

## AN INTEROGATION OF JEAN PAUL SARTRE'S ETHICAL EXISTENTIALISM

BY

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### ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the moral lacunae in Jean Paul Sartre's ethical existentialism. Ethical existentialism is the belief that people, first of all exist, confront themselves, emerge in the world, and define themselves afterward. For Jean Paul Sartre, there is no supreme entity, no objective system of values, no essence, and above all, no determinism. He argues that individual autonomy is an inescapable nature of man's existence; for each individual writes the next chapter of their own autobiography. The important question then is; how relevant is Sartre's ethical existentialism? Does it pose existential threat to human existence? It is on this note that the paper adopts critical method and submits that Jean Paul Sartre's existential ethics is merely an emotional outburst that concentrates largely on analysing only the dark side of man's existence without adequately taking into cognisance that there are some human personal identity traits like, consciousness, rationality, imagination and creativity, inherent in man that are basically pre-determined. Man, right from the beginning for instance, did not willingly choose to possess those qualities, and in this case, man is therefore not totally free from his own actions as resolutely advanced by Jean Paul Sartre.

### INTRODUCTION

Existentialism is the movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> up to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that attempts to address the problems of human existence, freedom and responsibility, and the place of man in the world. Its central focus therefore is how to make an authentically human life possible in a seemingly meaningless world. Gleaning from the above, Jean Paul Sartre's ethical existentialism is the view that the value of human freedom is the core of human existence and the foundation of all other values. It simply implies that freedom is an inherent value in man and this in extension implies choice. It is essentially the search for the condition of man, his state of being free, and subsequently an attempt to create man's own essence having been thrown into the absurd world where he has to struggle and gradually define himself.

Sartre set to develop an ontological account of what it is to be human as he first rejects the traditional Freud's theory of the unconsciousness, that there are psychological factors that are beyond the grasp of human consciousness and therefore stands as the potential excuses for certain forms of behaviour. This, according to Sartre, provides man with an excuse to avoid responsibilities. Although Sartre was of the view that "human

beings are responsible even for their own passions, because even human desires and feelings are fundamentally formed by his actions and deeds having been abandoned and thrown into the despair world without any entity to guide and direct him” (Stumpf465). According to him, “it is up to the individual to exercise his freedom in such a manner that he does not lose sight of his existence as a free human being” (465). Sartre believes that it is by so doing that man will come to understand more about the original choice which his whole life represents. With such an understanding, an individual could live an authentic life and avoid the pitfalls of self-deceit such as “bad faith” – which represents a phenomenon whereby the individuals act in- authentically, by yielding to the external pressure of the society to adopt false values and then disowns their own personal freedom. Such scenario is what Sartre termed bad faith. Worth noting here is that Jean Paul Sartre is a child of his own age. His philosophical speculation was triggered by his incredible ability to grasp and interpret the precarious spiritual situation of the post war wreckages of France. As at then, the young people of France appear delusional owing to the disastrous effects of the war, and as such, had no hope in anything. But Sartre quickly casts a new anchor of salvation despite how strange his idea seems to be. He advised the young hopeless people of his generation to live as they like without hoping for anything. This, for him, is freedom. In the world of Sartre’s era where some people do not believe in anything or hope for anything, why then could he be prescribing philosophical creed which can only exert unhealthy individualism and internal unrest? This as I think, requires careful evaluation and, of course, the basis of interrogating the moral lacunae in Jean Paul Sartre’s ethical existentialism.

### **SARTRE’S “EXISTENCE” PRECEDES ESSENCE**

Existentialists, especially Jean Paul Sartre, accept the conclusion that “existence precedes essence” and some go even further and affirm that essence does not exist, that only existence has reality. “All existentialists emphasize the person as a subject. The subject exists, and for some, he alone exists; that is to say, if any essence whatever exists, it is individual’s subjective state of existence” ( Sahakian 167).

For Sartre, existence primarily precedes essence. He ask; ‘what does it mean to say that existence precedes essence, and how does this formula bear upon the understanding of human nature? (Stumpf464). In answering the above question, Sartre argues that man cannot simply explain human nature in the manner or ways he seems to describe a manufactured object.

