

A Note on Existential Ethics

Abstract

The Philosophy of Existentialism has a metaphysical and an ethical aspect. What is termed as intellectualism regards goodness and badness and the rightness and wrongness of an action to be the functions of the nature of that thing. Plato's moral theory is important with respect to the development of intellectualism. Aristotle's ethical doctrine is concerned with the theory of human nature and a theory of natural teleology. Against intellectualism we have what is known as voluntarism. Voluntarism is classified as theological voluntarism and ethical voluntarism. Kierkegaard is a voluntarist and we attribute ethical voluntarism to Kant and Nietzsche. Sartre's ethics rests mainly on his concept of Bad Faith which takes the form of pretence that one is not free. This is inauthenticity according to Sartre.

Heidegger talks of ethics when he makes a distinction between authentic and inauthentic mode of existence. Man is in an inauthentic or fallen state in his average everydayness. He must reject this inauthentic role and strives to achieve authenticity.

Keywords: Intellectualism, Voluntarism, 'Teleological Suspension of The Ethical', Bad Faith, Freedom, Inauthenticity, Being Towards Death, Facticity, Nothingness, Anguish.

Introduction

Among contemporary philosophical movements, none is more directly concerned with ethical questions than existentialism. The philosophy of almost all existentialists has a metaphysical and an ethical aspect. The existentialists are so to say deeply concerned with the nature of value and choice and moral freedom.

There are passages in the writings of existentialists where they disparage reason and glorify action for action's sake. A more penetrating look in to this matter brings out that within an account of human action, the existentialists make room for what we may call reasons for acting. It may be added that contemporary moral philosophy that is usually called prescriptivistic or non-cognitivist is closely akin to the ethical theory of existentialism.

It is commonly held that the concepts of truth and falsity as applied to judgments of value form the core concepts of Western moral philosophy since its inception. Though this view was put forward by Socrates it was explicitly interpreted by Plato and the whole development of moral philosophy has been dominated by Plato's statement of what may be called the intellectualistic thesis.

Against the view that the moral quality of things is relative to the attitudes and aspirations of individuals intellectualism has always insisted that the goodness and badness of thing and the rightness and wrongness of an action are functions of the nature of that thing or action rather than of our feelings about it.

Two features of Plato's moral theory are important with respect to the development of intellectualism. First his attribution of logical necessity which suggested a conception of the relationship between the form of the good and other universals. Secondly, knowledge of the moral quality of things has been conceived of a type with mathematical knowledge. In both cases the test of truth is essentially logical in character.

So far as Aristotle is concerned, it was a theory of human nature and a theory of natural teleology that form the basis of his ethical doctrine. According to it each individual thing is endowed with a nature or essence that it has in common with other individuals and by virtue of which they are classed as belonging to certain genus or species. This classification in to kinds is natural in the sense that the distinction between defining traits and peripheral traits is supposed to be real and not a conventional distinction.

If this theory is applied to human action, the principles of right action will stem from the telos or end of man, and this end will be implicit in the 'nature' of man. These principles will have the status of moral or practical truths and the end of man is the exercise of intellectual virtue which will be the necessary truth.



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According to Aristotle deliberation is concerned with means to an end, and choice is the out come of deliberation. Deliberation and choice thus operate within a frame-work of goals over which they have no control and the goal of any being is determined by the kind of being it is, that is by its nature.

This view that man has a natural end and that the moral principles by which this end is defined has the necessary truths became the central thesis by which the Greek tradition of ethical intellectualism was transmitted to the modern world.

In the classical presentation of natural law theory put forward by St. Thomas, intellectualism was to accommodate itself to the Christian view that the basis of morality is the will of a personal God. The premise on which Thomas' theory of God's personality rests is that God has a nature or essence. This divine essence differs from the essence of finite beings in the sense that God's existence and essence are one, whereas man's are not.

A counter tradition in moral philosophy, against intellectualism is termed as voluntarism. It is based on the assumption that moral principles of action to which the concepts of truth and falsity do not properly apply are dependent on choice and also guided by it.

This voluntaristic position that is relevant to the concerns of ethical theory is found in certain movements of thought that found expression in the thought of Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century. Later 'voluntarism' was transformed by Kant and others into a philosophical theory of Ethics.

Theories that make the will of God the basis of morality are classified by philosophers as theological voluntarism. This is further divided between those theories that place their emphasis on the moral personality of God, and those that are concerned with the situation of subordinate moral beings under a God whose will is not subject to rational control. As an example of the former one can take into account the concept of God as discussed by William of Ockham. As an example of the latter the thought of Kierkegaard is peerless.

