

**HERMENEUTICIZING RESPONSIBILITY IN FREEDOM AS LIMITATION TO  
FREEDOM IN JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALISM**

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**Abstract**

The question of freedom and responsibility has been a perennial one among philosophers of different epochs. This question has to do with whether man is actually free or not. Jean-Paul Sartre, in respect to this problem holds that man is free because man first of all exists, encounters the world, surges up in the world and makes himself what he wants to be through his freedom. However, he made reference to responsibility that goes with freedom whereby man is accountable for his actions. It is therefore, the desire of this work to employ the method of hermeneutics to present responsibility as limitations to freedom in the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. This work therefore concludes that though man is free, there are a number of factors that pose as limitations to his freedom; law, moral reasoning, determinism, etc.

**Keywords:** hermeneutics, freedom, Jean-Paul, existentialism

**Introduction**

Existentialism is a school of thought in Philosophy that calls on man to play active part in the mystery of life. It is a philosophy of the subject rather than the object. It emphasizes the idea that man, to a large extent, determines his essence. To actualize his essence, man needs freedom. This explains the reason why the issue of whether man is free has been a perennial one among philosophers of different epochs. Jean-Paul Sartre being a pure existentialist philosopher, held that man's freedom is bounded by nothingness. He holds that "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and defines himself afterwards"<sup>1</sup>. He went further to posit that freedom connotes choice and choice connotes responsibility. As such, man is responsible for whatever choice he makes. With respect to the problem of man's freedom which is one of the basic tenets of existentialism, J.P. Sartre is of the view that man's freedom is unlimited but that one is responsible for one's action. At this juncture, one can rightly observe that the sense of responsibility in the choice that man makes is already a limitation and a hindrance to the sense of absolute of freedom. This is made even clearer in the view of Jean Jacques Rousseau who argues that "man is free but everywhere in chains"<sup>2</sup>. It is on this ground that this study seeks to critically appraise J.P. Sartre's idea of freedom and responsibility.

**Definition of Key Words**

**Freedom:** is a philosophical doctrine that talks about the absence of constraints or restriction. According to Sartre, "human being is his own past and also his own future"<sup>3</sup>. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines freedom as "the quality or state of being free; as the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action"<sup>4</sup>. Freedom is understood to mean freedom from limitations that impede the full use of our abilities in becoming all that we can be.

**Responsibility:** This is the idea or notion of an individual being held accountable for his or her actions. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as "a quality of being liable to be called on to answer as the primary cause, motive or agent for one's conduct and obligation"<sup>5</sup>. In other words, responsibility entails one answering or being accountable for that choice of action taken; that is assuming full responsibility for his actions. Arthur Schopenhauer in his "Essay on Freedom of the Will" writes that "we have a clear and certain feeling of responsibility for what we do, of accountability for our actions – a feeling that rests on an unshakable certainty that we ourselves are the doers of our deed"<sup>6</sup>.

**Sartrean Concept of Freedom**

The word freedom has many meanings; it can refer to political liberty or economic rights, it can refer to the absence of coercion or threat from others. Human freedom has been stoutly defended by a great deal of thinkers of various persuasions. However, no voice in its defense has been more persuasive than

that of the existentialist philosopher - Jean-Paul Sartre whose vehement pronouncement of freedom arose from his own intense experience of human struggle during the Nazi occupation of France in World War II. Though Sartre had much to say about these issues, his real contributions were his arguments that individual persons control their own decisions and actions. He is convinced that there is no determinism of any kind; “nothing tells me what to do, I myself decide, I cannot blame God, or others, or my past environment. I am now what I make myself to be.”<sup>7</sup> This means accepting the consequences of my own freedom, being responsible for my decision and facing the consequences thereof. Human freedom as Sartre sees it, is not always a blessing; it is more often a tragedy - whether we like it or not, “we are condemned to be free.”<sup>8</sup> The point here is that freedom is the nature of man; that is, freedom is coeval to human nature because in anxiety, man becomes aware of his freedom, and freedom goes with responsibility.

Freedom carried with it an unavoidable anguish when we fully realize how overwhelming the implication of our freedom can be. It entails tragic choices with formidable consequences for out of our freedom, we do not make decisions for ourselves alone, but for others, and sometimes for all mankind. To realize completely what this means can be a nightmarish insight into the very nature of existence, as Sartre opines, “freedom is identified with my existence.”<sup>9</sup> To be free means to be caught in a paradox for we are forever dissatisfied with existence as we know it. But to live means to dream a million dreams and forge ahead to catch the fullness of our being. Indeed each mortal man wants to be God but the truer fact is that we are finite and our limitations are crushing - still, they are unacceptable. So, we continue to compete and strive, dreaming our dreams, though they are futile dreams, and even though we know it. We do all these simply because we cannot do otherwise; for to exist “is to be free, and to be free is to act, to take initiative, to make choices and decisions, to dream impossible dreams, however unreachable they are.”<sup>10</sup>

The key to understanding what Sartre is saying lies in the fact that human life is inescapably tragic, marked by resentment and anxiety. We, as individuals are forced to make painful decisions among bad alternatives though sometimes we may want direction in making decision or some objective realm of values to assure us that we are making the right choice. However, Sartre argues that “we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone without excuse.”<sup>11</sup> Sartre sees freedom as something that alienates, it is only when one is alienated from what belongs to him that recovery would make sense. Man therefore, works out his freedom from his facticity, alienating himself from others as a means of satisfying his unlimited freedom. Sartre asserts: “Without facticity, freedom would not exist as a power of annihilation and of choice, and without freedom facticity would not be discovered and it would have no meaning.”<sup>12</sup>

Sartrean position on freedom depicts high degree of individualistic and self-alienating tendencies. More so, he talks of the “being-in-itself” and the “being-for-itself” in freedom. The ‘being-in-itself’ is precisely the nothingness which is made to be at the heart of man and which forces human reality to make itself to be while the “being-for-itself” is a conscious subject capable of sensing, perceiving, thinking, judging, choosing and deciding; it is incomplete - still in the making, fluid and determinant. It corresponds to the being of human consciousness. Being-in-itself is diametrically opposed to being-for-itself, it is fixed, complete and wholly given thereby lacking freedom; having nothing to do with conscious-spontaneity which characterizes freedom. Hence, it points to the world of things. Sartre went further to argue that in the exercise of freedom, man choose his values which enables him to enhance his responsibility in every circumstance, thus responsibility is a condition sine qua non for freedom.

### **Sartrean Concept of Responsibility**

The concept of responsibility is inseparable from that of freedom, for “to be free is ipso facto to be responsible.”<sup>13</sup> There can be no freedom without responsibility; freedom is not only a gift to man but it is also a very heavy burden laid on him, a heavy responsibility entrusted on him for he is held responsible for the way he uses his freedom. Sartre argues that man is responsible not only for the actions which are derived from his freedom but also responsible to at least some events which are outside the realms of applicability of freedom; hence the quote: “in freedom, the human being is his own past as also his own future.”<sup>14</sup> The point here is that people are what they make of themselves, they

have no one to blame for what they are except themselves. Moreover, when people choose in the process of making themselves, they choose not only for themselves but for all people; “they are therefore responsible not only for their own individuality but they are responsible for all people”<sup>15</sup> says Sartre. This seems to contradict the line of reasoning Sartre is developing - to say that before one can choose a way of action one must ask what would happen if everyone else acted so, is to assume a general human essence which makes my mode of action relevant to all people. Sartre does in fact say that even though we create our own values and thereby create ourselves, we nevertheless create at the same time an image of our human nature as we believe it ought to be. It then follows that when we choose this or that way of acting, we affirm the value of what we have chosen, and nothing can be better for anyone of us unless it is better for all. By this, Sartre is calling attention to one of the clearest experience of human beings namely; that all people must make decision, and although they have no authoritative guide, they must still choose and at the same time ask whether they would be willing for others to choose the same action. We as individuals at times cannot escape the disturbing thoughts that we would not want others to act as we do, to say that others will not so act is a case of self-deception. Sartre asserts: “The act of choice then, is one that all people must accomplish with a deep sense of anguish, for in this act people are responsible not only for themselves but also for each other. Those who evade their responsibility through self-deception will not be at ease in their conscience”.<sup>15</sup> From this, it will be noted that our being responsible is a logical following of our freedom in the sense that man should assume full responsibility for their actions and should hold himself accountable, and be ready to accept the blame or praise for what he has freely done.