When we consider, for example, a knife, we know what it would be used for and how it would be made. Thus, even before the knife is made, the knife maker already conceives it as having a definite purpose and as being the product of definite process. If by the essence of the knife we mean the procedure by which it was made and the purposes for which it was produced, we can say that the knife’s essence precedes its existence. To look upon a knife is to understand exactly what its useful purposes is. (463).

Relating this to human nature, Sartre argues that when we think about human nature for instance, man tend to describe self as nothing but a product of God's creation. Men think of God most of the time as a "Heavenly Artisan". This suggests that when God creates, he knows precisely what he is creating. From this perspective, in the God's mind, he would compare the human nature with that of the knife. Each individual in this case is just a fulfilment of definite purpose, which obviously resides in God's wisdom.

Nevertheless, some 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophers including Diderot, Voltaire and Kant retained the notion that people possess a "human nature" a nature to be undoubtedly found in every person. For them, human being possesses the same essence, and essence precedes individual concrete or historical existence. Jean Paul Sartre however turned this around and proceeded to take the route of Atheism. He remarked, if there is no God, then there is no given human nature precisely because there is no God to have a conception of it. According to Sartre, "human nature cannot be defined in advance because it is not completely thought out in advance, people merely exist and only later on do we become our essential selves"(464). Sartre opines further:

To say that existence precedes essence means that people first of all exist, confront themselves, emerge in the world, and define themselves afterward. At first, a person simply is, and then we are simply that which we make of ourselves (463).

The view Sartre is advocating for is that men are what they make of themselves, and that we simply are, and have no one else to blame for what we are except ourselves. According to Arne, Naess, "Sartre simply isolate the human being from the life of the cosmos, and declare him disposer of his own dignity and salvation insofar as he pronounces his responsibility" (274). In Sartre's ethics, man is to be judged for his actions alone; his intentions doesn't count. No cause can be made by appealing to the complexity of things, or lack of opportunity to demonstrate one's real self. The existentialist slogan "Existence precedes essence" can be applied in a variety of contexts, as man is simply nothing else but that which he makes himself, and what he makes of himself is no more than the sum total of his real life experiences.

### **ON SARTRE'S FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY**

The ethical postulation of Sartre is basically located in his idea of freedom and responsibility. For instance, he posits that man are what he actually make of himself: man simply have no one else to blame for whatever he is except himself. To illustrate better, Sartre's belief on free- will and responsibility, as I reference an advice he gave to his troubled student. The student told Sartre that he had a very difficult choice to make; he had to either go to fight in the war; or to stay with his sickly widowed mother. The student was seriously in dilemma because, on one hand, he was loyal and patriotic to his country and willing to serve; but on the hand, he loved his mother dearly and desperately wanted to take care of her. Sartre considered many moral principles that might guide his emotionally downtrodden student, such as, Christianity's doctrine to love one's neighbour, Kant's categorical imperative, the utilitarian principle of promoting the greatest happiness for the greatest number and other moral subjective views that one should strictly follow one's feelings.

Sartre knew that none of these would help his student to decide what to do. Take for example, one of the Christian ethical creeds “love your neighbour”. Who is in this case is the student’s neighbour- the mother or the fellow countrymen fighting for freedom? The answer seems not clear, or is it the Kant’s categorical imperative “never to treat any person as a means but as end” (Sartre297). Sartre knew Kant’s moral principle would not guide the student either, and he replied the student;

Very well, if I stay with my mother, I will treat her as an end not as a means; but by virtue of this fact, I am running the risk of treating the people around me who are fighting, as means; and, conversely, if i join those who are fighting, I will be treating them as an end, and, by doing that, I run the risk of treating my mother as means (297).

For Sartre, no moral principles or ethical codes can give the student the right thing to do. However, he still has a very simple answer for his troubled student; he tells him that “he was free to choose his own actions” (298). Sartre submits that “man is condemned to be free. Condemned because he did not create himself yet in other aspect, he is free because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does” (Shiniece4). Sartre adds that freedom comes with responsibility hence, Maurice Natanson cited Sartre to infer that “man chooses but we do not choose to be free; we are simply condemned to freedom”(7). Thus, man could not be sometimes free and sometimes slave; he is entirely and always free or he is not” (49).But there is a contradiction of Sartre’s idea of freedom when he asserts that when I choose in the process of making myself, I choose also not only for my dear self but for all other people. He says; I am therefore responsible not only for my own individuality but, I am responsible for all people.