According to Ockham, the traditional distinctions of reason as that between Gods' essence and his existence, or between his will and his knowledge is merely conceptual, for there is no such distinction in God himself or any object at all. The object of God's knowledge is particular things, not universal essences. The conception of control of God's will in relation to particular things is rejected by Ockham. Thus God's acts of will are not subject to control whether logical or causal, because there is no moral order antecedent to the exercise of his will. The divine will thus constitutes what is good and right. The only limit set to the divine will is that it cannot involve an internal contradiction. However Ockham is quick to add that this certainly does not mean that he cannot change his will.

Thus God enjoys total autonomy and he is the only 'moral agent'. The basis of morality is thus the *potentia absoluta* of God, and it is He who determines what actions are right and wrong. In other words, morality does not consist in the order of knowing, but in a spontaneous creativity that

expresses itself in commands by God and in which rational beings are to find the principles of right and wrong. God is not determined by any obligations and any uniformity that may characterize this command is self-imposed and can be terminated at his will.

There is much substance in the thought of the Protestant Reformers to name a few: Luther and Calvin. According to them there is no set conditions which can guarantee salvation. God's will is thus "a hidden" will which cannot be bound by any body of rules.

Kierkegaard is a voluntarist in the sense of rejecting all traditional claims that the content of God's will can be known by human beings in the form of universal principles. The Knight of Faith, according to Kierkegaard gives up all the general moral rules as Abraham was prepared to do. Kierkegaard's phrase "teleological suspension of the ethical" enlarges the sphere of morality to include abidance to God's particular commands. This faith is a kind of choice unwarranted by any objective moral rationality.

The philosophers who have contributed to the development of ethical voluntarism and on whose work Existentialism has been built are the German idealists--- Kant and Nietzsche. They stand respectively at the beginning and end of this evolution. We may also take in to account secondary figures ---Hegel and Schopenhauer.

Kant's moral philosophy is regarded as an extreme form of rationalism. Kant lays down a procedure for determining which actions are morally right and thinks that this procedure is able to provide a satisfactory answer to the question "What should I do?" Kant assigns these powers to practical reason as distinct from theoretical reason.

Kant maintains that morality needs not merely causal freedom, but also logical freedom. If the moral law is directed by God, we would not be free even if we were free in the sense of being able to obey or disobey that command. The 'rational will' as Kant terms it, rules out any arbitrariness or choice in determining what is right. Furthermore universality is a sufficient condition for determining the rightness of an act.

Hegel, unlike Kant had associated volitional acts to the historical community to which individuals belong and on which they are dependent for their ethical substance. The 'Phenomenology of Mind' contains brilliant passages in which moral consciousness concedes to custom and tradition a normative authority. Schopenhauer, it may be added subjects the will to an internal tyrant- conscience instead of an external master, God.

Nietzsche puts forward as his first principle that "there are no moral phenomena" but only a moral interpretation of these phenomena. Nietzsche's term for this interpretation is 'perspectivism'. He rejects the view that an action is right, if it would be right for every human being in the same situation.

Nietzsche's morality is concerned with the creation and realization of ideals. They are the expression of individual choice and make no claim to universal validity or acceptance. It is a freedom to "re-evaluate all values" in the light of one's own ideal. The ideals he speaks of are the ideals of some group and cannot be confined to a single individual.

Nietzsche insists on the importance of tradition and continuity and a sense of responsibility for the future of man as whole. This insistence on the role of ideals in the moral life is Nietzsche's main contribution to ethical theory.

In the justification of the title "Existential Ethics" it will be of interest to take into account Kierkegaard's views.

Although it appears that Kierkegaard has put forward a Christian ethics that emphasized the relationship between the individual and God, yet Kierkegaard has himself stated that an authentic existence is possible outside Christianity,

If Kierkegaard's notion of the meaning of an ethical existence is not essentially based upon Christianity, neither is it rooted in Kantian ethics. Though there is an emphasis on an ethics of duty or 'duty for duty's sake' in some passages in 'either/or' 'The Sickness unto death' and 'concluding unscientific Postscript', the conception of a fundamental duty towards oneself in view of a goal, to become a self or person is the core of Kierkegaard's phenomenology of ethical existence. Kierkegaard's conception of an ethical mode of existence is modeled upon Socrates ethics of self-control, self mastery and self-transformation and Aristotle's virtues as well.

