

Freedom as a Value to Sartrean Morality : An Appraisal

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Abstract

The issue of freedom has become increasingly complex with the advancement of philosophy over time; it becomes a perpetual philosophical issue, a subject of debate and controversy, mainly after World War II in the last century when the wave of existentialist culture and literature strongly influenced our society. The issue remains in our modern age with its same impetus and interest, as we still not been able to find any reliable solution regarding human freedom and determinism, freedom and its burden of responsibility, man's authentic creativity and personal integrity, etc. Thus, I will try to focus especially on how Jean-Paul Sartre, as an existentialist philosopher, established his theory of "absolute freedom" in the way for man to utilize it as the highest value for morality.

Keywords: Consciousness, Freedom, Value, Subjectivity, Morality.

Introduction

Undoubtedly, freedom is the only creative and authentic way of our life in order to live as a social creature or as a moral being. But how much are we be free in our socio-economic dimension and in a world where amazing technological advancement takes place? What value freedom provides man to live a moral life in such a world? Jean-Paul Sartre, a renowned philosopher, playwright, novelist, thinks that freedom is absolute; man is absolutely free to live a moral life. He claims that freedom is the highest value for man to live as a moral being. But of course his theory of 'absolute freedom' is not above criticism, especially in cases where the determinism claims that most of our basic characteristics are controlled by our environment, climate, genetic heredity, physiological, psychological and socio-economic-spiritual factors. Thus, my concern in this article is to show how Sartre arguably established that man is free, completely free, bound to be free, condemned to be free in the way to live as an authentic moral being; and how freedom can be regarded as the highest value to live a moral life.

Sartre's one of the main concern in his existential philosophy is to establish the thesis that freedom is the highest value for any moral theory. We cannot go to any moral theory without accepting the fact that man as a moral agent must be free; without being free man cannot be a moral creature. Or to say, "Morality is possible only insofar as human beings are free."¹ Of course, we usually find that many moral theories have accepted freedom as a primary (most important) value for morality. Thus, it seems to me that it is not quite unrealizable or unexceptional to undertake freedom as a value for Sartrean morality. Rather, what is exceptional and as well as important to note is that he undertakes freedom as the highest value for his morality, while he strictly denied to consider any kind of determinism, the value of God and the value of the immortal Soul for morality. Moreover, he strictly rejects the divine authority of God as well as the immortality of the Soul in his existential philosophy and presents the individual man as the "self-creator" of his own life by applying abundant freedom to choose values in moral life.

Aim of the Study

At the very beginning we must consider Jean-Paul Sartre, as an existential philosopher, who undertakes freedom not only as the starting point of his philosophy, but also as the ultimate goal for to build up his moral view. So, at first, my aim is to analyse Sartre's ontological concept of freedom, that is, the ontological development of freedom, its meaning and scope, its limitations and obstacles in the way he presents it as a value to morality. Secondly, I will discuss about the concept of value, as we will see Sartre has argued for the subjective value which commonly



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leads Sartre to an ethical subjectivism; but we will find there are significant differences between Sartre's value theory and the doctrine of ethical subjectivism. And finally, I will try to conclude and defend the thesis on the basis of first two analyses, that freedom is the sole factor or the highest value for his moral theory.

