analyzing the structure of action.

Nicolai Berdyaev, the Russian Existentialist says that the problem regarding freedom is that the traditional philosophers have objectified freedom. To treat something as an object is to believe that it can be perceived, investigated and proved or disproved from outside. But for Kant freedom is not to be proved rather it is the postulate of action. Existentialists take self as an agent rather than a subject. Agent is one who acts.

Existentialist philosophers take action in its inclusive sense. Gabriel Marcel distinguishes between exclusive and inclusive senses of action. In its exclusive sense, action is taken as outer act and human beings are only 'functional man' in this sense. Functional man, reduced to a factor in the empirical, social reality, is deprived of mystery, dignity, personhood and humanity itself. Thus, action in its exclusive sense is mere function of activism. In the inclusive sense action includes both thought and passion. The existentialist concept of action embraces within itself the whole mystery of human existence. Sartre adds some more to this concept of action. According to him, to act is to modify the shape of the world; it is to arrange means to view of an end. An action is on principle intentional. Secondly, the action necessarily implies as its condition the recognition of 'desideratum', i.e.

an objective lack. Finally he says, the issue between determinist and in determinist is that the later are concerned to find cases of decision for which there exist no prior cause and the former that there is no action without a cause. Sartre says that to speak of an act which would lack intentional structure that is the necessary feature of every act. Thus an act cannot be said to be directed towards nothing. The end is the 'cause' that exists prior to the act as a lack. Sartre writes: "The essential question lies beyond the complex organization "cause-intention-act-end", indeed we ought to ask how a cause (or motive) can be constituted as such."²⁹

In 1943, when *Being and Nothingness* was published, Sartre considered the philosophy of action to be essentially undeveloped, a view which - given that the major available work in this domain in French was Blondel's *L'Action* of 1893 - seems plausible enough. But such a philosophy was especially needed at that time as a propeadeutic to morality and the philosophy of freedom, because the dominant problems of the moments were problems of the possibility and authenticity of action.

The essential characteristics of action, as Sartre sees it is that it is always intentional and that it always responds to a lack. The latter implies that every action is a venture into non-being. It follows at the same time that no actual state of affairs can determine an action, that as such it cannot even determine that we

should see in it the lack that might lead to action. The latter part of *Being and Nothingness* is devoted to an analysis of ‘doing’ and ‘having’ in their relation to ‘being’, as they depend on and challenge the freedom of the for-itself and constitutes its project, i.e., its conscious intentionality towards the future. The book ends with a section entitled ‘Ethical Implications’ and the promise of a work consecrated to the problem of morality.

“Sartre has already pointed out that if negation comes into the world through human activity, the latter must be a being capable of realizing a “nihilating rupture with the world and with himself.” The permanent possibility of this rupture is freedom. This implies for man a particular type of existence such that human reality is its own nothingness, and for it to be is to nihilate the in-itself which it is. It is because of this that the for-itself has to be what it is not.”³⁰ For Sartre “to say that it is what it is not while not being what it is, to say that in it, existence precedes and conditions essence”.³¹

Above discussion implies that man is free. If the for-itself wishes to hide its own nothingness from itself and to incorporate the in-itself as its true mode of being, it tries to hide freedom from itself. This is what happens in the determinist’s attempt to explain the human action as an unbroken chain of causes.

Sartre states that human reality is free, because it is not full and sufficient like in-itself, which he expresses in other words, that it is not enough. As man is complete, man has a possibility and he has the power to choose. As Sartre says, “Freedom is precisely the nothingness which is *made-to-be* at the heart of man and which forces human reality to *make itself* instead of *to be*.”³² For human reality, to be is to choose oneself. Thus, freedom is not a being; it is the nothingness of being. Sartre makes an emphatic statement. “Man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all.”³³

Concept of freedom: Sartre, in analyzing the relation between cause, motive and end, points out that the cause is characterized as the objective appreciation of the situation. Sartre means by cause the objective appreciation of the situation. It is an ensemble of factors that are utilized by the agent. For example, in Macbeth’s murder of the king, the factual conditions were such as Macbeth could make use of them. But the objective situation could be considered as cause only in the light of an end. Sartre says, “We shall therefore use the term *cause* for the objective apprehension of a determined situation as this situation is revealed in the light of a certain end as being able to serve as the means for attaining this end”.³⁴

On the other hand the motive is generally contemplated as a subjective matter. It is the ensemble of the desires, emotions and passions which urge us to accomplish

certain act. It is true that the cause is objective, as the state of contemporary things revealed to a consciousness. But this state of affairs can be revealed only to a for-itself, since in general the for-itself is the being for which there is a world.

Here cause can be used as the objective situation, when it is possible to go beyond a particular potentiality. This potentiality is revealed only if the situation is transcending towards a state of things that does not exist yet. Thus the cause, instead of determining the action, arises only in and through the project of an action. It is now possible to understand the relations of these three terms: cause, motive and end.

According to Sartre “just as it is the upsurge of the for-itself which causes there to be a world, so here it is the very being of the for- itself --- in so far as the being is a pure project toward an end- which causes there to be a certain objective structure of the world, one which deserves the name of cause in the light of this end.”³⁵ “The for-itself is the consciousness of this cause. But this is a positional consciousness which is at the same time a non-thetic consciousness of itself as project toward an end. In this sense, it is a motive, as it experiences itself non-thetically as a project at the very moment at which it reveals the organization of the world as causes. Cause and motive are the correlatives, just as the non-thetic self-consciousness is the ontological correlate of the thetic consciousness of the object.”³⁶ It means that freedom actually presupposes the being of for-itself. It is free to the exact extent

that it has to be its own nothingness, first, by temporalizing itself i.e., by remaining at a distance from itself, so that it can never let itself be determined by a past to perform this or that act: by rising up as consciousness of something and (of) itself, and finally by being a transcendence, i.e., a project. But this does not mean that every act is capricious. Each of our act is entirely free in the sense of being understood in the light of the project of the for-itself. But this does not mean that our act can be anything whatsoever or that it is unforeseeable.

Common opinion does not hold that to be free means only to choose oneself. A choice is to be free if it is such that what it is. For example, in starting out in a Cricket match, one player or batsman become fatigued and he gave up (retired) the match. Someone can point out that he was free and so could have succeeded in resisting his fatigue. The problem is to be formulated like this: could he have done otherwise without perceptibly modifying the organic totality of the project which he is?

The fatigue by itself could not provoke his decision. Fatigue is the way in which exist his body and it is the very facticity of his consciousness. As he played the full match, the surrounding world that is revealed to him is the object of his consciousness. To the extent that he appreciates the match with his eyes, his legs, etc. he has a non-positional consciousness of his body which directs his relations

with the world and establishes his engagement in the world, in the form of fatigue. As he suffers the fatigue, it appears tolerable or intolerable. It is the reflective for-itself which, rising up, suffers the fatigue as intolerable. What decision he takes under the condition of fatigue is to be understood in the perspective of a larger choice. His other co-players are also fatigued, but if they decide to go on, their fatigue is lived in a vaster project of sweet mastery and appreciation of the match. It is only by means of this project that the fatigue will be understandable and that it will have meaning for them.

Like Freud, Sartre thinks that an act cannot be limited to itself; it refers to more profound structures. According to Freud, act is symbolic. It expresses more profound desires which can be interpreted only in terms of an initial determination of the subject's libido. But Freud, though he avoids the theory of interpreting the action by mere antecedently circumstances, aims at constituting a deeper determinism. The ultimate cause in Freudian psychology being the libido, it seems that Freud has free himself from what is known as horizontal determinism in which each action is determined by the previous circumstances, just as in the case of natural events. But the libido being dependent on the historical situation remains rooted in the horizontal determinism. Freud explains all action in terms of the past complexes, and so the dimension of the future does not exist for psycho-analysis. Sartre wants to understand every act "integrated as a secondary structure in a

global structure and finally in the totality which I am.”³⁷ Let us return to the question which was asked earlier: could he have done otherwise than yielding to fatigue? Sartre answers that the act was not gratuitous, because it has to be interpreted in terms of an original project of which it formed one integral part. Thus, it is evident that the act could not have been modified without at the same time supposing a fundamental modification of his original project. “Thus this-possible-to stop-theoretically takes on its meaning only in and through the hierarchy of the possible which I am in terms of the ultimate and initial possible.”³⁸ this does not mean that it is necessary for him to stop, but merely that he can refuse to stop only by a radical conversion of his being-in-the-world.