One can get through aesthetic despair, nihilism or theoretical doubt by a resolution to commit oneself to a choice. Unlike epistemic doubt-where one is interested in the question of truth or the possibility of truth what is of interest is one's self. A skeptical doubt as regards what one ought to be cannot be overcome by knowledge or deliberation. In a decisive choice alone is self-reflective doubt cleared. It may be pointed out that Kierkegaard's notion of choice is in many respects similar to Aristotle's account of choice as pointed out in 'Nicomachean Ethics'.

Deliberation is the condition for the possibility of choice, but it neither entails nor initiates choice. For Kierkegaard as well as for Aristotle we deliberate not about the necessary or the impossible, but about the possible which we know to be within our purview. What Kierkegaard wanted to emphasize is the distinction between 'insignificant choice' and 'existential' or spiritual choice' that has to do with the development of the character of the individual.

For Kierkegaard, conscience is an important existential state of being because it cultivates our personality. In a deliberate choice of oneself as guilty one does not assume that one is momentarily guilty for this or that offence, but accepts guilt as a pervasive aspect of one's existence. One often feels guilty about what one has not done in one's life, as we feel guilt over a specific act in our life that mutilates our moral consciousness. Furthermore responsibility for one's choice, decision and action is a response to choose oneself as guilty.

According to Kierkegaard, from the point of view of the man of faith, man must accept himself as in sin in relation to God. He writes in 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript' sin is a decisive expression for the religious mode of existence. The concept of sin has meaning only within the context of a subjective faith in a being before whom one is necessarily sinful.

Kierkegaard remarks in 'concluding Unscientific Postscript' "the terrible emancipation from

the requirement of realizing the ethical (for example in the case of Abraham's spiritual trial in relation to the sacrifice of his son, a trial in which "the ethical is present every moment" even though the "individual cannot realize it" since it is not a question of an individual related to his task "as possibility to actuality but as impossibility". The possibility of sin is the basis for the dialectical tension of religious existence.

According to Kierkegaard the truly ethical individual aims to become the paradigmatic individual to symbolize what is universal in man. The endeavour to become the "universal man" conforms to what is known as Socratic subjectivity. In other words to accentuate one's own subjectivity is what Kierkegaard understands as the ethical prescription of Socrates, Kierkegaard also thought that to endeavour to become a self enables one to become an integrated individual with character which coalesces with Aristotle's view of man in the 'Nicomachean Ethics'.

Kierkegaard seemed to hold that for the moral transformation of the individual it is necessary to curb one's vicious impulses, to achieve self mastery and self-control confirming one's resolve to become a moral being. This struggle is certainly a victory. This makes one's life meaningful. This is not a gift given to man; it is something to be won, a task to be accomplished, a goal towards which the individual strives.

The conception of ethical development that Kierkegaard propounds is not an ethics of duty, but an ethics of self-realization. This emphasis on self-realization as presented in "concluding unscientific Postscript" distinguishes Kierkegaard's conception of practical ethics from all forms of utilitarianism and from what F.H. Bradley asserts as "duty for duty's sake".

Self-mastery is as much a part of Kierkegaard's ethics as it is of Nietzsche. In "Joyful Wisdom" Nietzsche remarks that conscience dictates "Thou shalt become what thou art."

One of the implications of subjective inwardness is the experience of subjective dread. Subjective dread in an encounter with nothingness. In the 'concept of Dread' Kierkegaard says that it is nothingness which is the object of dread.

There is one question that must be dealt with as regards Kierkegaard's ethics of subjectivity, namely: what is the relationship between subjectivity as an ethical goal for man and the notion that the individual who chooses to live in the ethical sphere of existence ought to endeavour to 'become' a universal man, a paradigmatic man?

Though Kierkegaard in his earliest journal entries, linked the ethical mode of being with the Christian (referring to the ethico-religious standpoint) yet he gradually separated the ethical sphere of existence and the religious. Thus he emphasized the development of ethical self-consciousness or ethical subjectivity in order to attain realization of self.

However it is paradoxical to say that by intensifying subjectivity one 'becomes universal'.

Before taking in to account the ethical dimension of Sartre's philosophy it makes sense to discuss the idea of Nothingness which is central to Sartre's Existentialism. 'Nothingness' or negation forms the subject matter of Part I of 'Being and

Nothingness'. Human consciousness is referred to as the gap or space which divides it from Being-in-itself. In another sense, nothingness is thought of as internal to the Being-for-itself. It is the emptiness within which he aims to fill up his perceptions, thoughts and actions. He determines his course of action and makes use of his freedom in to the unknown future.

