

***EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM: A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION***

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freedom, Sartre, existentialism, being-in-itself, being-for-itself, self-determination, condemned to be free.

**Abstract:**

This paper is an ontological investigation into Sartre's concept of radical freedom. It includes a brief background on the nature of Existentialism. Various texts, *Being and Nothingness; Existentialism Is a Humanism; The Bhagavad-Gita* and some of Sartre's literary works are critically discussed.

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 the natural world. "Ways of knowing" such as Confucianism, Zen and Madhyamika Buddhism are some examples.

It was not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that a "way of knowing" investigated the problem of radical freedom in an intense manner. This way, labelled 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 any body 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 (Kaufmann, 1975 p.12.)*

Of the many writers and philosophers whose work expounds existential ideas, only Kierkegaard and Sartre actually used the term existentialism in relation

to their own work. In this paper I discuss the concept of human freedom as developed by Jean Paul Sartre. "Man is condemned to be free!", this statement by Sartre both in his major philosophical work, "Being and Nothingness"(BN) and his famous talk, "Existentialism is a Humanism" has profound implications for all human beings. It involves such aspects of human existence as: free will and determinism; moral values; the notion of God; and relationships with others.

Before discussing freedom specifically I will look at two of Sartre's basic premises: "existence precedes essence"; and his division of the world into two distinct categories, *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*. I believe an understanding of these two concepts is necessary to fully appreciate the profundity of, "man is condemned to be free". Fundamental to Sartre's whole philosophy is his insistence that "existence precedes essence" in the human being. He uses the analogy of an artisan creating a utilitarian object such as a paper-knife to show that non-conscious objects are made (or exist, such as a rock) with an inbuilt essence. This essence or nature determines their life and consequently they are not free to act otherwise. Similarly if a human is created by God, (a supernal artisan) then the human's essence has been determined (Kaufmann 1975, p.348).

In the view of Leibniz, "God determined each man's essence and then left him to act freely in accordance with the demands of his essence". Sartre rejects this as freedom and argues that if Leibniz is correct then humans are determined in "one original gesture" (BN xxix).

May describes Sartre's statement as, "...man is a being of whom no essence can be affirmed, for such an essence would introduce a permanent element, contradictory to man's power of transforming himself indefinitely". He then points out however, that man does have an essence, which is his, "...power to create himself" (May 1969, p.13). May then hints at ways of discovering how this power is possible. I believe this criticism qualifies Sartre's statement not contradicts it. For Sartre however, since there is no pre-established pattern for human nature, "...each man makes his essence as he lives" (BN 630).

Sartre's classification of existence and essence gives rise to his categorization of all things into a duality. Firstly, Being-in-itself. This group of *things* such as rocks, trees and paper-knives have the following characteristics: they are not free; not responsible; have a determined essence (therefore are caused); and are fixed and complete. In contrast to these non-conscious objects is the second category, Being-for-itself. These conscious *subjects* are characterised by: being free; responsible for themselves; have no determined essence and therefore are not caused; are not fixed and can never be complete (Images (a) 1986 p.17).

I think it is important to note that Sartre's use of consciousness does not simply mean awareness but self-reflective awareness. Warnock also mentions this minor, though important point (Warnock, 1967 pp.18-23). Sartre's duality of non-conscious objects and (self) conscious subjects is the basis of his assertion that only self-conscious subjects, *human beings*, can be free.

Sartre not only insists that humans are free, free at every instant to choose their course of action, but that we are “condemned to be free”. It is an inescapable fact of being human, (being-for-itself) that we are free, it is impossible to be otherwise. Sartre defines freedom as:

*The very being of the For-itself which is “condemned to be free” and must forever choose itself - i.e., make itself. ‘To be free’ does not mean ‘to obtain what one has wished’ but rather ‘by oneself to determine oneself to wish’ (in the broad sense of choosing). In other words success is not important to freedom.” (BN p.631).*

An object, being-in-itself, is determined by its essence, a tree is not free to choose its destiny it must live its life according to its nature. You could say a tree is “condemned *not* to be free”. Because we humans have no intrinsic nature or essence (according to Sartre), because we have the unique ability for conscious self-reflection we are free to determine ourselves. “Man is not only free - man is freedom”.

*We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say man is condemned to be free. 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 (Kaufmann 1975, p.353).*

Sartre believes we are condemned to be free because we had no choice in the matter of being free. He allows humans only one instance of non-freedom (the ultimate paradox?), that is when we are thrown into this chance world by chance. After this we are responsible, in an absolute sense, for everything we do. To have no choice in whether you will be free to choose and to then be responsible for all your future actions is surely *condemnation*. Further, to make things worse, and this is the real irony in Sartre's philosophy, we cannot blame anybody or anything for our situation.

Sartre in one gesture removes God as a deterministic father-figure and as such as a crutch; insists we cannot blame our parents, our teachers or our governments for our predicaments. He leaves us standing utterly alone and naked in a hostile world. Very few people, Sartre believes, are willing to accept and embrace their freedom and consequently be responsible for themselves. This responsibility for self-determination causes most people *anguish* and *despair*, people would much rather be able to project blame for their situation onto someone or something else. The realization that “our destiny is in our own hands” means we experience a feeling of *abandonment* (Images (a) 1986. p.18).

Sartre sees *anguish* as an experience rather than an emotional state caused by, the realization of total freedom and responsibility, and when I choose, I choose for myself and others. Most people would rather not carry this burden so they experience *anguish*. *Abandonment* is that which is experienced after a person realises they are totally responsible and can find no, “guide in their nature” (it does not exist), nor in God's revelations (they do not exist) as to how they should act. People are not only responsible for what they do, they also have to *invent* their own moral code so as to know what they should do (ibid.). *Despair* occurs together with *abandonment* and *anguish* when one realises no matter what choice

one makes the world is at very least passively hostile to our intentions (and survival).

Regardless of the burden of freedom and the ensuing *anguish*, *abandonment* and *despair* Sartre insists we must embrace our freedom. He defines the act of not facing up to freedom and responsibility as bad-faith or self-deception. *Bad-faith* is not just a tendency to fall back into the routines of everyday life, but is nothing less than a betrayal of one's self, a lie in which one deceives oneself about oneself (Solomon 1988 p.183).

For Sartre there are no excuses for evading one's freedom. To act in bad faith is to try to behave like an *object* or *thing*. In doing this a person pretends they have a fixed or determined nature and in so doing avoids acting responsibly and *authentically*.

*Thus the refusal of freedom can be conceived only as an attempt to apprehend oneself as being-in-itself; it amounts to the same thing. Human reality may be defined as a being such that in its being its freedom is at stake because human reality perpetually tries to refuse to recognize its freedom. (BN p.440).*

Sartre explores this idea of self-deception in many of his literary works, "*In Camera*" and "*Portrait of an Antisemite*" are two excellent examples. Sartre insists that to act *authentically*, that is freely and responsibly with full consciousness, is the only absolute and unconditional moral value (Images (a) p.23). I find a close parallel on a practical level in, "*The Bhagavadgita*" when Khrisna tells Arjuna: "It is more salutary to carry out your own Law poorly than another's Law well; it is better to die in your own Law than to prosper in another's" (van Buitenen 1981, p.85).

For Sartre it is only possible to judge another by the rule, are they acting *authentically*. Superficially this seems to condone anti-Semitism, rape and so on; however, I believe Sartre would argue that in all cases of abuse it could be shown that a person was not acting *authentically*, for to rape another would in a sense be to rape oneself and to not allow the other their freedom.

Even though we are essentially alone, Sartre recognizes we are inescapably connected with other people. Theoretically *authentic* relationships are possible, however, because most people will not accept their own freedom they consequently cannot allow others, their freedom. We try to control or possess others as we possess a thing or object (ibid p.26). This dichotomy results in relationships degenerating into sadistic-masochistic manipulations. Paglia explores this concept in depth in, "Sexual Personae". "There is no selflessness or self-sacrifice, only refinement of domination" (Paglia, 1990. p.274). Both these types of *self-deception* show how humans are loath to embrace the freedom to which they are condemned.

Much has been written about the pessimistic, nihilistic implications of the existentialists generally, Sartre and Nietzsche particularly. For Sartre, as for practical Zen philosophy, life has no purpose other than for living. The world of objects (being-in-itself) exists, "for-it-self by-it-self" human beings are incidental to it. There is no God who created us and determined our essence.

The freedom that comes with being human is not something that we choose, it is our humanness. Sartre maintains the responsibility of acknowledging freedom is too much for most people to bear so they try not to be free and act in a mode of *self-deception* in all they do. Relationships are maintained through *bad faith* as others nearly always try to treat the other as an *object to own or control*. If people persist in living an un-free life in *bad faith* then perhaps the accusation of pessimism is correct.

I believe Sartre's whole purpose is to awaken people from the *dream of self-deception*; this whilst there are some major differences, is also the purpose of many Eastern religions and philosophical systems. Sartre gives people their freedom, releases them from the invisible strings that the theistic religions would have us believe connect us to an omnipotent puppeteer in the heavens. Nothing could be a more optimistic, practical philosophy of existence than showing people they are free at all times. That they no longer have unseen, unknown forces controlling their lives; forces which no matter how much the person try, they have

no control over. Surely it is better to be “condemned to be free”, than “condemned to be a slave or mere puppet”. Sartre more than many other philosophers, practiced what he preached. “Sartre has remained free - and in many senses uncommitted, unbound by any institutional discipline. His soul, [sic] therefore remains his own.” (McBride 1967, p325).

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**Bio:**

Rob Harle is a writer, artist and academic reviewer. Writing work includes poetry, short fiction stories, academic essays and reviews of scholarly books and papers. His work is published in journals, anthologies, online reviews, books and he has two volumes of his own poetry published – *Scratches & Deeper Wounds* (1996) and *Mechanisms of Desire* (2012). Recent poetry has been published in *Rupkatha*

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His art practice currently involves digital-computer art both for the web and print. His giclée images have been exhibited widely. He is especially interested in promoting the inclusion of visual art in academic and scientific journals.

Formal studies include Comparative Religion, Philosophy, Architecture, Literature and Psychotherapy, his thesis concerned Freud's notion of the subconscious and its relationship with Surrealist poetry.

Rob's main concern is to explore and document the radical changes technology is bringing about. He has coined the term techno Metamorphosis to describe this.

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