### **Freedom and Consciousness**

Consciousness renews the face of the earth; without consciousness, the earth will remain untouched, while the world devoid of consciousness means isolation and boredom. Introduce a man who is a conscious subject, the world acquires a new look. The nature of consciousness leads to the question of the nature of man, man alone is conscious in Sartre's meaning of the term. Sartre tried to prove that consciousness in itself is nothing until it has perceived because; "Consciousness is always conscious of something, and this something is provided just as much by ourselves as by our surroundings"<sup>16</sup>

We are partly instrumental in deciding what we perceive by selecting what is significant for us. For example, two people can be present in the same room and yet experience it quite differently. This is because we contribute our own meaning - or our own interests - when we perceive our surroundings. A woman who is pregnant might think she sees other pregnant woman everywhere she looks, that is not because there were no pregnant women before but because now that she is pregnant she sees the world through different eyes. The point here is that experiences differ from one individual to another and those ways we respond to these experience also differ according to each person's uniqueness. In the world as seen by consciousness, we have multiplicity, similarities, differences and varieties; as Sartre opines "to be conscious of something is to not be that something and in the world as it appears to consciousness, non-being is present in a number of ways."<sup>17</sup> Mbaegbu in explaining what Sartre meant by consciousness held that “Consciousness' sees between things in the world, and therefore can only apply to the world as seen, by, consciousness; and the world-for-consciousness; is shot through with nothingness”.<sup>18</sup>

It then means, that the world for me is a self-centered one, but others exist also; each being is the center of his own conscious world. Sartre now sees the other people as an alien trespassing on his reserve. He sees his liberty endangered by the liberty of other; therefore: "Hell is other people! Because man knows himself forever at odds with others who by their glances threatens man, turning him to a mere object."<sup>19</sup>

### **Moral Reasoning and Law as Limitations to Freedom**

There is no doubt that moral reasoning limits our sense of freedom. People find themselves at crossroads in their lives, often not knowing what they really want or in what direction they should best go. Over time, they develop into better or worse persons, undergo conversions, adopt new religious or moral beliefs, slowly break free of negative emotional patterns, and make fresh starts. If what we are is constituted to a certain extent by our project and goals, then it is always open to us to consider who we are in light of who we might want to become, or who we should become; and if as Sartre argues that

"we are the beings who transform our being into meaning, and through whom meaning comes into the world"<sup>20</sup>. This means that we are capable of raising morally evaluative question like: to what extent can we actually control these changes, through deliberation, moral reflection, and search for rational justification? And to what extent are we to be held responsible for who we become? In clarifying this question, Sartre's moral psychology theory is considered and it is based on the groundlessness of the roots of our way of being in the world. That we define ourselves by our project does not mean that the choice we make of ourselves occurs in a causal vacuum, obviously we do not choose our parents or our biological makeup, we find ourselves thrown into a situation and endowed with certain characteristics.

But this factual characteristic to a certain extent underdetermine how we assume them, find meaning and moral significance in them, and take them up as part of a whole way of life. They do not come ready-made, or with labels on them. Sartre illustrates this view with the case of physical disability this way; "Even this disability from which I suffer, I have assumed by the very fact that I live, I surpass it toward my own projects, I make of it the necessary obstacle for my being, and I cannot be crippled without choosing myself as crippled. This means I choose the way in which I constitute my disability"<sup>21</sup>.

