



PREDICAMENT, SITUATION, CHOICE, AND COMMITMENT

Dr. Uday Singh

Associate Professor (Philosophy)

Government Girls' College

Chittorgarh, Rajasthan

ABSTRACT:

There are a few issues which I intend to discuss in this paper such as what comprises human reality and freedom. Readers have found great deal to criticize Sartre's notion of freedom and not much to admire. The conclusions they draw about the human reality and freedom seems to be poorly informed by contemporary research in existentialism and interdisciplinary work on human reality. My aim is to oversimplify many complex and controversial issues simultaneously offering some agreement on matters that are still subject to debate. I think what is at issue is not the constitution of the faint notion of freedom and choice by readers but the justification by the readers for taking that blurred notion to be clear and distinct. Hence, I will consider an aspect of his thought-provoking philosophy, *viz.*, the construal of the notion of choice and human predicament.

KEYWORDS: Choice, Responsibility, Commitment

Understanding the way in which Sartre deals with freedom, choice, and responsibility; needs attending to the way in which he takes himself to be entitled to maintain the boundary of distinction between being and nothingness. The philosophical explanation of choice and freedom is rooted in nothingness. The component factor of human reality—a suite comprising of nothingness, freedom, responsibility, decision, choice, faith, anguish,



guilt, resentment, commitment, respect, trust *etc.* made the existentialist proclaim that *existence* comes before *essence*. Sartre propounds the ontology of being in Sartre; *for-itself* and *in-itself*; as linked with human existence. At the centre of Sartre's philosophy is the claim that man is free to choose, free to decide. Sartre is very critical of the attempt of those who hold that they were not free to choose or to decide. Sartre never seems to grant this very point in his characterizations of human reality in *Being and Nothingness*. Nevertheless, this worry concerns the proper conception of the upshot of the notion of human existence. According to Sartre, the ontology of being comprises freedom and a host of other considerations. Sartre holds that there is human predicament in which man finds himself situated in the world. Amidst human condition and exigencies man feels a deep existential sense of anguish, dislocation, alienation, and disconnection in the world. The world seems to make no sense. Man feels as if he is exiled from existence itself. He feels the existential nausea encircling him. Since there is no place or space for God in the atheistic existential hardware, the question arises as to who will rescue man from the burden of consciousness that is from the predicamental situations. Sartre has quintessentially placed God outside human existence, thus there is no silent, invisible figure living in the sky to redeem him. Man cannot wait for God to act or react in this unprecedented situation as God is *no more*. When practically each and every person turns to God or spirituality in his or her travails or predicament, will the existentialist story with a missing captain of the ship hold water? Can man deliver himself from this challenging situation? Can existentialism provide succour? Well, as a matter of fact, in respect of the earlier interpretations of Sartre, it seems that the accounts have overleapt the inevitability of freedom, choice, responsibility, and commitment for purposive existence or life way. Commitment is righteous and vice versa. However, in this picture, commitment is not a



set of social norm but commitment could lead to human benefits. Due to tensions arising out of disagreements and selfishness, there is a potential danger of the situation escalating into violence. No norms, rules or code of conduct can anticipate each and every human predicament and situation, as each individual is unique, has a unique mind, and is uniquely situated; thus there would be instances or cases about which rules and norms are either silent or hazy and indistinct. Hence human beings if choose to remain committed to a goal without being selfish, a resolution procedure would evolve that would not cripple society but would be intrinsically attractive and fascinating for altruistic purpose and human welfare.

Existentialistically speaking, especially from Sartre's point of view, man is free to choose his way of being (life-style) but he is not able either to choose *not to be* (to avoid altogether any choice or to refrain completely from making any choice) or to choose not to be free. Not to choose also implies *choosing* to not to make any choice. In fact, there is no recess of any sort from choosing that is from making choices.