Sartre’s ethical view, in his existentialist period, rests on his concept of freedom. The fact of the freedom of the for-itself, he says in a famous passage, has serious consequences for human destiny: “man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being. We are taking the word ‘responsibility’ in its ordinary sense as ‘consciousness [of] being the incontestable author of an event or of an object.’ In this sense the responsibility of the for-itself is overwhelming since he is the one by whom it happens that *there is* a world; since he is also the one who makes himself be, then whatever may be the situation in which he finds himself, the for-itself must wholly assume this situation with its peculiar coefficient of

adversity, even though it be insupportable. He must assume the situations with the proud consciousness of being the author of it, for the very worst disadvantages or the worst threats which can endanger my person have meaning only in and through my project; and it is on the ground of the engagement which I am that they appear.”³⁹

Freedom is not a *capacity* of the for-itself, but rather a *state*; it arises out of the negation which at once joins and separates the for-itself to and from the in-itself that surrounds it. Freedom is the condition of being undetermined and undeterminable. The breach of determination which the ontological status of the for-itself ensure protects us not only from our present situation but also from our own past. This past, however, includes our motives for action, and this makes action itself a perpetually hazardous, but a perpetually exciting, affair. Not that an action may not proceed conformably with our motives- but it cannot be bound by them. Freedom from this particular form of determination is not a right on the exercise of which we can congratulate our self- to assume this would be to get the whole thing backwards: “it is not *because* I am free that my act is not subject to the determination of motives; on the contrary, the structure of motives as ineffective is the condition of my freedom”⁴⁰. In fact this state of affairs is very unsettling, because it prevents us from being sure as to our own future intentions. If we from a project, we cannot necessarily count on ourselves to carry it through, and this

uncertainty is a source of anguish. It is, says Sartre, as if “I make an appointment with myself..... Anguish is the fear of not finding myself at that appointment, of no longer even wishing to bring myself there”.⁴¹ Here we see once again, the emergence of bad faith- but the bad faith does not lie in not keeping the appointment with oneself, it lies in the denial of the possibility that one might not keep it. For human being must allow their future self the freedom to be something other than what their present self projects for it. This necessarily follows from the simple fact that every human beings are for-itself not an in-itself.

What Sartre calls ‘original freedom’ is, therefore, nothing other than the presupposition less and undetermined upsurge of the for-itself in every moment of our life. Hence it cannot be represented as a prelude to action, in the sense of something going temporally before- rather it constitutes the foundation for action, whether voluntary or passionate. Sartre differs from many moral philosophers in refusing to oppose will and passion to one another; they differ in manner, to be sure, but may serve the same ends, which neither creates. One man flies in panic for his life, another reason that would be better to hold firm, but the fact that the former is governed by his passion and the latter by his will does not mean that one subscribes more fully than the other to the value of life as something to be preserved. It is almost as if will could be regarded as passion exercised calmly, passion as will out of control.

The truth of human freedom, we might say, is to turn spontaneity into project, to accept contingency and to ride it, as it were, rather as one might ride a wave. It is in effect to choose the contingency one is with its various possibilities, primary and secondary. Freedom itself antedates this truth- it is not that we are human and choose and are therefore free, but that we are free and therefore human and must choose. To be free does not mean, Sartre insists, even if they remain unfulfilled, one chooses the world but that one chooses oneself in the world. The resulting doctrine has a familiar ambiguity: on the one hand we are projected into the world. On the other we make our own project in it; on the one hand we are freedom as a negation of determination, on the other we must be freedom as a determination of negation.