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AN EVALUATION OF THE PRIMACY OF FREEDOM, CHOICE AND RESPONSIBILITY IN JEAN PAUL SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALISM AND THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

The concept 'existentialism has been contentious and tremendously ambiguous just as the term 'humanism itself. However, it has generally been viewed as a protest against moral or physical determinism in regard to man. While 'humanism', in its general sense is seen as any system centered on the concepts of dignity and freedom of man. Consistently, Jean Paul Sartre built his existentialism on the fundamental principle of human freedom and makes concept it unique in his version of existentialism. Thus, Sartre begins his discuss on existentialism with a phenomenological description of reality. That is, a kind of analysis that emphasizes the primacy of human consciousness in relation to choice and freedom. This sense of consciousness in Sartre's existentialism also preludes self-determination and freedom in relation to moral choice of man. Essentially, Sartre's version of 'existentialism is a unique concept of freedom. Therefore, this paper examines the primacy of Sartre's notion of freedom and its consequences in the realm of moral choice. To achieve this, the paper employs the tool of analytical method to evaluate some of the contending issues in Sartre's submission on the concepts of choice, freedom and responsibility.

Keywords: Freedom, Responsibility, Jean Paul Satre, Existentialism, Moral Implications.

Introduction

Essentially, the concept "existentialism" has generated a lot of debates as it has been applied to many different reactions to both rationalism and idealism in literature and traditional philosophy. In fact, though that those generally viewed as belonging to the existentialist "school" or "movement" are somewhat in agreement in their thoughts on some basic tenets, but they still do not agree on some essentials like human suffering, anxiety fear, freedom and choice. Therefore, because of this disagreement on these essentials, contemporary existentialists rather prefer to be called humanist than "existentialist". Despite this disagreement, that fact remains that it is of the very nature of existentialism to deny the primacy of essence over existence, According to (Sartre 12), "the meeting point of all sincere existentialists, possibly excluding Thomists who call themselves existentialists, seems to be in their avowal of individualism". However, in view of the point of divergent among the existentialists, the word existentialism has generated many definitions depending on

individual's choice and understanding. Some of these definitions or descriptions are discussed below in order to provide a profound background for this discourse.

Conceptual Clarification of Terms

Existentialists has been described as a philosophical movement that further gave birth to a number of different schools and it can be grouped into two major categories; the Christian existentialists championed by Karl Jasper and Gabriel Marcel and the theistic existentialists in the likes of Jean Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger. Nevertheless, existentialism can be described as the philosophy of existence. That is, a philosophical thought that deals with human beliefs in their concrete existence and with human beings having the nature of thinking, feeling and acting. According (William Barret 43), existentialism is a philosophy that confronts human situation in it totality, to ask what the basic conditions of human existence are, and how man can establish his own meaning out of these conditions. Following from the above, it can be deduced that existentialism is a philosophical theory that offers man the knowledge to deal with his personal experience and helps him to acknowledge experience as evidence of existence. Consequently, this experience consists of both bad and good, right or wrong, fears and anxieties. As such, when one from experiences is able to choose freely between that which is good or bad, between what is wrong or right, then one could be said to be responsible for his or her action.

Furthermore, Ritchie on the other hand opines that by existentialism, one means the philosophical attitude which consists in the clarification and the realization of the significance of existence as such. And by existence, one means the mode of being which is specific and originally of man, and irreducible to that of any other entity, thing, or object subsisting (Ritchie 398). From Ritchie's definition, existentialism can simply be said to be the studies of existence as such. That is, the existence of mode of being of man or human.

Sequel to the above analysis, it is clearly evident that existentialism underscores authenticity, individuality, freedom and anxiety because; these are indispensible components of the mode being of man. In other words, these aforementioned attributes are some of the important components that define human existence differently from other beings, objects or things. Following Ritchie's line of thought, Sartre and Karl Jasper are also of the position that the basic material for existentialists' philosophy is man's daily experience and the belief that human condition reveals itself more clearly and obviously when one is in the state of fear, terror, torture and loneliness (Ajayi80). Consequently, Existentialists would reject any interest in metaphysical reality or abstract speculations about human existence or about what is real and unchanging in the empirical world. Thus, this is why (Macqarrie 14) rightly argues that; Existentialism should be seen as a style of philosophizing because they do not believe in abstract speculation but rather they are interested in "concrete human existence"

Therefore, from the above explanations, it can be deduced that it is only human existence that is the primary concern or object of existentialists' philosophy, not a table, an animal, a stone or an angel. As such, for the existentialists, only human beings exist or in other words, only human being is a living person because only human person is conscious that he is alive, having feelings and emotions of love and hate, of apprehension and prejudice. This again explains why the existentialists narrow their focus to the explanation of existence of human being rather than of things in general.