In *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre gives the example of his own student-soldier who was confronted with the predicament of going to England to join the Free French Forces or of staying near his mother and helping her to live. When he approached Sartre for a piece of advice to redeem him from the human condition, Sartre had but one reply to make. "You are free, therefore choose—that is to say invent." ¹

Avid and careful readers of Sartre know well, that man is free to choose but he cannot choose to be free. So let's clearly see the Sartrean point that there is no meaning for man's existence other than what he constitutes or makes for himself by his acts. Since he is made by nobody except himself he alone is responsible for making himself and this making of



man is a continual process comprising acts or actions. As there is no human nature or essence, man's actions are free. Man is not determined by his nature. He is freedom. He does not receive value from a transcendent source but rather he is left alone with his freedom. When values emanates from man, there is one thing which man would desire by all means and that is freedom, so freedom becomes the value of values in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. Man can never be other than a free man so the existential problems of life that confront man can never be solved other than by man himself that is by his own *existence*; that is by his *commitment*. In fact, in a captivating phrase Sartre says, "We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does." ² Both Christian and atheistic existentialists believe in common that existence precedes essence. As there is no essence '*man has to make himself*' as Sartre often reiterates. "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism."³ says Sartre. Since existence is prior to essence man is responsible for his life that is for whatever he is. As man primarily *exists*, existentialism places each individual in complete control of himself as he is, and puts the responsibility for his life or existence upon his own shoulders. Thus existentialism is neither an outdated line of thought nor a philosophy of quietism or inaction but it is a quite unique philosophy of commitment and action, and accountability for the action which was free. God does not exist so there are no commandments, no written norms, no written values, no do's and don'ts, hence in such scenario everything is permitted. There is only man and man is freedom thus man is now without any excuse or justification because the useful and costly hypothesis God who was referred to justify man's action is now no longer present. Man



has to make *himself*. Though the process of making himself/herself is a life-long process; yet it never finishes or completes itself even after going through a long life. Death can only stop the process it can never finish or complete it. Since the process of making *one-self* always remains incomplete or unfinished man cannot be defined. Only something which is complete and finished can be defined. We cannot define man just as we can define a computer because a computer is complete; it is finished and no more waiting to be a computer. But in man's case the future which is always there, always keeps man waiting to become himself or to make himself. Further, man can never become finished or complete like a computer or for that matter like a thing because man is *no-thing*. A thing has an essence (fixed, unfreedom) but man has no essence. Essence implies fullness, completeness, necessity, *having been*, nature, no more possibilities etc. Such fullness is in logic, system, science, and in abstraction. Two plus two is four is technically fully true, it is completely true, and it is necessarily true. But such technically full and necessary truths do not exist in the realm of human reality or existence because man is without essence, without nature. He is free till his last breath and he has to make himself in the ultimate moment too, and yet remaining unfinished because we never know if he had to live an extra moment what would have been the upshot of that extra free moment; and these would-be-possible-extra-free moments can go on endlessly. Therefore, man cannot be defined in the way one defines a sofa or a chair. "Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom. What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the *being* of "human reality." Man does not exist *first* in order to be free *subsequently*; there is no difference between the being of man and his *being-free*."² His very existence causes anguish in man because existence implies various possibilities or options. Which option has to be chosen, which



possibility to be realized and which to be discarded depends on man alone. Man himself has to decide. There is no one to guide him except he himself. No amount of diligent and systematic inquiry or investigation into the human condition of the student-soldier would have helped him to decide or discover the solution to his predicament. There is no facile method by which the student-soldier could overcome his predicament. But he has to choose between any one of the two options and the choice is criterionless, thus man feels forlorn, forsaken, and abandoned, in fact, he feels anguish.

A particular option or choice becomes valuable because it was chosen by man and not that a particular choice was valuable and hence it was chosen. Prior to being chosen, a choice or an option is empty of any value. Values come from man and this anguishes him because man has to *decide* concerning his possibilities, concerning his possibility of choice and he is without any excuse regarding his *decision* which emanates from a self which he is *not* or as Sartre says “....man is always separated by a nothingness from his essence.”⁵ Thus the very fact that I have no essence and the very fact that I have to make myself, beginning from the scratch, anguishes me. Each moment I have to make myself. “In a word, we must recall here against Hegel that being *is* and that nothingness *is not*.”⁴ Indeed, whether one is involved in a high-stakes situation or a low-stakes situation with all kinds of restrictions and variations; this in itself would not resolve the issue. Choice and commitment would give value to these variables. It can ameliorate crisis and alleviate pain and sufferings faced by humanity, leading to prosperity and welfare of human beings. To conclude, I have explored commitment; a less-explored phenomenon; in relation to human reality and choice and have briefly presented the issue with more engagement. However, those steeped in existential debate, it strikes me as a fruitful problem to be further examined.



