

Freedom and Responsibility in Jean-Paul Sartre: A Fundamental Principle in Authentic Existence

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Abstract

It is as ancient as humanity the problem of freedom that goes with the question of responsibility. Jean-Paul Sartre stated that man is not free but man is freedom, therefore man is condemned to freedom. The question is how, and to what extent is man responsible for his freedom? If man is free, is man also free from the consequences of his freedom? In this article, a critical analysis of key existentialist thinkers, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, and Søren Kierkegaard, as well as recent scholars, this article argues that freedom and responsibility are inextricably linked and essential for authentic existence. Sartre gives absolutism to freedom which is doubtable and inauthentic. Man is not absolutely free and the freedom of man is questionable as man is also bound by the responsibilities of his actions. This work is geared to expose the ontological mistake of Sartre which has some ethical implications for human society. The researcher suggests that since man in his questionable freedom is still checkmated by his responsibility, laws, rules, and regulations should be made and promulgated so that the J.P. Sartre pseudo-freedom will be in check.

Keywords: Freedom, Responsibility, and Authentic Existence

Introduction

Human freedom is undoubtedly one of the most fundamental ideas that have driven the development of democratic politics in the last few hundred years. Existentialist philosophy posits that human existence is characterized by freedom and responsibility, which are fundamental principles of authentic existence. Freedom is taught in school as one of the essential tenets of human life, and lack of freedom is used as 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. However, Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, upends the conventional view of freedom and frames the issue in a new, existential framework.¹

Sartre's existential philosophy stems from his new vision of consciousness, and by answering the question of the being in a new way; he provides a different understanding of our existence in this world. At the heart of Sartre's new philosophy is his division of being into two categories: the "being-for-itself" and the "being-in-itself". At the heart of his philosophy is the concept of nothingness—or, as he puts it, the nihilation of being,² this is for the 'being-for-itself', and the 'being-in-itself', is an empty negation of the non-conscious being which is called the 'being-in-itself'. In simpler terms, we can look at the consciousness of human beings as the being-for-itself, and the non-conscious being of human beings as the 'being-in-itself'. Although it seems that these two terms divide the being of humans into two separate parts, Sartre explains that because the 'being-for-itself' is nothing more than the negation of the 'being-in-itself', they are irrevocably linked, and we can avoid the pitfall of having a dichotomy at the heart of being.³ Freedom plays a key role in the determination of consciousness—for Sartre, freedom is the being of humans, and is inexorably linked to the 'being-for-itself'. Although it sounds uncomfortable, if not unnerving, Sartre maintains that human beings are necessarily free, always, and a human cannot fail to be free.

To fail to be free, in his view, is the same as to cease to be. So, the result Sartre ends up with—redefining the role of freedom as the mode of being of the 'being-for-itself'—while unexpected, provides a new way of looking at our lives, and I think that Sartre successfully sheds light on our understanding of ourselves and our choices in the world.⁴

For Sartre, existence precedes essence, freedom is absolute, and existence is freedom. It has been made clear that Sartre does not believe that any essence or substance can be attributed to individuals before their existence. Individuals first of all exist, and there is no "human nature" that exists outside or inside beings. Freedom is therefore limitless, but the physical limitations of the world are taken into consideration. Sartre writes "No limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself or, if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free".⁵ However, individuals are born into the world or a "situation" – this is what he calls "facticity". The facticity of the human condition involves the limits imposed on the individual by the world. For example, I can choose to jump off a cliff and fly, but I will probably crash because I do not have wings. This does not mean that I am not free – I am still free to choose to fly, but I will have to deal with the consequences of my actions. Sartre writes

that freedom means “by oneself to determine oneself to wish. In other words, achievement is not important to freedom”. It is important to note the difference between choice, wish, and dream.

However, for Sartre, man’s action, though decided freely, can never be self-willed, since man must be responsible whenever and whatever he chooses for himself. There should be commitment behind all actions of man because he is responsible not only for himself but for the whole of humanity as well.