The Concept of Existence in Sartre's Existentialism

As earlier mentioned, Sartre like other existentialists believes that only human being is conscious of his existence by virtue of his ability to feel emotions and consciousness. Based on this, Sartre posits existence precedes essence because in his view man is first of all conscious of his existence before essence. That is, man's existence for the existentialists is prior to his essence. This is why Sartre consistently argues that existentialism:

> …is to say that man first of all, exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only afterwards defines itself… and if an existentialist conceives him as indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing only afterwards will he be something and he himself will have made what he will (Sartre 1947).

From Sartre's conception, it can be evident that man is nothing but what he makes himself. In other words, it simply suggests that man has within his nature undeniable freedom and choice. That is to say, man by the virtue of his of his existence prior to his essence is free to choose the type of life he wish to live and such, he is in control of his destiny by virtue of his freedom and choice. This is why according to (Ajayi 81), the first principle of existentialists' philosophy goes thus; to exist presupposes freedom and choice. Therefore, with this principle, man for Sartre is unarguably compelled to choose a way of life for himself. Though conscious of political and socio-cultural predicaments, man directs and lives a life which he freely chooses but with its responsibility. Accordingly, Sartre's notion of freedom and choice is inseparable part of human nature as a conscious being because freedom makes itself in an act. Hence, by inference, this suggests that freedom and choice are the propelling factors or the motivating character of man's action towards an end which he determines to attain. Though, freedom in this sense constitutes the foundation of human essences, it has no definite root because it is subject to any logical requisite. This is why Sartre rightly observes that man, with the aid of his freedom, reveals it essence by transcending the world toward his own possibility (Sartre 440). Thus, it can be said that the possibility of man's reality is freedom. In summary, for the Existentialists, human freedom is an essential element and basic condition of his existence such that in reality his is free to choose what he is and what he will be.

Sartre's Concepts of Freedom, Choice and Responsibility

The Concept of Freedom

As stated above, the Existentialists generally conceive freedom as the essential edifice of man's being and the basic condition of human existence. Therefore, human existential reality for Sartre consists in freedom because it is separated by nothingness from what it is and from what it will be. That is, man's freedom hovers around the fact that he is not himself but present to himself. In other words, according to (Ajayi 81-82), human freedom could be understood specifically as the nothingness that is made to be at the heart of man, and which forces human reality to make itself instead of to be. The implication arising from the above analysis is that actions performed in a state of insanity cannot be considered as free actions since the agent does not know what he or she is doing. More importantly, if this is the case, it can be deduced that consciousness is very key to the concept of freedom because no action can be said to be free or voluntary if the doer is not aware of what he or she is doing. This points the fact why the existentialists and Sartre in particular, maintain that man's existence and his freedom are identical and inseparable because both are essential parts of man's reality. On the one hand, Sartre goes further to explain that freedom is identical with existence but on the other hand,

he argues that it is not identical with the ability to achieve one's aim. He buttresses this when he alluded to the common sense that, the formula to be free does not mean to obtain what one has wished, but rather, by oneself to determine oneself to wish (Sartre 481). The logical implication of this is that man is condemned to be free and his freedom is not negotiable. By this again, it also implies that man cannot be fixed permanently in a way because he is free and always subject to change.

Following from the assertion, it means that consciousness is significant to human freedom and choice, and goes with responsibility. That is, the idea of being free also implies that there is no excuse for one's actions or inaction. As such, responsibility here goes with exercise of one's freedom and choice. This is so because, man by virtue of his existence, he exercises his freedom and choice of choosing one course of action or way of life, and by that very choice, he makes alternative course of actions possible. Meaning that, one can either chose or chose not to choose but with the readiness to take responsibility for one's choice. As such, human freedom is limited even within itself as rightly points out by Sartre, "freedom is not free not to be free… because the fact of not being able not to be free is the facility of freedom and the fact of not being able not to exist is its contingency" (487). Consequently, each action perform by an individual, no matter how significant or insignificant it could be, is from a free choice. Accordingly, man as a free being cannot avoid making choice because he has to choose one way or the other among many alternatives. This explains why Sartre opines that not to choose is to choose not to choose and so, this leads one to the concept of choice which is one of the major themes of existentialism.