Footnotes

1. Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1966. *Existentialism and Humanism*. Translation and Introduction by Philip Mairet. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. 38.
2. Ibid. 34.
3. Ibid. 28.
4. Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1992. *Being and Nothingness : A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. Translated and with an Introduction by Hazel E. Barnes, University of Colorado. New York: Washington Square Press. 60.

References

- 1 Alberes, Rene. 1961. *Jean-Paul Sartre. Philosopher Without Faith*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- 2 Brée, Germaine. 1972. *Camus and Sartre: Crisis and Commitment*. New York: Delta Press.
- 3 Camus, Albert. 1946. *The Stranger*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert. New York: Knopf.
- 4 Carson, Ronald J. 1974. *Jean-Paul Sartre*. London: Lutterworth Press.
- 5 Caws, Peter. 1979. *Sartre*. London :Routledge and Keagan Paul.
- 6 Dempsey, P. J. 1950. *The Psychology of Sartre*. Westminster: Newman Press.
- 7 Grene, Marjorie. 1968. *Introduction to Existentialism* (First published as *Dreadful Freedom*). Chicago : A Phoenix Book. The University of Chicago Press.
- 8 Hubert, L. Dreyfus and Mark. A. Wrathall. 2009. *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*. Memphis: University of Memphis.



-
- 9 Husserl, Edmund. 1976. *Ideas. General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. Translated by W.R. Boyce Gibson. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. ; New York: Humanities Press Inc.
- 10 Jolivet, Régis. 1967. *Sartre: The Theology of the Absurd*. Westminster: Newman Press.
- 11 Kaufmann, Walter. 1962. *Existentialism from Dostevsky to Sartre*. New York: Dover Publications.
- 12 Kierkegaard, Soren. 1941. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* . Translated from the Danish by David F. Swenson. Completed after his death and provided with Introduction and Notes by Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press For American Scandinavian Foundation.
- 13 Kierkegaard, Soren. 1973. *The Concept of Dread*. Translated with Introduction and Notes by Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- 14 LaCapra, Dominick. 1979. *A Preface to Sartre : A Critical Introduction to Sartre's Literary and Philosophical Writings*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd.
- 15 Lafarge, Rene. 1970. *Jean-Paul Sartre: Philosophy*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- 16 Murdoch, Iris. 1967. *Sartre—Romantic Rationalist*. London: CollinsFontana.
- 17 Santoni, E. Ronald. 1995. *Bad Faith, Good Faith, and Authenticity in Sartre's Early Philosophy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- 18 Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1948. *The Psychology of Imagination*. Translated from the French, Typography by Brown Brothers Linotypers. New York :Philosophical Library, Inc.
-



-
- 19 Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1957. *The Transcendence of the Ego. An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*. Translated and Annotated with an Introduction by Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick. New York: The Noonday Press, Inc.
- 20 Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1961. *The Reprieve*. Translated by Eric Sutton. Harmondsworth: Penguins.
- 21 Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1962. *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*. Translated by Philip Mairet with a Preface by Mary Warnock. London : Methuen & Co. Ltd.
- 22 Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1964. *Essays in Aesthetics*. Selected and Translated by Wade Baskin. London: Peter Owen Ltd.
- 23 Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1965. *Nausea*. Translated by Robert Baldick. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.
- 24 Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1966. *Existentialism and Humanism*. Translation and Introduction by Philip Mairet. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd.
- 25 Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1974. *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. Translated by John Matthews. London: NLB.
- 26 Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1985. *Iron in the Soul*. