Sartrean Morality and The Sense of Responsibility: An Analysis

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Abstract: *Morality is our utmost priority for living a social life; and for morality man must consider himself as a free moral agent. Thus, freedom is the fundamental condition for man to be morale. But can we really be free to perform any action or how much can a man be free to perform as a moral agent? Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the legends, a renowned philosopher, literary figure, took the concrete man as the starting point of his philosophy; and he tried to establish that man, as a conscious being, enjoys "absolute freedom" to live his life; but, at the same time, he imposed a burden of responsibility on man, not only for his own life but for whole the mankind. We shall see that the sense of responsibility is nothing but the logical consequence of Sartre's theory of "absolute freedom." What is most significant in Sartre's moral perspective is to comprehend man as a moral agent who is absolutely responsible not only for his own chosen actions, but also for the actions he did not choose. And, probably, this sense of responsibility makes difference from all other traditional conception of responsibility. My aim is to find the arguments for this 'absolute sense of responsibility' which he arguably presents to construct his moral perspectives and to analyze whether the theory of "absolute responsibility" is acceptable.*

Keywords: *Consciousness, Freedom, Transcendence, Value, Responsibility.*

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1. **Introduction**

In our modern age, how well a man lives his life depends on how much he is able to utilize the tools of modern science. We are almost surrounded by the products of modern science; we have become the part of a larger mechanical process. The vast products of mechanical tools in the world chain people in the name of freedom. Perhaps the World War II in the last century has shown us the deadly devastation of the use of modern technology. We have seen, mainly after the World War II, the wave of existential culture and literature strongly influenced our society against so-called materialism and inhumanity and in favour of *individual* human freedom. They try to focus through their various movements and literary works that as a moral creature man has to maintain the value of life, man has to maintain the humanity and above all man is the ultimate truth. They only concern on the individual human being who is the sole creator of himself. They only focus on how a man, as a conscious being, can live a good life, an authentic life into the society. The word 'good living' can be debated, but there is no controversy that the moral value of our 'good living' is being eroded; even an ordinary people do not deny it. So even in the twenty-first century, we seek to find out whether there is any sense of morality, respect or responsibility in human consciousness. Thus, the issue of morality and responsibility is still alive with its same impetus and with its same interest in our present society.

Sartre embodies his moral perspective considering man as a social being on the one hand, and on the other hand, he makes man to discover himself as a sole creator of his own moral life by employing his abundant freedom in choosing moral values. In common sense morality refers to a set of values, standards or laws that enable us to live together into a society. In that sense, Sartre would not be a moralist; because he does not provide any set of moral standards or any set of moral principles for man to live. Noticeably we find, Sartre failed to keep his promise that he made at the end of *Being and Nothingness* to write a separate treatise on morality. However, we find different philosophical and literary books where he shares valuable thoughts on morality. Sartre's thought of a morality developed primarily based on his ontological analysis of human reality where he stressed on individual human freedom and their reciprocal relations into the society. As an existentialist, his central theme of morality deals with the notion of the man, the consciousness, the for-itself whose being *precedes* its essence. Man is the only being who creates his own essence by existing as a being with its essential characteristics of freedom. Sartre contends that, man, as a conscious existent, invents moral values by applying his abundant freedom; there is neither any divine value nor any divine authority (e.g. God) that can provide values for man to live a moral life. As a free being man is the foundation of all values and makes his own choice of the truth for himself. Thus, man alone and absolutely alone a man bears the responsibility for what *he is*, for what he chooses to *be*, for what he does or will do. There is no one and absolutely nothing that can take the responsibility on behalf of other. Moreover, regardless of the situation, whatever a man does, he does freely and for which he must be

answerable to everyone. This accountability makes man to take the responsibility for whatever he chooses freely, not only for himself but for all men. There is no way out without taking the burden of responsibility. This approach leads Sartre's moral perspectives to humanism where a sense of responsibility leaves a deeper significance for his morality.

2. Aims and Objectives

In this article, my aim is to search individual man as a moral agent, who enjoys "absolute freedom" in choosing actions. I shall focus on how Sartre argues to defend his theory of "absolute freedom." Then my concern shall be to show that the moral values are not given; man invents values for his moral life, and there is nothing absolute, nothing is there in the world that can provide values for man to guide him. And finally, my concern shall be to establish that as a free moral agent man must take the responsibility, not only for his own chosen actions but for the whole world where he participates in all happenings willingly or unwillingly. That is to say, my aim is to defend Sartre's notion of "absolute responsibility" by analyzing the various arguments scattered throughout his writings. In order to establish my goal, I have paid much attention to the study of Sartre's various works, especially to the *Being and Nothingness*, and *Existentialism Is a Humanism*; and besides, I have followed a number of scholarly books and articles to analyze the arguments.