It means then that we alone can create meaning of the ensemble of tactical condition that roots us in a particular situation. The question of who we become after these moral deliberations expresses our need to find lasting and independent reasons and moral grounds for what we are doing with our lives. Mill echoing this line of thought holds that "a person has, to a certain extent, a power to alter his character."<sup>22</sup> To this, Aristotle believed that to some extent, our character is up to us, he claimed that: "Moral excellence comes about as the result of habit rather than being innate or inborn. It is from the same causes and by the same means that every excellence is both produced or destroyed, by doing the acts that we do in our transaction with other men we become just or unjust"<sup>23</sup>. It then means that human beings have natures that are malleable; people have the in-born capacity to acquire a variety of traits. People can be selfish, as well as unselfish, courageous as well as cowardly; such character traits are acquired rather than innate. We deceive ourselves if we think that our character is not all up to us; that becomes an excuse for lack of effort. Thus, conception of moral virtue can provide guidance for our conduct with each other for if we discover that we are selfish or cowardly, we can take steps to do unselfish and courageous actions, and by doing such actions we can eventually extinguish the unwanted traits and acquire the wanted trait. This is an important distinction for moral philosophy.

Sartrean defense of individual's freedom shows that we are not prisoners of our character, biological make-up or environmental conditioning. He argues that the freedom we enjoy as moral agents consists in an autonomous and creative agency: "we are free in a morally important sense, to be as we want to be"<sup>24</sup>. This means that we are free to choose who we are, and to lay out ground plan of our way of life, within a range of given determinants and situational constraints. We are also free within certain bounds to remake ourselves, and the assumption of alternative way of life, life plan and moral outlooks always remain a living option, thereby achieving moral autonomy. This view has strong Kantian undertone in the way it conceives people as the source of their own moral authority and moral being - "think for yourself"<sup>25</sup> as Kant will always say in defense of freedom as a condition of possibility for moral responsibility, and in the way it elevates people (as moral agents and person) above the realm of nature and the empirically determined. Considering the existentialist emphasis on individuals' freedom, choice and authenticity, Kant argues in his "Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone" that: "Man himself must make or have made himself into whatever, in a moral sense, whether good or evil, he is or is to become. Either condition must be an effect on his free choice."<sup>26</sup>.

Moreover, moral reasoning in ordinary decision making involves such activities as deliberating about morally conflicting courses of action, engaging in moral argument and discussion with people, and searching for the moral justification of our choices. This is because when ultimate priorities are in question, choices about conflicting courses of action may be guided by this deliberation; this reveal just how deep rooted and primary our commitment to a way of life and the choice of self is. It suggests that we alone choose what rules of argument and what moral conflict-resolution procedures we will count as a relevant moral concern among the vast spectrum of possible normative concerns. The point here, however, is not that the attempt to work out these deep questions will turn out to be meaningless or that

we are left in the dark, rather than in the process of working out these issues, the choices and actions we make involves the deepest level of our being which are not determined entirely on objective grounds. Eventually we find that the search for justification and moral reasoning in which we engage just come to an end, and we are thrown into our own finite and fallible resources... action where deliberation leaves off. It is at this stage as Heidegger, Sartre and others argue that the basic question of existence can be worked out only by existing. These limitation are not the function of our finite temporal perspective but also that our lives are too short, and the future too pressing to bother too much with reflection. Stuart in his book, *Morality and Conflict* noted that: "A person hesitates between two contrasting way of life, and sets of virtues, and he has to make a very definite, and even final determination between them. The determination is a negation, and normally the agent will feel that the choice has killed, or repressed, some part of him".<sup>27</sup> This means that making decision is a torturous one because in the process of choosing for ourselves, we are also creating or inventing a standard for humanity as well. Therefore, moral autonomy is ascribed to people who have not passively acquiesced to social expectations, roles and values, but who have not passively acquiesced to social expectation, roles and values, but who have ,by reasoning, choice, or moral reflection, arrived at their own moral outlook and view of the good life; who have achieved at level of person and interpersonal integrity, by assuming a stance of self-questioning towards their desires, beliefs, volition, and habits, and who know with some acuity what they are doing with their lives, and what their true goals are. We hold this as an ideal to which we should aspire and evaluate ourselves and other in light of it. Its achievement is considered a virtue and the lack of shortcoming.