Freedom and Responsibility

The word freedom in the world of philosophy has different meanings and as such it gives rise to many nuances. According to Sartre, human beings are “condemned to be free”.⁷ Emphasizing the inherent freedom and responsibility that comes with human existence, Heidegger also highlights the importance of freedom and responsibility, arguing that “authentic existence involves acknowledging and accepting one’s own freedom and responsibility”.⁸ Kierkegaard emphasizes the importance of individual responsibility in relation to the divine, stating, “The authentic existence is when the individual relates himself to the divine alone, and not to another individual”.⁹

Recent scholars have expanded on this concept, highlighting its relevance to contemporary issues. For example, philosopher and psychologist Hubert Dreyfus argues that freedom and responsibility are essential for human flourishing, stating, “Freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin”.¹⁰ Similarly, existentialist philosopher and theologian John Caputo argues that freedom and responsibility are fundamental principles of authentic existence, stating, “Freedom and responsibility are the two wings of the same bird”.¹¹

Authentic Existence

Etymologically, the English word authentic is derived from the old French word “authentique” which was derived from the late “authenticus”, from the Greek ‘autentikos’. According to Reader’s Digest Universal Dictionary. Authentic means “a worthy of trust, reliance or belief”.¹² This is in accordance with the etymological definition of the concept in its Greek origin. Autentikos stands for true, genuine and authoritative. This can be synonymous or identical with the word real. So, in the existentialist content, authentic can be taken as perfect or real, what it “...ought to be”.¹³

“The latin word ‘existentia’ is derived from ‘ex-sistere’, which means ‘to stand out’ or ‘to emerge’... this etymology is not just a matter of historical interest; it also gives us a clue to the meaning of existence.”¹⁴

It was Aristotle in the beginning of his “metaphysics” that pointed out that “man by nature desires to know”.¹⁵ Man desires to gain insight into the nature of existence. Naturally, among the first things man desires to understand is his own being, that is, his nature and life. Descartes made the subjective ego the starting point of philosophical inquiry. In following this trend, Heidegger made *Dasein* the point of departure in any meaningful quest for the understanding of being. These whole points advocate that human existence is the central theme for any meaningful philosophy.

From the Socratic age, human existence has been seen differently by many thinkers both philosophers and theologians. What can we regard as a genuine, reliable human existence? This question has thwarted the philosophical camp into several fragments that is difficult to say with authoritarian voice what human existence is. A journey from the Socratic age to the radical rationalism of Rene Descartes has exulted reason as the criterion for human existence. In essence, rationality is the bedrock of authentic human existence.

The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard broke the myths of rationality or to take in it’s most primordial form, reason (Logos) as the basis of authentic existence in third and last stage in his segmentation of human stage. This last stage is the “Religious stage”.¹⁶ In this stage, Kierkegaard locates the affirmation of one’s relationship to God, the personal and transcendental absolute. This religious stage is reached by a leap of faith. So, for Kierkegaard, authentic existence is when an individual relates himself to the Divine alone and not to other person.

This Kierkegaard theme was de-divinized by Nietzsche who launched the route of atheistic existentialism. Nietzsche radicalized Kierkegaard’s existentialism to have a godless existentialism. For Nietzsche, the authentic human existence is the infinite will to power. This Nietzschean stance influenced most of the existentialists after him like Heidegger and Sartre.

In the book of T.Z Lavine, *From Socrates to Sartre*, Sartre was captured to maintain that the authentic human existence is an endless ability of a concrete individual to choose amidst of alternatives in the world. According to Lavine, Sartre’s authentic existence is embedded in the human freedom. It is the absolute freedom in the work of Sartre that grounded his motion of authentic freedom. In this line of thought, Lavine put down: “But now Sartre discloses that there is an even greater depth to my freedom as conscious being. I have discovered that as a totally free conscious, I alone own responsibility for the meaning of the situation in which I live”.¹⁷ This showcases that

in Lavine's understanding of the work of Sartre, that freedom breeds responsibility. For the "for-itself", the presence of freedom makes him responsible for his action. Lavine went further to nuance:

But what meaning shall I give my world? From what sources can I draw meaning? I raise such questions, not when I am engaged in accomplishing the seemingly useful routine of daily activities, but when I reflect upon my activities. Then, I see that there is no source of absolute truth to which I can any longer turn to provide meaning for my life.¹⁸

This drawing meaning of life to oneself is what Sartre called 'authentic existence' of human being. Though Lavine captured Sartre's idea of authentic existence well without raising questions on what it may imply. Moreover, there was no mention of the theme in his work. He further discussed the concept of bad faith without telling us that bad faith is a mode of escapism from authentic existence.

In the book of Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Tillich attacked Sartre of the forgetfulness of the root of existentialism on the fallenness of human species. For man to fall, he must have to fall from somewhere, which is his root. For man to live authentically, says Tillich, he has to go back to the "ursprung" (source). So, Sartre's notion of authentic existence is in favor of Kierkegaardian view of authentic existence of life. For Tillich, though freedom defines man, but according to him, "Freedom is not the freedom of indeterminacy"¹⁹.

Daigle, explores the concept of authentic existence in relation to the self, maintaining that authenticity involves a genuine and honest relationship with oneself.

Daigle states that: "Authentic existence is a matter of being true to oneself, of being honest and genuine in one's relationship with oneself."²⁰

More so, in an attempt to throw more light to the subject matter, Cleary discussed the concept of existential authenticity, he contend that it involves embracing one's freedom and responsibility to create one's own values and meaning in life. "Existential authenticity is about embracing our freedom and responsibility to create our own values and meaning in life."²¹

In the Walter Kaufman's *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Kaufman saw Sartre concept of authentic existence as the ability of one to decide for himself in all circumstance. Destroying all the fabrics of metaphysical transcendence, as Kaufman in his reading of Sartre, man is an infinite freedom and a responsible being. This according to Kaufman will make man a self-contained. As he wrote commenting on Sartre, "man is the future of man"²². That man is the future of man according to Kaufman interpretation of Sartre; we may deduce that Kaufman mean of Sartre to be of the opinion that there is no other existence beyond human existence. This means that human existence should be horizontal instead of vertical. This implies that though human transcendence should not be a quest for identification with the divine 'Nous'. Rather human existence should be unrestricted human transcendence manifested in his freedom, will, choice, action and responsibility.

One peculiar feature of Kaufman's integration of Sartre is his ability to link Sartrean notion of authentic existence which is decipherable from the notion of abandonment with the Cartesian thesis of consciousness. Though Kaufman aim in his work is to explore the main fabric of the Sartre's existentialism without any criticism. So, we cannot blame Kaufman on certain neglect in his work on Sartre.

Mary Warnock is another authority that has contributed immensely on the study of Sartre's work. She is one of the most influential commentators on Sartre. Warnock in her book *philosophy of Sartre*, pointed out that Sartre appreciated the ingenuity of Descartes for realizing better than anyone the autonomy of thought. But, Warnock claimed that Sartre maintains that the Cartesian thought is quite different from the productiveness, or creativity of thought. Sartre according to Warnock claimed that Descartes in his 'Discourse' did not concentrate on creativity. He attacked Descartes for being too preoccupied with the mathematical learning where there are fixed rules of procedures without knowing that the mind is free to go on alone. Sartre claims Warnock maintains that Descartes thought the mind could not exercise creativity when occupied either with mathematical or scientific subjects. Sartre read Descartes as saying that man can creatively be free only in imaginative thinking. Warnock writes concerning Sartre's reaction on this Cartesian principle thus:

Sartre is not satisfied with this solution. Is this power to reject the false enough to give us the powerful and immediate awareness of freedom which we supposed to have in the "cogito"? Sartre thinks that it is not and that Descartes was guilty of confusion at this point.²³

Warnock claimed that Sartre has two senses of 'freedom' and he switches from one to the other as it suits him. The first sense is that in which a man is aware that he is actively free. That is, free to judge, to act, to comprehend and to create. The second sense is that in which man is free only to avoid error.