3. Main Article

3.1. Nature of Consciousness:

I have mentioned earlier that, for Sartre, man, as a conscious being, first exists into the world and then he proceeds to create his own essence. Actually Sartre's concept of "absolute freedom" comes from his ontological analysis of human reality. In his ontology, Sartre considers two separate regions of being – e.g. being-in-itself (*en soi*) which refers to the worldly objects, which is massif and solid, which is the object of consciousness; on the other hand, being-for-itself (*pour soi*) which refers to man as a conscious being, which is conscious of objects and of itself as well. To illustrate the concept of consciousness, Sartre acknowledges Edmund Husserl's principle of intentionality that claims, "Consciousness is consciousness of something."[1] That is to say, consciousness is always outwards, towards something, towards an object; although consciousness is conscious of itself as well, but the self is not an object in this respect. According to Sartre consciousness has the negativity in its nature, as he defines consciousness, the for-itself, as "it *is not* what it is and *is* what it is not."[2] Primarily, it seems that the definition is perplexing and paradoxical; but by this definition Sartre leads us ultimately to consider that consciousness is freedom. The definition expresses that, in reality, consciousness is *nothing* at all; it is not a substance, it is not an "I" (ego). It always maintains a considerable gap between the world and itself. This gap makes consciousness to considerate it as *nothingness*, and since it has no content, it is transparent. Everything in the world either physical or mental

is *external* to it. More, he contends that there is nothing *positivity* in consciousness, it can only be characterised by its very *negativity*, such as, abstracting, denying, doubting, questioning, etc. For this very nature, consciousness allows *nothingness* to come into the world. Thus, Sartre says, "the man [as a consciousness] is the being by which nothingness comes to the world."[3]

However, the nature of consciousness allows us to consider man as a transcendent being that has the potentiality to transcend itself. Human consciousness is a constant process of becoming; he is never identical with its own past, he always tends to surpass the past and the present to go towards the future. According to Sartre, what *transcendence* refers to is that of the ability to go through the alternative possibilities, to make a plan for future, to map out ambitious projects in order to manifest oneself. Thus, there is a possibility to create one's own *essence* by performing freely chosen actions; but we create not only ourselves, we create whole the world at once; we can even change the state of the world.

3.2. Consciousness is Freedom:

Since, consciousness is nothing, it is completely independent from anything in the world; and from which Sartre radically claims that consciousness is essentially freedom. What does it mean? According to him, if we simply claim that "consciousness is free" then freedom would be a mere characteristic of consciousness, which refers to the meaning that consciousness has freedom. Again, if freedom is conceived as mere property of consciousness, then it allows us to think that there may happen to exist more important properties than freedom. Even, what is more crucial to note is that it allows 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 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"[4] Sartre leaves no place for any excuses. Therefore, Sartre concludes that "man is condemned to be free" and there is no way of cancelling freedom except eliminating consciousness.

3.3. Freedom is Absolute:

In order to find a significant moral discourse in Sartre's philosophy where he imposes a sense of absolute responsibility on individual man, I must at first tend to defend his theory of "absolute freedom." According to Sartre, freedom is spontaneous; we born with freedom. There is nothing that can determine our freedom. Of course, there is a concept of determinism, which claims that most of our basic characteristics are controlled by our environment, climate, genetic heredity, physiological, psychological and socio-economic-spiritual factors. But Sartre strictly denies any kind of determinism; he even opposes to accept these factors as the limitations to our freedom. Of course, he does not deny these worldly situations to which he considers as the "coefficient of adversities of things."[5] He termed these adversities as "facticities"

that includes worldly situations of our life – that may be biological, psychological, social, economical, historical or spiritual. He discussed five kinds of such facticities in his book *Being and Nothingness*; such as, "My Place," "My Past," "My Environment," "My Fellowman," and "My Death." But these are mere facts that we must live; we cannot even deny or change these facts. Primarily, it seems that the facts are limiting our freedom; but Sartre denies accepting it as the limitation to our freedom. Because, we are the being who confer meanings on the facts; and we must understand freedom in the context of our future projects. He even thinks that, although we are not the creator of these facts (as 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). However, we cannot make ourselves free without acknowledging these given facts. 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 it is true that, 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 to have one leg is not the real limitation of total freedom; we are totally free to choose an action in the light of future projects. Thus 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."[6]