The Concept of Choice

The concept of choice is also central to human nature because the Existentialists position that existence precedes essence if further subjected to critical analysis will leads to the conclusion that man has no fixed nature that limits or determines his freedom of choice. So, the concept of choice in this context can be described as option chosen among many or various alternatives. However, choices can be made in uneasiness manner, it can also be made in bad faith or one can also choose not to choose, but, in any case, each end as speculated above is a genuine situation and the responsibility that accompanies this end rest exclusively on the maker of the choice. According to (Ndubuisi 61), "whatever thing our being may be, it is a choice" it therefore lies on individual to choose to either be great, noble or ignoble, humiliated or embittered by choice.

In view of this, as human beings, we cannot afford not to choose because refusing to choose is also a way of choosing. Hence, it is one's choice that authenticates one's actions or inactions. More so, this simply means that, there is nothing outside man's existence or nature that forces man's choice of action other than his freedom of choice. As such, whatever action one decided to take is an exercise of his or her freedom and choice. Accordingly, the acts of being absolutely responsible for one action logically follow from one's freedom and choice. However, for (Greene 46), there is one transcendent self to which one can look for directives for our choice of actions which is free consciousness. It is this sense of self consciousness that is the foundation of our present choice (Greene 46).In other words, it implies that as each individual being has free consciousness, so does each makes his or her choices independently. Consequently, since one's destiny lies in domain of one's prerogative, there is therefore no

way to act towards its realization than by acting within one's freedom and choice. Fell succinctly corroborated this assertion when he writes that:

> No human act is determined in as much as consciousness itself is determined by its choice of projects or ends. Therefore, whatever action one takes is simply an exercise of his or her freedom. Hence, freedom is indispensable ingredient for the realization of one's authentic existence. It is the very core of, and the door, to authentic existence (Fell 85).

From the above observations, it means that man is perpetually condemned to freedom because he did not create himself, yet in other way, he is free because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. Hence, from here the issue of human responsibility comes in to play.

The Concept of Responsibility

Responsibility in this wise suggests the act of being conscious to the effect that one is the author of all his or her actions. Responsibility on another note connotes accountability and it suggests that an individual must or should be fully responsible for his or her actions. In other words, it goes to imply that one should hold him or herself accountable and be prepared to bear the blame or praise for whatever action he or she has freely performed (Ajayi 85). That is rather than blaming one devil somewhere for one's bad action; one must take responsibility for the consequence of one's action.

Following from the above, one thing that stands evidently clear is that man, though, by the virtue of his existence is endowed with freedom and choice but accompanied logically with responsibility. Therefore, freedom, choice and responsibility are three faces of the same reality. Although, freedom in Sartre's conception as earlier mentioned in this paper is identical with man's being and existence, but when man fully realizes the gravity of responsibility attached to his freedom, he will come understand that freedom is a heavy burden on him.

Evaluation

From the whole analyses, the Existentialists idea of man being condemned to freedom to choose whatever action he wishes, needs more clarification because of the reality of the regulatory powers of political, social, cultural and economic factors that seems to always hinder one's choice of action. Though, the Existentialists would argue that there is always a way out of such obstacles because such factors cannot determine one's life against one's choice. In view of this Ajayi strongly argues that:

> There are two options; one option is to confront these obstacles as realities of life and then take appropriate steps to deal with them. The other option is to avoid them by way of running away from them or refuse to live in such society or at best one may decide to go along with the oppressive conditions that are also a choice (Ajayi, 85).

The above observation suggests that in every situation one is confronted with, there is always a choice and solution. Though, this solution could be negative or positive, or the choice to be chosen may be ultimate or fundamental one that stands between life and death in some

instances. By implication, it means in the existentialists opinion, man also has the freedom to choose either to prolong his lifespan or to end it. Situating this within context of ethics, if human freedom and choice is pursued to the logical end as emphasized by the existentialists particularly Sartre, it could leads to moral relativism or situation ethics. Ethical relativism in this context is a position which holds that there are no moral absolutes or that moral rightness or wrongness of action depends on individual judgment.

More importantly, another point that stands clear amidst existentialists' theory is that, to suppress man's freedom and choice will be unattainable since the concepts of freedom and choice in it foundation overlaps with nothingness at the heart of man. Furthermore, in Sartre's conception, one can see that he over amplification of the concept of freedom because he places more emphasis on man's freedom and choice as tool for charting a course of life. In doing this, Sartre perhaps did not take into consideration some prevailing circumstances such as; diseases, wars, poverty and other socio- political factors that are often times beyond human control. Nevertheless, one may not be too surprise that he maintains this position because he is an atheist and as an atheist, he believes nothing other than the fact that existence precedes essence. Following his atheistic philosophy, Sartre argues that it in the world that man realizes himself and so, it is unthinkable to talk about the world without man or to deny his existence in the world. Consequently, this also by implication suggests that man has no predetermined future or destiny other than the one he chooses for himself. Hence, it is apt to say that man by virtue his freedom and choice is the architect of his good fortune or otherwise of it.