The first sense is the fundamental thesis of Sartre while the second sense is the Cartesian mode of freedom. For Warnock, Sartre's authentic existence is in the first sense of freedom. Warnock wrote of Sartre,

But Sartre certainly believes that he can find two senses, and that both are important, indeed, both senses are out to be essential to his own view of human freedom. In the active or creative sense, we know that we are free, and the fact that we can think, we can choose is proof of it, it is further proven each time we perform any action. In the other non-creative sense, we are free to say, if not to assert; to reject, if not to accept, and here we have come upon what in Sartre's own theory, is the most important characteristic of human consciousness.²⁴

Warnock rightly pointed out that Descartes notion of freedom is not enough to guarantee human creativity. Human creativity is a product of a type of freedom which is unrestricted. Here, Warnock claimed that for this type of freedom to be, God must not be. This means that for man to live authentically as man, God must die. Warnock pointed out that existential abandonment implies that man is the arbiter of his own life. He does not need to consult another for him to decide. Even if he consults another, he is not fixed to the advice of another. For him to choose to act according to another's instruction is living an artificial life.

Warnock though exposed Sartrean philosophy with mastery ingenuity but she forgot to crosscheck Sartrean idea of authentic existence, she neglected to dig deeper to see that even to follow another's instruction is a matter of choice. One has to decide either to follow one's thought or the instruction of another. This is also a demonstration of freedom. This stance bridged the gap between authenticity and inauthenticity. So, as Warnock asserted Sartre, there is no difference between authentic and inauthentic life. Every life is authentic. This idea will automatically suggest the irrelevancy of this work. Warnock's analysis of bad faith as a mode of escape from authentic existence betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept, which warrants a more sophisticated examination. Though Warnock is an authority, she was blind to certain jumps of both logic of Sartre's work and the inherent implications of its thesis.

Pietro Chiodi in his book *Sartre and Marxism*, Chiodi claims that Sartre authentic existence can be examined from Marxist perspective. For Chiodi, Sartre's authentic existence is different from the Marxist ideology which claim that human existence can be determined by the economic condition. For Sartre, as Chiodi claims, Marxist conception of human person is a predetermined person, he is a fixed entity. This is against the Sartrean view of authentic mode of human existence. Chiodi claims that though Sartre later joined Marxism in his later days, his notion of human existence was radically distinguished from that of the Marxist. For Sartre, man is not fixed just like the Marxist say. For Sartre, man is undetermined neither by economy nor by the political situation. Sartre in his attack on Marxism maintains that even if economic influences man, it is the duty of man either to reject or to accept the economic and political condition. So Chiodi maintains that freedom to accept or reject is the authentic human existence. Chiodi writes "... the problem of the possible was located in the extra-temporal dimension of the relation between the for-itself and in-itself, and the fundamental project of human reality was that of being God"²⁵. The impossibility in principles of such a metaphysical project meant in effect the positive denial of all necessity together with the negative denial that consists in assuming that the only alternative to necessity is total indeterminacy. Chiodi argues that Sartre's authentic existence is in limitless freedom to deny or to assert, unlimited freedom to choose or to will even if one cannot get what one wills.

In the Leslie Stevenson's *Seven Theories of Human Nature*, Stevenson pictures Sartre's authentic existence as being structure in his concrete individual freedom. Stevenson said that "Sartre like existentialists, believes in the ability of every person to choose for himself his attitude, purpose, values, and way of life."²⁶ Stevenson went further to say, "for in their view the only 'authentic' and genuine way of life is that freely chosen by each individual for himself"²⁷.

Stevenson in his critic of Sartre, pointed out serious stylistic problem in Sartre. Though apart from the stylistic problem of Sartre's writing, Stevenson only pointed out the ethical implication of Sartre's notion of authentic existence without paying attention to its ontological problem. This work seeks to address the gap in the existing literature.