This seems to contradict the very idea he is advancing. Sartre says 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 any one of us unless it is better for all. This seems to resemble Kant’s categorical imperative; But Sartre do not wish to invoke any universal law to guide our moral choice and actions. He is rather calling the attention of human beings to make a choice, take decisions and be willing to be responsible for their actions in all circumstances. Since man according to him has no authoritative guides. People must still choose and at the same time ask whether we would be willing for others to choose the same action. The act of choice then is one that all people must accomplish with a deep sense of anguish, for in this act, we are responsible not only for ourselves but also for one another.

Sartre’s moral language is tailored towards solidifying his atheistic lifestyle. For instance, he wholeheartedly accepted Dostoevsky;s notion that “if God did not exist, everything would be permitted” and takes seriously Frederick Nietzsche’s illusion that “God is dead. Borrowing from Martin Heidegger, he agrees with him that in a Godless world, our psychological condition is one of abandonment and a flux of choices. Abandonment implies the total dismissal of God and every possibility in some sort of intelligible heaven. “Again there cannot now be any god prior to my choice since there is no infinite or perfect consciousness to think it” (464).

Sartre believes that people are condemned to be free. We are without any excuse, our existence precedes our essence. Apart from our existence, there is

nothingness. In his work titled: “*Nausea*” Sartre “reveals that existence is present and whatever that is not present does not exist. This implies that there is nothing besides the existing individuals and for that there is no God, no objective system of values, no essence and above all no determinism. “An individual” says Sartre is “free; a person is freedom” (102). People are simply condemned to be free. People according to him find themselves thrown into the world but man is a free agent the moment he is conscious of himself.

Sartre as pointed out earlier had rejected Freud’s view that human actions or behaviour is determined by unconscious and irrational desires. This notion according to Jean Paul Sartre provides us with an excuse to evade our responsibilities. For Sartre, we are responsible even for our passions because even our feelings are simply formed by our deeds. Freedom for him is simply appealing because there is nothing forcing one to behave in any given way.

...There is no precise pattern luring me into the future. I am the only thing that exists. We all free, Sartre says, therefore we must choose, that is, invent, because no rule of general morality can show us what we ought to do. There is no guidelines that guaranteed to us in this world (465).

We are forced to become and to define ourselves by our own choice of action, as he emphasizes the need for doctrine to be derived from human experience and reject any appeal to external essence. Like ardent existential atheist, he believes that human beings are forced to create themselves. He contends that the absence of pre-established objective values, make man to be entirely responsible for whatever he becomes, and this puts the future of humanity in their own hands. Sartre however quotes Francis Pongees: “man is the future of man” (34). However, by using abandonment in metaphysical perspective, Sartre emphasizes the sense of loss triggered by the realisation that there is no God to dictate our moral choices, no divinity to give us guidelines as to how to achieve salvation. In fact, there is absolutely no external force to dictates our objective moral values.

man according to Sartre first of all exist, encounters himself, Surge up in the world and define himself afterwards. If man as existentialist is not definable, it is because to begin with, he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself (28).

“Jean Paul Sartre does not believe in a rationally ordered reality, but in a subjective, irrational human existence, whose decisions, choices, and behaviour are executed independent of reason. Subjective man is motivated by feeling, anxiety, irrational impulses, which override whatever decision his rational forces can rally” (Sahakian 168). Sartre submits that existence is not rational but permeated with intense feeling, anxiety, forlornness, abandonment, despair which according to him become man’s criteria for knowing truth. Sartre advise that one is free and have right to choose – that is to say “invent”. No rule of general morality according to him can show you what you ought to do; no signs are vouchsafed in this world.

## **ON ANGUISH AND BAD FAITH**

In the existential world, the term anguish, abandonment and anxiety are re-occurring terms commonly used by the existentialist thinkers especially Jean Paul Sartre. Those terms express the experiences of human freedom and responsibility therein. "Sartre believes that man is in anguish; and he meant that a man who commits himself; a man who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own self and his profound responsibilities" (Sartre 25). Anxiety denotes the feeling of unease you get when you start to recognize the fact that life is after all absurd; it indicates the feelings of loneliness you get when you realize that no one can help you make sense of your own very existence

Bad faith is also one of the unique concept of Jean Paul Sartre's ethical existentialism. Sartre notes that there is no meaning or sense of life prior to acts of wills. Life cannot be anything until it is lived, but each individual must make sense of it. "The value of life is nothing else but the sense each person fashions into it"(466). Sartre maintained that we are the victims of mysterious forces within us. He refers to some behaviour indicating bad faith with further illustration. He gave an example of a young lady who consents to go out with a particular man and she knows very well what the man's cherished intentions are, the lady knows that sooner or later she will have to make a decision. She does not want to admit the urgency of the matter, preferring rather to interpret all his actions as discreet and respectful. She is, Sartre says, in self-deception. Her actions are inauthentic. All human beings are guilty in principle, of similar inauthenticity of bad faith, of playing roles and trying to disguise her true actual personality.

The conclusion Sartre reached is that if I express my genuine personality in all my behaviour, I will never deceive myself, and honesty will then become my watchword; my ideal, and at the same time, my very being. Again, Sartre further posits that anguish is one of the factors that direct human beings toward self-deception. The individuals experience anguish when they are confronted with heavy responsibilities and death. He believes that while every human being suffers from anguish as an effect of heavy human responsibilities, some of them might try to hide their anguish and that is self-deception and bad faith.

In fact, bad faith is a phenomenon whereby the individuals act inauthentically, by yielding to the other external pressures of the society to adopt false values and then disown their own true identity, personal freedom and feelings. When a person uses his freedom to deny his own freedom, he is paradoxically acting in bad faith. The question now is; why do people engage themselves in bad faith? The reason as I think is that people have been deceiving themselves thinking that they lack freedom to make choices because of an unfounded fear of potential consequences of making a choice. It is on the strength of this that Sartre remarked that "Once freedom lights its beacon in a man's heart, the gods are powerless against him" (Sartre,102). Sartre's opinion is that people are free to make a choice and to act according to that choice, and going contrary to it, is in itself a self-deception or bad faith.

### **ON THE MORAL LACUNAE IN SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALISM**

The thesis that existence supersedes essence as advanced by Jean Paul Sartre seems to be highly subjective. His thinking is that the individual is solely responsible for his actions; and this might likely lead to moral breakdown and in extension “nihilism” – a rejection of all religious and moral principles, the belief that life is meaningless. It is a belief that all moral values are baseless and nothing including truth may not be objectively known. A nihilist would believe in nothing, have no respect or loyalty to anyone, no purpose other than the ones he assigns to himself. This could be the outcome of Jean Paul Sartre’s ethical subjectivism. Jean Paul Sartre forgot to note that even though man is thrown into the world, but the world he was thrown into is an ordered world. Interestingly though, not only that man lives in an ordered planet, but his human nature such as feelings, creativity, imagination and rationality are obviously pre-determined because man did not in the ab-initio choose to have those capacities on his own volition. This therefore implies that if man have no choice in relation to those qualities that he naturally possesses, then he is not completely free from his own actions as advanced by Sartre.

Similarly, Sartre argues that there is no universal rules in all cases and it is only the individual rules that exist. This then signifies that, Sartre favours “solipsism”-Hence, the word solipsism is derived from the Latin “solus ipse” which can be translated literally to mean one- self- alone, or less literally as “I -alone –exist”. (Pihlstrom 6). Rollins C. D, reminds us that the earliest use of a cognate of the English term solipsist is ascribable to an apostate Jesuit, Gulio Clement Scotti, in a work of 1652 titled “Monarchia solipsorum” which depicts a kingdom seekers”(20). As an ontological thesis, solipsism states that the world is basically my world and everything there is, is equal to, or utterly depend on the contents of my thought. In fact, solipsism attaches prime importance to the self which when radicalized would culminate into a thinking that only what is internal to my mind at any particular point in time really exist. It is a philosophical thinking in which only the individual and his mental states exist. But, the danger of solipsism which Sartre is advocating is that, it exerts an excessive prioritization of one’s own self which often end up in a kind of narcissistic credo. Besides that, solipsism is an expression of human loneliness and the inevitable isolation of individual consciousness. But then, Sartre’s ethical existentialism is still relevant because we still have to take seriously human subjectivity and individuality, the uniqueness of our individual point of view. As Pihlstrom submits;

“Whatever we do, however we think about others- their suffering, vulnerability and mortality or their unique individuality as such, we only have our own capacities for moral reflection to rely on. We will never entirely escape the risk of either disregarding the other or swallowing the other into our own ethical project of living authentically, no matter how other-regarding we wish to be” (150).

Sami Pihlstrom further argues that “if there is a God who has created the world, including me, then there is certainly God and his creation as perfect being” (n.p).But invoking God can hardly help in this case as the solipsist hardly believe in God just like

Sartre himself. And moreover, God could for instance be a solipsist. Nonetheless, the very different way of countering his solipsism is to acknowledge the fact that the empirical reality of matter is not in conflict with transcendental solipsism. For instance, when we look at the world around us, we see trees, stars, galaxies and birds etc. However, most of these objects we perceive exist independently of us, that they would continue to exist even if we ourselves cease to exist from the face of this world. Such is the nature of the objective world and being-in-itself that Sartre attempts to isolate the individuals from. The world is ontologically and intersubjectively related, and as such, the being-in-itself are meaningful being despite the seemingly hopelessness that Sartre thinks to pervade the universe

Moreover, if one should accept the cognitive belief that nothing other than your own directly accessible data is real, then in the end, one may end up confining himself to a prison whose limits are those data. If it constitutes one's immediate consciousness then such individual will eventually become a prisoner to himself. "The self is your world, the world is yourself. Nothing else is allowed in you" (Pihlstrom 24).

Again, if the individual man for instance is allowed to be the sole determinant of what is good or bad, then we are automatically prescribing the master-morality of Frederick Nietzsche (1844-1900) where the superman uses his "master-moral-will" to bulldoze his way without minding whose ox is gored. This was the case in Nazi Germany under the leadership of Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) and Benito Mussolini of Italy (1883-1945). The consequences of their actions were immense and disastrous as a result of their "wilful self-creation" as core adherents of Jean Paul Sartre. Maurice Natanson is of the view that Sartre's "freedom does not bring a state of perfection or any meaning into the world; it is nothing but a perpetual inwardization of contingency, nothing but a return to the primitive outburst of absurdity"(76). Sartre simply fails to realize that freedom, choice and responsibility are meaningful to an individual if and only if such an individual realistically faces or embraces objective existence.

According to Marx O. Hallman, Sartrean existentialism "invite people to remain in quietism of hopelessness, because it rules out all final solutions. This being the case, it makes action in this world totally impossible resulting ultimately in contemplative philosophy. Moreover, since contemplation is a luxury, we end up with a bourgeois philosophy" (87). Since the bourgeoisie is the super class that exploits the less privileged class, Sartre's existentialism in this regard is tailored toward man exploiting his fellow men in the guise of seeking for freedom. That is, man using his freedom to deny his own freedom.

It is also the belief of Jean Paul Sartre that the individual is the actual parameter of knowing what is right and wrong. He embraces the view that the moral judgments are about the feelings of the person making the judgment. The corollary of this is that unlike the ethical objectivism where the agent have no part to play, but in Jean Paul's ethical perspective, it is rather the agent that is the hub which all things revolve. "The agent displays his primal importance in such feelings like admiration, disapproval, detestation and approval" (Ozumba 35). In fact, there is no universal rule that applies in all cases, it is only individual rules that exist. Many people chided Sartre's ethical existentialism as a philosophy of despair, overly pessimistic and concentrating of all that is ignominious in all human affairs. It is the theory which licenses the most heinous crimes in the guise of



free choice. The Sartre's ethical existentialist rejects the notion of God, moral laws, etc, it then follows that everyone can do whatever he likes, and will be incapable from that point of view to condemn either the action of someone else. And if man reject the existence of God and his external values, man's life will then be determined by the event of chance rather than the necessity of reason, and that will pose existential threat to humanity.