To defend the concept of total freedom, he even denies the existence of God as a determining character over human world. By affirming Nietzsche's intense rejection of God, that is, by accepting that "God is dead"[7] Sartre contends that there is no God or no other divine power that can be the foundation of man's essence. Man creates his own essence only after existing into the world; man has no essence *a priori.* The existential dictum "existence precedes essence"[8] suggests that there is no supreme authority over man into the world. Some critic comments that the rejection of God makes Sartre as an atheist and on the basis of which he formulates his atheistic moral discourse. But this is not true that Sartre's morality depends on his atheistic approach; rather it is to note that his rejection of God is by instinct, not by any bitterness. He thinks that there is not required to accept the existence of God as the authority of morals or as an authority of *good*. In his most widely-read post-war lecture *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, (1946) Sartre claims, "Even if God were to exist, it would make no difference ..."[9] 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.

3.4. Freedom Entails Responsibility:

By rejecting God, Sartre makes man to be free absolutely; without God man is completely alone and helplessly thrown into the world, where he has to make his decisions solely without any guidance by any divine authority. Sartre claims,

"…if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence – a being whose existence comes before its essence," and if "existence truly does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is to make every man conscious of what he is, and to make him solely responsible for his own existence. And when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men."[10]

3.4.1. Authority of Value and Responsibility:

Being free completely, man invents the moral values for his own life. There is no objective value, no universal moral law, and no eternal truths for man to relay. So, for Sartre, man 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. 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. However, those moral theories cannot compel us to act as per a 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. Moreover, Sartre suggests that man is responsible not only for himself but for all men, for the whole mankind. He says, "…being condemned to be free… he [man] is responsible for the world and for himself as way of being."[11]

3.4.2. The Others and Authenticity as Moral Virtue:

Some critics may ask, 'Why should I take the responsibility for whole the mankind?' It is because man is not an isolated being; he must consider the existence of the others in to the world. For Sartre, his existence is *existence-in-the-world*, and thus his thoughts and actions are always conditioned by the existence of the others. Heidegger says that the being of man is *being with* (*mitsein*). Each individual man or any individualistic approach having full freedom can only sustain in the background of common social thought and can be isolated from any generalized thought of a social group. In that context one can make his existence authentic or inauthentic. By accepting the role of a kind of generalized man or as a part of totality of the group, one makes his existence *inauthentic*; but it is possible, on the other hand, to find the existence as an independent and responsible being amid his existence as the *being-in-the-world*. This may be called an *authentic* existence of an individual.

3.4.3. Authenticity and Responsibility:

Sartre's exposition of authenticity, in *Being and Nothingness*, provides us to understand his ethical stand point. He considers *authenticity* as the chief moral virtue for his moral consideration. Sartre contends that, to be an authentic person, one must apprehend the absolute freedom and its consequent responsibility. But, sometimes the burden of responsibility makes man to feel anguish, and to flee from this anguished apprehension man try to apprehend himself as a part of *everybody*, a social unity of *they*, which signifies his *inauthentic* existence; and inauthentic existence is actually a reflection of people's bad faith. Bad faith is actually an excuse, an alternative way of departing from taking responsibility. But when the individual culminates in frustration, he takes the decision with all sincerity, priority and necessity according to his promise. As a result the decision turns into a responsible step. This is the ethical stage of individual's existence where things like concentration, contemplation, invention and mental preparation makes man to take the responsibility. Choice and responsibility are therefore necessary and unavoidable for Sartrean morality. When it is said that man is responsible for what he does, it implies that what he does, does freely and he could have refrained from doing it; henceforth he has to be accountable to the others for his action. This accountability makes people responsible. Consequently, it refers that everyone is fully and solely responsible for everything that he does independently.

3.4.4. Responsibility is Absolute:

Sartre even more strictly tries to convey us that we are not only responsible for our freely chosen actions; we are even responsible for all the happenings in the world which we do not choose. Because, everything that happens in the world, the significance comes from man; man is the being who makes the world meaningful through his actions. It is, therefore, the for-itself who has to take the *absolute responsibility* for its being, even if the situation become very worst

disadvantages or endanger; because, there is nothing from outside that compel us to decide our feeling or our manner of living the situation. In other words, since everything that happens to me happens through me and it is mine, so I must bear the full responsibility for it. Even, in the case of community events, such as, if a war that suddenly breaks through, which engages me in it, it does not come from outside. This war is *mine*, although I did not declare this war. But I choose this war by my very attitude towards it. Of course, I can take myself away from the war by getting suicide or by exile or by guile; but it is certainly the ultimate possible way of confronting a situation. So it cannot be a largely desirable way for us due to revealing a cowardice image among the public opinion; or we may find certain other values for joining the war instead of fleeing it. And in the end I choose it, as I deserve it and there is no way out of it. For this reason, Sartre quotes the statements of J. Romains as saying that, "In war there is no innocent victims."[12] Therefore, whatever may be the situation I must bear the entire responsibility of the war as if I had declared it; and I have nothing to excuse for that, not even any compulsion on my freedom. Being without any excuse I must not feel remorse or regrets for my being. As my very upsurge into being, I must bear the whole weight of the world alone, without any support from outside.