Additionally, accepted that man has freedom and choice, but it is a known fact that every human society is governed by both laws and social norms and these laws and social norms are the measuring standards by which our moral actions are judged. The implication is that, no society exists without laws and social norms because these are what made it possible for a peaceful society to be attained. Hence, the society, laws and social norms are inseparably determining the direction of human freedom and choice. Consequent upon this, if we have a situation where an individual creates his or her own standard differently based on individual freedom and choice, then, such a society will be left to wallow in crave disorder and chaos. In view of this fact, Sartre's assertion that conceives human freedom and choice as sacrosanct and insuppressible is somewhat untenable.

In addition, by Sartre's subscription to the fact that in the exercise of human freedom and choice, one is likely to encounters some sort of constrains occasioned by certain factors, then it implies that he has equally agreed that these factors can also determine the course of man's actions under a given situation or condition. Hence, Sartre's claim that man as a being free to make choice for his course of actions; turning to nothing for the justification of his actions is also not tenable in any ideal society. On the other hand, if we say there is no need for justification for our actions, there will be no room for morality. As such, a moral society, where orderliness and peaceful coexistence will become unattainable because, in every human society, there are always socio-cultural norms, rules or morals the guide human actions with regards to what the society respect or despise.

More importantly, it is evident from all indications that Sartre didn't pay much attention to the prominent influence of the existence of others realities such as; past events, death, places and other environmental factors which are also fundamental in determining the course of

human choice of actions. Perhaps, Sartre did not pay attention to all these because of his contrary opinion that past events such as one past achievement or failures cannot influence one's present and future. This for him does not occupy a dominant position in one's decision or choice of action. But on the contrary, it seems that Sartre totally forgets that, as human beings, we cannot disconnect our past with the present and the future if we are to progress and act rightly. Therefore, we need to maintain and build on our past good choices or jettisoned the bad ones so as to make good choice.

Another very important limitation of Sartre's vehement emphasis on concept of freedom and choice is that he completely ignored the reality of human institutions or authorities (governments), laws, moral values and norms of our society to which all others are responsible to and which shapes the direction of our actions as humans. If Sartre refuse to take all these into consideration, then on what basis is his concepts of freedom, choice and responsibility anchored? To my mind, his concepts of freedom, choice, and responsibility can be more meaningful and relevant to the contemporary human societies if the existence of socio-cultural norms and authority higher than the individual are put into consideration in his theorization.

Conclusion

Accepted that Sartre's concepts of freedom, choice and responsibility has some obvious limitations, it will not be appropriate to condemn the fact that his philosophy has indisputably enhances human choice of action, hope, courage and optimism. Obvious because, it is man alone as rational being that gives meaning and value to life. This is why Sartre's position seems suggest that, though, man is free to make the choice for the course of his action but he is must be ready and courageous enough to take responsibility for his action. Therefore, the emphasis on freedom of man's value creation engenders the sense of responsibility and moderation. This by implication indicates that everybody must be ready to take full responsibility for his or her actions, either praises or blames and no room for excuse because no action is taken unconsciously.

Furthermore, Sartre's existentialism also reiterates that man by the virtue of his freedom and choice, has the responsibility to determine the pattern of life to wishes to live. This again simply means that man has the sole responsibility of designing his destiny and the choice of life to live. It also shows that man has a virgin life which he is expected to fill by his actions. As such, individual failure and success as a free being is first and foremost attributable to one's choice of action. Hence, allusion to any external and unseen forces somewhere as the cause of one's failure or bad action as most criminals often times allude to the devil for their actions is not justifiable. It is not justifiable because according to (Akinpelu 154), man as a free being is 'an open possibility', meaning an individual who is in the state of becoming, and is capable of actually becoming whatever he wants to become.

Another important point well established in this paper is that, as human beings, we have no permanent destiny because we are subject to change by the virtue of our freedom and choice. What this therefore indicates is that, there is always room for change in our world but the change is the sole responsibility of each individual. In other words, the change of bad human conditions in our society today should begin from each individual to the larger groups because each individual person constitutes the larger society. Hence, we all must exercise our freedom and choice to champion the course of common good bearing in mind that each of us

will bear the full responsibility for his or her actions. It is by exercising our freedom and choice of action in a good way that we can attain ideal society because freedom, choice and responsibility are inseparable ingredients of human existential reality and societal harmony.

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