Main Article

At the very starting point of Sartre's phenomenological ontology of human reality, he takes man as a conscious being, as the *Being-for-itself*.² As a conscious being man enjoys complete freedom in its nature; and being conscious man has to confront his own transcendence, his own enormous possibilities. According to Sartre, freedom is freedom of consciousness, and consciousness has the negativity in its nature. He defines consciousness, the for-itself, with a certain negativity of the human reality; for him, consciousness "*is not* what it is and *is* what it is not."³ But, what does he mean by defining consciousness in a way where it seems to be paradoxical and perplexing? The answer, in actuality, leads us to a long way to understand why Sartre considers consciousness as freedom; or, more precisely to say, for Sartre, consciousness is freedom. Now, if we take a look on the first part of the definition, that is, "consciousness is not what it is," it leads us to consider that consciousness is *nothing* at all. In other words, consciousness is not a substance; it is not an "I" (ego) or it cannot be an object that has some objective qualities in it. Rather, *everything* in the world either physical or mental is *external* to it. It is completely independent from the objects of the world; and hence, "absolutely free" and transparent. This is what Sartre radically converted from Edmund Husserl's principle of *intentionality*. According to that principle "consciousness is always consciousness of something."⁴ That is to say, consciousness is always outwards, towards something that are outside of it. Thus, this characterization amounts to certify consciousness as freedom. The second part of this definition, that is, "consciousness is what it is not," leads Sartre to conceive consciousness as *nothingness*. According to Sartre, there is nothing positivity in consciousness, it can only characterised by its *negative* activity, such as, abstracting, doubting, denying, questioning etc. Since, he argues, consciousness is "the being by which nothingness comes to the world."⁵

For this very nature of the consciousness, it is to be said that the conscious being, the for-itself, is a transcendent being that has the potentiality to transcend itself towards the future to be other than what it is. According to Sartre, what 'transcendence' refers to is that of the ability to go through the alternative possibilities, to make a plan for the future, to map out ambitious projects in order to manifest oneself. It is a possibility to create ourselves by performing actions; we create not only ourselves, but the whole world at once, we can even change the state of the world.

At the same time we must focus on the remarks that Sartre made about consciousness, that is, consciousness is essentially freedom. What does he mean by claiming that consciousness is freedom?

We may simply think that 'consciousness is free' which refers to the meaning simply that 'consciousness has freedom;' that is, it simply declares that freedom is merely a property of consciousness. Consequently, it allows us to think that there may happen to exist more important properties than freedom; even, more important is that, it allow us to open the space for finding excuses as to why we were not really free in some particular circumstances. It may be for an emotional, or for sickness, or for some other particular pressing situation, we find a gateway to relief ourselves from the burdensome freedom and its consequent responsibility. So, by emphasizing that "consciousness itself is freedom"⁶ Sartre leaves no place for any excuses. Therefore, he concludes that "man is condemned to be free" and there is no way of cancelling freedom except eliminating consciousness.

Now Sartre argues for man's total freedom, and to defend his absolute freedom theory he denied accepting any kind of determinism. For him freedom is spontaneous; and since freedom is freedom of choice, we cannot choose to deny freedom. No past resolution or even any future project can determine our freedom. He argues that every moment we confront a new situation, and always there is a possibility to choose a new resolution exploiting the past. Suppose, an addicted smoker who made a resolution not to smoke anymore; but every time, it is seen that he confronts such a situation where his resolution not to smoke is violated, even though he is very well aware of the harmful effects of smoking. Namely, it can be said that every time he discovers himself with temptation that since he is free, he can make a fresh, new resolution for him. Thus, the past is always the past; yesterday's resolution in no way determines what one will do now. Even if we consider that, in that situation, he retains with his past resolution not to smoke, this will also be called a new resolution. By the same token the present situation does not determine the future; because, future is always out of reach. The future is always unpredictable and uncertain. Of course, we can make our future projects for to *be* what we *are not*, but this does not mean that future is determined by the present. If we make a resolution for future, this does not refer that we will be succeeded to meet this resolution. There will always the possibility to change or modify the present resolution.

At the same time, Sartre declines the assertion of the determinists, where they claimed that human reality is surrounded and determined by our environment, climate, genetic heredity, physiological, psychological and socio-economic-spiritual factors. To defend his notion of "absolute freedom," Sartre opposes accepting these factors as the limitation of freedom. He considers these factors as the "coefficient of adversities of things;"⁷ he termed these adversities as the "*facticies*"⁸ that includes our concrete situations of our life – that may be biological, psychological, social, economical, historical or spiritual. He accepts and discusses five kinds of facticies in his book "Being and Nothingness;" such as, "My Place," "My Past," "My Environment," "My