In his book, *In search of Philosophic Understanding*, Edwin A. Burt examined the ethical note in Sartre's philosophy which he claims to lead to a robust humanism by which, he (Sartre) believes, we can rise above the threat of meaninglessness that haunt man. According to Burt, commenting on Sartre, "Renouncing all wishful self-deception, we can fulfill our true manhood"²⁸. What does Burt, regard as wishful self-deception? I think that he meant Sartre's notion of bad faith or a mode of existence Heidegger called '*Dasman*'. For Sartre, as Burt claims, "we see that our task is to give meaning to life by our own free and responsible action and to create a human community that accords to every person the independence and dignity truly belonging to him"²⁹. For Burt, commenting on Sartre, "we achieve authentic selfhood in society, not in isolation"³⁰. This Burt's comment really captured Sartre's thesis that 'for-itself' is a being in-the-world. He is a being that enters into a relation with the

other. Burt claims that this relation creates the possibility of a swift between authentic and inauthentic existence. Man has capacity to follow the mass thereby becoming what Heidegger called mass man (*Dasman*); or to follow his own mind, that is his choice thereby living authentically.

The error or rather the ignorance we uncovered in the work of Warnock is also inherent in the work of Burt. Burt was ignorant that a deliberation of choice whether one to his interest or the other's is also a freedom. One can follow what the other instructed out of choice. Moreover, Burt neglects the ontology of freedom in the work of Sartre, thereby building his intellectual superstructure upon a weak ground of Sartre's work. Having reached this critical juncture, there is need for an indepth examination of Sartre's philosophy on authentic existence.

Existence is assumed to be a basic issue in the philosophy of the existentialist. Generally, the existentialists, notion of existence is totally different from the original application of the word. For the existentialists, existence should not be taken as the opposite of essence or in the sense of existential and essential distinction. Man according to existentialist philosophers has no fixed essence. It is in the context of the above remarks concerning man's dynamic self-transcending that we come back to the problem of existence and essence. We have noted some disagreements among existentialists over this problem. Heidegger declares that man's essence lies in his existence, Sartre that existence precedes essence. Heidegger and Sartre, together with other philosophers of existence, agreed that man has no fixed essence given in advance.

Authentic Existence in Sartre

As Jim Unah and Chris Osegwenwune relate, man, for Sartre, is essentially an individual human being with his own life to live and his own death to die. By this, if we refuse to assert our individuality, we have no one to blame but ourselves. For arising from our individuality are an enormous freedom of action and a heavy burden of responsibility. Man, the existentialist conclude, is totally free. There is no human nature, Sartre affirms, and no heaven of values which must guide his choices. Man is therefore condemned to freedom. This being the case, man should act and invent values for himself for action is the only thing that enables a man to live. And since man is free, then, he is totally responsible for his actions. He cannot be free to act and at the same time not responsible for his actions.³¹

In a sense, Sartre proposes an inescapability of freedom. But his theory of man's being is not a metaphysical theory of human subjectivity. He conceives freedom as an actual feature of the lived human experience. Again, the concept of freedom does not suggest a metaphysical theory of human nature. Inescapability of freedom does not mean that each individual can choose whatever he wants. Sartre argues that, freedom is inescapable as it determines the nature of our being. This inescapability suggests that we have to make choices with responsibility. Even when we refuse to make a choice, we are exercising our freedom and are unwittingly making a choice, and when we refuse to take decisions, we have unknowingly decided. Even to choose to be a slave of someone else or blindly imitating others are all instances of freedom.³² Hence, it is in man's interest to accept his total freedom and responsibility for his actions.³³

Of course, freedom has been a central theme in Sartre's existentialism. His view of freedom is:

I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act. I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself. Human-reality is free because it is not enough. It is free because it is perpetually wrenched away from itself and because it has been separated by nothingness from what it is and from what it will be. It is free, finally because its present being is itself nothingness in the form of the "reflection reflecting." Man is free because he is not himself but presence himself... Man cannot be sometimes free and sometimes slave; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all.³⁴

Freedom is thus, a crucial fact concerning the being of man. Since man is not a being-in-itself, and hence is separated from being, he is not determined by being and is essentially free. Sartre says that human freedom precedes the essence of man and makes it possible. Man makes himself through his choices and therefore, he is nothing else but what he makes of himself.