On the other hand, it is a truism that law to a large extent limits freedom; that is to say, law curtails or checkmate human freedom. Maintaining order in the society is the essential element of law which brings about harmonious co-existence among people. Law can be understood as system of rules enforced to control or govern behavior. Thomas Hobbes for instance in his *Social Contract* realized that if people's freedom is not checked, there will be chaos in the society. He then proposed that people should give up their autonomy of self-rule to an assembly of men who Hobbes gave the name Leviathan; with the multitude united in this Leviathan, harmony is achieved. Furthermore, it will be noted that when we talk of law as a limitation to freedom, we do not mean that it negates freedom but rather it is there to curtail excess freedom whereby one person's freedom clashes with that of another. Man in his very nature is part of a shared existence and his freedom is a shared freedom. His very nature contains direction and norms, and by becoming inwardly with his direction and norms is what freedom is all about. It then follows that one's freedom ends where the other person's freedom begins in order to maintain a peaceful and orderly society.

### **Conclusion**

Having examined Sartrean concept of freedom and responsibility, it is the contention of this research work that some scholars misconstrue Sartre's view because they only read his earlier works (e.g. *Being and Nothingness*) without reading his later works(e.g. *The Family Idiot*) where he made some modifications. Some scholars view Sartre's existentialism as pessimistic because of the absolute freedom he allocated to man in his earlier works and the uncritical acceptance of the incompatibility between freedom and determinism.

Though in his later works, especially in 'The Family Idiot' he accepted a kind of limitation to man's freedom when he said that we are to remake ourselves from what is already made of us. For example, one can get rid of a neurosis (affliction) but cannot get cured of one's self; that is, we can, as finite being change our character traits but cannot change our biological make-up or social conditioning. This is the limitation Sartre accords freedom in his later works because he has come to understand that man is not an absolute or a presupposed given but an achievement that is built up from his socially conditioned self and the constraints of a particular historical situation. Again, man lives in a society where societal laws determine how he behaves. This way, one can really see that law limits man's freedom as long as man remains a societal being.

Human reality everywhere encounters resistance and obstacles which it has not created, but these resistance and obstacles have meaning only in and through the free choice which human reality is.<sup>28</sup>

The point here is that the dialectical functioning of man is action because it is all up to him to work out what he is going to do with the fundamental life possibilities confronting him and what basic orientation he is going to take in the face of existence. Gabriel Marcel in his lecture on "The Mystery of Being," presents a similar view of the role freedom plays in human agency. He asserts that "the notion of creative development occurs through free activity as soon as there is life, or rather as soon as there is 'being in a situation'. In life one may recognize circumstance and situation as a call to creative development."<sup>29</sup> Marcel's point here is that answering the question of who I am entails man articulating his life based on a reality that gives it meaning and purpose; and also to both give and fully realize life.

Finally, I wish to say that Sartrean existentialism no doubt breeds hope, courage and optimism; its optimistic message is that the destiny of man is placed within himself. Man is an open possibility in the sense that he is the one to confer meaning to events he experience in life and construct from them a signifying situation. I end with this quote from a cellular biology Bruce Lipton:

Perception is awareness shaped by belief. Beliefs control perception. Rewrite beliefs and you rewrite perception. Rewrite perception and you rewrite genes and behaviors.... I am free to change how I respond to the world, so as I change the way I see the world I change my genetic expression. We are not victims of our genes; we are masters of our genetics.<sup>30</sup>

Often the secret to gaining control is learning both to accept those circumstances and to work within the limitations that they impose. If you can reclaim some control of your life despite unfortunate circumstances, that is good. If your circumstances eventually improve; that is better, but the best is yet to come.

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