When a man realizes for the first time that this nothingness exists within himself (in other words he is free to do and to think whatever he chooses) he suffers Anguish. He is unable to bear the burden of this immense freedom and in order to escape Anguish he hides himself under the garb of Bad Faith. This takes the form of pretending to himself that he is not free. Bad Faith is equivalent to in- authenticity in the Sartrean sense.

Sartre describes two different kinds of Bad Faith. In the first kind a man tries to believe, while knowing at the same time that it is a pretence, that he projects himself as a thing and cannot help behaving as he is behaving. This is very close to what Sartre designates as Good Faith of the honest man who accepts that he is weak, wicked, a homosexual or whatever it is, and thus absolves himself from the responsibility.

The second kind of Bad Faith is introduced by Sartre's portrait of a café waiter. In all the movements and gestures, he is simply over-acting. His behaviour is but ritualistic. He bends in a manner which expresses his deep concern and deference for the diners; he balances his tray in a manner which is too precarious. His movements are all like the moves in a game. He is playing the game of being a waiter. He wishes that he makes his condition real so that he has no choice left. The public also wishes to see him nothing but a waiter, they do not want to think of him as a free human being, but prefers that he assumes the role which is demanded of his job.

The waiter merely represents an ideal waiter for he cannot totally conform to the role which is assigned to him. Thus his self is separate from his role as the object is from the subject-separated by nothing. This nothing isolates one from him.

Bad Faith lies in pretending to oneself that one is bound by necessity and has no options open to him. The waiter may not get up early in the morning, refuse to make coffee, may be impolite to customers, but in so doing he may be chucked out. It is useless to say that he must work to support his family. It is precisely to arrange things his own way and to face consequences of this course of things is his own decision which causes Anguish.

In discussing Being-for-others Sartre argues against solipsism. His argument is that one can recognize the mode of Being-for-others as a different mode of being from any other and this ascertains the presence of others.

He gives the example of the man who moved by curiosity looks through a key-hole and listens at a door. He is for the time being completely absorbed in what he is doing so much so that his consciousness of himself and his body is reduced to the minimum of pre-reflective consciousness. He sees the door, the key-hole and all his surroundings as part of the task he has set himself. Suddenly he hears foot-steps in the hall and realizes that some one is there watching him. His existence is re-constituted in a wholly new way. He exists

now as a person eaves dropping. He all of a sudden changes from a subject to an object who bears descriptive labels like a thing and he accepts these labels in shame.

He is changed, Sartre says in the structure of his being. When he realizes that he is under observation, he is supposed to understand a profound philosophical truth that we exist in relation to other people. Other people are not coats and hats for us as Descartes thought they are. People exist in flesh and blood, and we know that we would exist differently if they did not.

Speaking at length on this subject, Sartre says that we would like others to adhere to the role which we have given them and expect their behaviour likewise. But this is not warranted for we very well know that one may tear off this veil any moment and emerge as a free and independent man doing things at his own bidding. This happens when one sees a man sitting in a public park reading a book. His behaviour is unpredictable, he is absorbed in his own thoughts, arranged his world in his own way-this world which is his own and not mine. Sartre calls the relation between the reading man and his look as a little crack in his own universe. Sartre says, "It appears as if the world has a kind of drain hole in the middle of its being, and that it is perpetually flowing off through this hole." Hence one's life cannot be lived at the level of pre-reflective self-consciousness.

A word on Heidegger's ethics is also worth consideration. It is to be noted that 'Sein und Zeit' is as much a treatise on values as it is a treatise on ontology. The ethics of 'Sein und Zeit' is that one must strive to become authentic. This necessitates that one must give up our endeavour to seek a set of given values; the Dasein must choose its own mode of existence.

Inauthenticity or Fallenness is one's attitude towards oneself as das Man in average everydayness. It is a personal failure to admit that one has the freedom to act. It is not a philosophical neglect but a self-deception.

Heidegger speaks of being-towards-death and he relates death to care. Care implies 'falling' into the impersonal collectivism of they. This shows in the everyday attitude to death which is one of flight and avoidance.

The second moment of care is facticity. It concerns what has been the 'already'. From the very beginning of life, the human existent is already in the situation of mortality. Death is and will remain part of the factual human condition.

Finally with respect to possibility and the future, death is seen as the supreme possibility, the one to which all others are subordinated.

Olafson has suggested that as Stevenson and R.M. Hare reject Moore's intuitionism there is in twentieth Century ethics, a tendency to repudiate 'evaluative facts' and the intuition of these facts. Values are the expression of attitudes and depend on one's subjectivity.

To conclude one must make use of one's discretion, spurn all baser impulses, strive to become an authentic self, pierce the role in which one has been cast and thus set oneself free from self-deception.

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