Some critic might object, why should I be thrown into this world of responsibility lonely since I did not want to be born? Sartre says that this would be a very simple and naïve response that lays a great emphasis on our very 'facticity.' Because, the very fact is that we born and no one is the foundation of his own being; we are just thrown into this solitary world. This does not mean that we should remain inactive or passive in this universe just as a floating wood on the water. Rather, we find ourselves, in a sudden, to this world with profound responsibility; even if we make ourselves inactive or refuse to choose responsibility still it is what we choose ourselves in a certain way where the facticity of our birth is not inapprehensible. In other words, there is no way to escape from this very responsibility. Furthermore, the birth is not purely a facticity, as it is considered for our "projective reconstruction" of our being. Sartre says, "I am ashamed of being born or I am astonished at it or I rejoice over it, or in attempting to get rid of my life I affirm that I live and I assume this life as bad. Thus in a certain sense I choose being born."[13] However, according to Sartre there is nothing without facticity in human reality; and therefore, "I am responsible for everything, in fact, except for my very responsibility.[14]

4. Conclusion

Under this consideration, since man is the one who gives meaning to every situation in the world and as well as to oneself for his very existence in it, there may be any situation that can have infinite number of meanings. Even there is nothing that can guide to anyone to determine or to interpret this meaning in one way instead of another. It is up to the man who is alone, without any help from outside, to determine the meaning that are going to happen for him. This very fact brings man to accompany with forlornness and anguish. That

is, the for-itself, the individual human being who realizes that he has been abandoned into a world where he is compelled to decide the meaning of his being for which he has to bear the profound responsibility without being feeling either remorse or regret. And there is no way of giving any excuse; because, in essence, he is no longer anything but a freedom. He must be in anguish because there is nothing that can reduce the burden of freedom and its consequence responsibility, and as we pointed out earlier that most of the time to get rid from this anguish he finds himself in bad faith.

Sartre's view on morality makes us to belief that man must bear the burden of freedom and it consequence responsibility until he has a chance to surpass his own self. There is only one possibility to refrain oneself from the burden of responsibility, and that is to cease one's being from all the potentiality to transcend itself; but it is possible only by one's death. In other words, if someone thinks of himself as a perfect being with nothing to transcend, he will turn out into an object devoid of freedom and responsibility; but the ontological characteristics of consciousness demands that man can never achieve this *objectness* until death.

However I think that Sartre propounds two little but strongest slogan ever in the history of morality, that are – "Man makes himself"[15] and "You are Free, so choose.[16] What would be the impact on human behavior when man confront of such a morality? Stephen Priest, a commentator, says, "Realising the full burden of our responsibility to humanity provokes in us the deepest sense of dread and anxiety. This discomfort is why we plunge ourselves into bad faith. Facing our freedom requires facing our responsibility. We can hardly bear to face our responsibility so we deny our freedom."[17] We seek to escape from this very painful responsibility; and to get rid from suffering in anguish, we try to find shelter into bad faith, which in fact indicates our inauthentic existence. In bad faith we are concealing our freedom and pretend that we have nothing to do; as if we are bound by the circumstances, as if we are the victim of a social, political, financial and religious culture of our society. However, Sartre urges us to hold on to the belief that we must have the courage to take responsibility as a free individual and regain our authenticity. Thus, Mary Warnock says, "Knowing what we are up to in deciding to do this or to do that, seeing clearly who we are and what exactly we are doing, this is the ideal which is approachable through the avoidance of Bad Faith.[18] We can achieve our own personality and authenticity with full freedom by the recognition of our absolute responsibility. And to be authentic an individual must embrace and not escape from the human condition. Authenticity, thus, requires a lucid awareness of the self in a given social condition. Here, responsibility would refer to a causal liability or obligation towards whole mankind. This shows that morality is an art that possess authentic individual to be creative, inventive and flexible. Thus, it turns out that, Sartre's existential morality is deeply a social project of responsibility for embracing one's own identity and uniqueness.

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