Fellowman” and “My Death” These are called the factual givens to the freedom which we cannot ever deny or change; but of course, we can constitute our free projects for future by accepting these given facts. We may seem that primarily it looks like a limitation to our freedom, but Sartre contends that it can no way be the limitation to our freedom; freedom can be considerate and understood in the context of future project, in the light of making choices for future. Because, we cannot be the creator of these facts (e.g. we cannot choose where and when we have to be born); but, in some cases, we can have the freedom to change these facts (e.g. we always have the freedom to choose the place where we live). So, we can never make ourselves free without acknowledging the worldly situation or the facticities that are given previously. Freedom can be meaningful within this concrete resistant world, otherwise freedom would be meaningless. According to Sartre, I live in an organized order into the world but I can take this organization meaningful from my own viewpoint as a free individual. Thus, man is always and absolutely free in the sense that he can able to get himself out of the facticities by providing a meaning and value of these facticities in its own way, in the light of future project. Of course, I cannot freely choose to be white if I am black, or cannot free to have two legs if I have one; but these are mere facticities, so these can in no way become a true obstacle or a real limitation to our total freedom. Rather, much more important is how we value these facts to set a goal for future. Suppose, I can set my goal to become a one-legged mountaineer and that would take me to a new height of honour. This proves that we are totally free to choose an action in the light of future projects. Sartre says, “I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself or, if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free.”⁹

However, values that we have inherited are not ultimate, values are to be invented. We provide value to things in our own way. Thus, values are subjective. There is nothing outside that determines the value of things. According to Sartre, man, as a conscious being, has no essence *a priori* that can be the foundation of value or truth. The existential principle “existence precedes essence”¹⁰ suggests that man being exist in the world creates his own essence. By affirming Nietzsche’s intense rejection of God, that is, by accepting that “God is dead”¹¹ Sartre contends that there is no God or no other divine power that can be the foundation of man’s essence. So, man, by its very nature, is alone and absolutely alone is the source of all possible meaning, truths and values for his own life in the world. Values enter into the world through human action. However, Sartre defines morality as a theory of action and through action moral values are invented into the world. Sartre intensely rejects the traditional, conventional moral system of his own time where values are given. He attacks to these moral systems where values are taken as an eternal and necessary truth for the world; he attacks traditional moral system because their pre-established values are *temporal* as they present in a

particular time and limited by time; their morality is *relative* as they fit only with a specific social groups; their morality is *contingent* as they result contingent facts in the varieties of social, historical and economical circumstances. Even, those moral theories cannot compel us to act as per specified moral values, principles, or laws. Such theories just provide us some abstract principles – such as, ‘lying is bad,’ ‘you should take care of your sick parents’ – but, these are mere principles and cannot enforce you to obey. It does not even prevent anyone from lying. The man who is telling truth is the one who invents the truth as a value and believes it in himself as to guide himself. Since, values are invented by individual’s free choice of action; he must bear the full responsibility of his action whatever the consequences of the action. Thus, man alone has to take responsibility for everything that he does freely. More, Sartre suggests that man is responsible not only for himself but for all men, for the whole of mankind. He says, “...being condemned to be free... he [man] is responsible for the world and for himself as way of being.”¹²

However, it is clear that to deal with human freedom is to deal with human subjectivity, and it deals with the thought of how an individual subject sees his own facts (facticities) in a certain situation. An individual man has to decide what value he would confer in a certain facts; since values are invented by the subject. Certainly, we found no such absolute source of truth and values that can help us to confer meaning to things or facts in the world. Necessarily, we have captured earlier that Sartre rejects God as any source of value or truth. He rejects the ‘existence of God’ as a postulate for his moral philosophy. He only accepts two postulates – e.g. ‘Personality’ (the subject of a moral life) as a moral agent and the ‘Freedom’ as the power of self-determination.