Moreso, "Sartre agrees with Husserl that all consciousness is consciousness of something, which implies that there is no consciousness without affirming the existence of an object which exists beyond or transcends our consciousness" (Stumpf466). Although, Sartre may argue that the object of consciousness can be the world as a solid mass or even trees or table, because without consciousness, the world simply is, and as such, it is without meaning. Consciousness for him generally constitute the overall meaning of things in the world, though it does not constitute their being. But then, Sartre perhaps fails to realize that no consciousness exists without affirming the existence of an object which might exist beyond or transcend our own consciousness. And this consciousness could also be conscious of God which Sartre denies its existence; after all, consciousness is conscious of something. In this case, his aim of assigning to man absolute freedom in the absence of God is a form of self-deception. "A bad faith". Jean Paul Sartre actually leaped away from God and believes that God does not exist but he cannot deny that his whole being cries out for God. This obviously contradicts his earlier claim that there is no external reality to dictates man's direction yet he agreed within himself that his whole being cries out for God he cannot forget. Although his statement above seems to also be in line with Soren Kierkegaard who understood "man as a creature who cannot prove the existence of God but who also leaps unto him in act of ultimate faith" (35). Again, Sartre writes: "... and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all" (29).

This sounds so unclear and contradictory because if something is better for an individual, it does not make it better for everybody. This will go contrary to most people's experiences and the diversity of human tastes or desires. Sartre has moved from the individual making choice for himself to the whole of mankind. This he fails to provide clear arguments to support his position, and this, equally goes contrary to the individual having supremacy over and above his actions.

Despite Sartre's ethical existentialism and its flaws and obscurities, it has tremendously addressed the kind of genuine questions that most philosophers largely ignore or treat with levity. It first fires our imaginations and offers genuine insights into human conditions. Even though Jean Paul Sartre's extreme position on freedom and responsibility is ultimately untenable, it however serves as a reminder to us that we can exert greater control over our lives. One could also appreciate Jean Paul Sartre's point of view as regards to his criticisms on essence preceding existence. The most significant point to note however is that if human actions and nature are already fixed in the world, then man cannot be blamed or held responsible for whatsoever he does.

Again, Sartre's account of bad faith makes the individual to be responsible for his own behaviours. For what began as an immoral subjectivism now turns out to be an ethics of strict accountability based upon individual responsibility. If that is the case, we are what we make of ourselves. We have no one else to blame for what we are, except ourselves. Sartre's existential ethics emphasizes that man has to pattern his life the way

he chooses. For according to him, each man has a virgin future which he is expected to fill by his actions. His philosophy no doubt breeds hope, courage, and optimism which implies that it is man alone that gives meaning to his life. Although, Critics of Jean Paul Sartre's existential ethics "complained that his existentialism was simply an emotional reaction to the dark side of human existence and did not offer anything of cognitive value" (Sahakian565). indeed, the existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre is seen as reactive or a bygone cultural movement which attempts to formulate a yardstick for self- evaluation and focused living, that will be impactful to human life.

## **CONCLUSION**

Jean Paul Sartre's existential ethics encourages mankind to freely make a choice and adopt an autonomous ethical stance, yet it fails to show the way to avoid this existential solitude. This is inherently absurd as he sanctions egomania, and nihilism- a degradation of all moral values. More so, Sartre fails to furnish man on how to appropriately account the origin of the transcendental self that must always freely make a choice. Beside, his ethical postulations which depict moral relativism later turned out to be ethics of self-evaluation and strict responsibility. It is imperative to note that if human actions and nature is already determined and fixed in the world, then man should not be blamed for whatever he does. This on its own encourages narcissism, and example abounds where a narcissistic individual holds everyone to ransom, as everything he thought of, exist to serve his needs. Sartre's ethics reminds us too that man can still take charge over his life even though his extreme position on freedom and choice is highly untenable. The scenario Sartre places the existential reality of mankind is comparable to a situation whereby one is to either swim or sink. Man should however learn to help himself instead of waiting for God or anchor his fate on a fellow man.

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