Once more, the idea of freedom also calls for the notion of responsibility. If we are free to make choices in our lives, we are also responsible for those choices. Hence freedom is linked with the possibility of authentic or truly human life. Sartre affirms that, what is important is not what is chosen, but in what manner it is chosen. Thus, in order to have an authentic life, one has to recognize the inescapability of freedom and accept the responsibility associated with it. "Since responsibility is associated with freedom, one cannot escape the anguish that may follow the inescapability of freedom. Anguish therefore, is a condition for freedom and action."³⁵

Freedom is the freedom to make choices in life. It also implies that there are no eternal guidelines or norms that have any transcendental validity which would help us while encountering alternatives. Hence there is uncertainty about the future. Each choice will have consequences, on which we have no control. Some of these consequences are better than others, but we can never know which choice leads to better consequences. Our existential situation is our objective situation and it leaves us as free individuals who have no objective guidelines. The choices we have are not dependent on circumstances external to us. By choosing we make ourselves. To exist authentically is therefore a challenge. It is to live with the realization that our freedom is boundless and we have no option but to make individual choices. In the absence of transcendental norms and guidelines, it is bound to encounter anguish and we have to accept this as a fact. It is part of our existential situation. We have to act based on the choices we make and should not blame external factors or circumstances. We have to take responsibility for choosing them as we are free.

To further express the experience of human freedom and responsibility, three themes are of paramount importance. They are: “anguish”, “abandonment”, and “despair”. When existentialists say that man is in anguish, they mean that a man who commits himself, a man who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility.³⁶ Explicitly, Sartre maintains that awareness of man’s total freedom and responsibility is accompanied by anguish which, as Copleston notes, is akin to the state of mind experienced by a man standing on the precipice who feels both attracted and repelled by the abyss.³⁷

To substantiate this view, Sartre acknowledges that man may therefore try to deceive himself by embracing some form of determinism, by throwing the responsibility on to something apart from his own choice, God or heredity or his upbringing and environment or what not. If, however he does so, he is in “bad faith.”³⁸ To be more precise, Sartre uses the term “bad faith” in more than one way. In its most general sense, it labels the attempt to deny the basic structure of human being, that the way an individual sees the world is determined by that individual’s character, which in turn can be changed by that individual. We deny this by pretending that our characters are fixed and unchangeable.³⁹ So, man is thrown into anguish when he realises that he has total freedom to chart the course of his life and the possibility that he might fail. Everybody, asserts the existentialist, feels this kind of anguish because it is one of the basic traits of human existence.

Sartre explains abandonment as: “it is we ourselves, who decide who we are to be”⁴⁰ Each human is left alone to choose how to act: no matter how many consultations and obligations may push you to act in a certain way, nothing can necessitate your choice. This is why humans are – in a sense – abandoned in their own agency.⁴¹

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of freedom and responsibility as the fundamental principles of authentic existence is a central tenet of existentialist philosophy. Through a critical analysis of key existentialist philosophers, this article maintains, that freedom and responsibility are inextricably linked and essential for authentic existence.

This work argued that the basic on which Sartre laid the foundation of his conception of authentic existence is not strong enough to bear the weight of logical crucible. This work maintains that the notion of absolute freedom is impossible because it is only contradictory but also porous. Freedom is based on individual state of mind. It is this individual state of the mind that manipulates the human person before it comes into conclusion.

Though, the existentialism of Sartre is not to be rejected totally, but would have been better if he accommodated the role of reason in human existence. Therefore, We the young generation should embrace rational inquiring while acknowledging its limitations and avoiding dogmatic reasoning. Furthermore, admitting human freedom and accepting responsibility of our actions and their consequences, than embracing absolute freedom without accountability. Finally, enhancing respectful dialogue between different perspectives which will help to promote mutual understanding and growth. In view of this, there will be an established balance between the dangers of exaggerated rationalism of traditional philosophers and exaggerated irrationalism of the radical or atheistic existentialism which Jean-Paul Sartre championed.

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