Sartre thinks there is not required to accept the existence of God as the authority of morals or as an authority of *good*. He rejects God by instinct and his disbelieve in God is not by any bitterness. He simply takes the idea of God as an *impossibility* or the idea where man can never reach. In his most widely-read post-war lecture “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” Sartre claims, “Even if God were to exist, it would make no difference ...”¹³ This does not mean that he somehow believes in the existence of God; rather what he means is that the problem of the existence of God is not really an issue in his moral discourse. He suggests that man has to comprehend himself as a sole creator of himself, there is nothing that can save him from himself and he must rediscover himself even if there is really a valid proof for the existence of God. On the contrary, he argues that the nonexistence of God left man alone in the world without having any divine source of value or any goodness for mankind. Since there is no God, there is at least one being who exists first before creating any defining nature or essence, and this being is of course man. Man creates his own nature, own essence only after existing into the world. This is the first conclusive principle that Sartre claims “Existence precedes

essence,” and it is treated as the basic principle of existentialism.

In the very consequence of accepting that “God is dead,” Sartre straightforwardly refers to Dostoyevsky’s crucial remark, “If God does not exist, everything is permissible.”¹⁴ And Sartre argues that this must be the starting point of existentialism; that is to say, without God everything is permitted to us and we are free. In Sartre’s own words, “there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom.”¹⁵ Again he says, “We have neither behind us, not before us, in the luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone and without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free.”¹⁶ Furthermore, he not only rejects God, he even believes that the idea of God is self-contradictory; and hence, impossible. Traditionally, the idea of God is conceived and defined by medieval philosophers along with Christian theology as the being who is the superlative creator of the universe having all power, all knowledge, all good, and He is what He wants to be, a permanent and eternal Being. First of all, the idea of God, as He is attributed, is an idea that deals with the realm beyond human experience; since, God is merely a metaphysical concept and there is no certain proof for the existence of this realm. On the other hand, according to such attributions, Sartre defines God as the totality of “being-in-itself and for-itself at once, all possibility without restrictions, and yet something secure, given, permanent, eternal.”¹⁷ Thus, for Sartre, God as “being-in-itself-for-itself” is a contradiction by nature; and hence, it is impossible to conceive of the idea of God. Thus by declining God as any divine source of value, Sartre proposes a secular type of morality for mankind; and at the same time, he puts freedom on the plane where it regarded as the highest priority or the highest value for his moral theory.

Again, on the way to conceive freedom as the highest value, Sartre not only rejects the idea of God, he strictly rejects the possibility of the immortal soul as well. He thinks there is no soul after the termination of the biological existence of man. As an existentialist he is only concerned with the question of the being that lays on the span of life from birth to death; he is only concerned about the dialectic between life and death. However, life beyond death is just as faith not knowledge; even being a metaphysical concept there is no human experience, even no scientific or logical proof for the existence of life after death. He argues that if there is truly a life beyond death, nobody would be afraid of death when death breathed its last. Rather, we see in our experience that nobody wants to die when death really comes closer. However, according to Sartre, human reality comes into existence by birth and deals with the facticities in life and goes out of existence by death. Of course, he does not deny the value of life after death. Thus it is unnecessary and absurd to accept the immortality of the soul in order to perform as a moral agent.

Research Methodology

The article shall study and analyze the concept of freedom that Sartre accepts as “absolute”

and on the concept of value theory of Sartre where he demands values are to be invented, not given by any divine authority. The main resource, for asserting the arguments against the subversive power of determinism and religious authoritarianism, primarily based on Sartre’s different philosophical and literary works in the contemporary. A careful study of Sartre’s major philosophical work “Being and Nothingness,” and his most widely-read lecture based essay “Existentialism Is a Humanism” guide my ideas to investigate the power and value of freedom as to why it should be regarded as the path finding to live an individual, authentic, self-created moral life. Beside these, the classic forms of freedom can be traced not only in his philosophical contribution, but also in his novels, stories, plays, etc.¹⁸

Review of Literature

The issue of freedom has been widely researched in the field of social and political surface in general as well as in the discipline of philosophy and literature. But my focus retain on scholarly philosophical research in modern times. While we undertake Sartre as primary concern on the issue of freedom, we find a lot of critical research articles discussing on whether his theory of absolute freedom can be accepted. Javid Ahmad Mallah, a Senior ICSSR Fellow in the Department of Philosophy, has tried to show that since, we are free, we do not need to accept God as our deterministic Father; and he claims that whatever we do, even if it results worse thing, we cannot blame anyone, neither God nor our parents or our teachers or our environment. This is why he called Sartre’s philosophy a “real irony.”¹⁹ However, the tendency to let man be free, free from any control of God, or any external circumstances, implies human being to be a solitary, miserable, helpless creature, even though he is a social being. Probably for this reason, Dr. Golam Dastagir, a critic, raised a question – “he [Sartre] regards human being as ‘nothing,’ or ‘devoid of universal essence.’ But can man be born being completely ‘nothing’ as a unique being at all?”²⁰ But I think it is understandable why Sartre puts man into the world of “nothing.” While he claims that man born with nothing, he means that man bears no essence *a priori*, man by born is lack, without any given property; man comes into existence first and then he creates his own essence. Sartre proves this argument by providing the conclusive existential dictum: “Existence precedes essence.” And all his efforts are directed to a long towards to unveil man as a free, self-created possibility.

It is severely criticized on the ground that Sartrean philosophy has failed to provide any ground for constructing morality. His philosophy makes morality impossible since every man has his own freedom to choose the value for himself, but it does not allow formulating any general principles or laws that can restrict arbitrary, inhuman actions. Some critics, such as Olatunji A. Oyeshile, admit that morality is possible only when there are objective moral values, universal moral codes like Kantian imperative which allow everyone to perform moral duties. But Sartre shows that we are not merely an educated animals or a machine who must obey blindly

the pre-established moral codes or universal moral laws in a determining way. Since we are free, as a conscious being, we have the right to choose the path for living and of course we must bear the responsibility for whatever we choose.

However, Immanuel Kant, an early modern rationalist, constructs his humanistic approach in morality contemplating man as a rational being having the essence *a priori*. Kantian rationalistic approach in his moral discourse approves man's freedom in the light of "practical reason," where he acknowledges God to postulating morality. But Sartrean morality has been seen as an attempt against intellectual pre-valued and abstractness of moral laws; as he strictly deny any kind of objective value for morality. Thus so far I have read different contributions in the field of morality I find a gap and inconsistency in establishing freedom as the supreme value for morality. But Sartre's main concern was to build up a moral view where man, as an existent, can able to enjoy a full freedom to choose their life and living. So, from the very beginning of his philosophical journey he tries to keep himself in favour of individual human freedom by destructing any kind of determinism; he even took the position for individual man where God is considerate merely as an absurd, unnecessary and abstract idea.

Conclusion

Thus, from the above discussion, we can say that value cannot be an objective property; there is no universal moral law or any objective moral code that can be followed by all men. Rather, these are too detached from practical life to guide our moral conduct in our daily life. Values are appeared in the world through human action as it is lived and freely chosen by us. If we apprehend value as a given property, it refers that we somehow try to avoid our freedom; and hence, bound ourselves by some given rules which determine our life. According to Sartre, we are absolutely free to decide for our lives – how to live a life, what is good or evil, what is worth for life – where no one can decide on behalf of another. More, he emphasizes that if we consider any given value or any objective moral law, that is also mine, as I choose it valuable in the way to perform moral action.

Thus to be a moral being, man must recognize the value of his own freedom; since man is inherently free, there is no way out without being free. We cannot deny to value freedom in the way performing as a moral agent. He emphasizes that denying the value of freedom is tantamount to self-deception. Thus, to hold any ethical belief we must acknowledge freedom as an inherent value, otherwise, it goes unsustainably against the universe of morality. These arguments lead to conclude that freedom is the prime postulate for morality, OR to say freedom is the *highest* value for his moral discourse. Perhaps, for this reason he can declare so emphatically that "You are free, so choose."²¹ Finally, I can present the whole argument by this way: Man is a consciousness being – being conscious man is free,

absolutely free without any determination – values are not objective or not given by any divine authority, since there is no God or Soul – being free man invents values for to be morale, freedom is the ultimate source of all values – thus, freedom itself is the supreme value to morality.

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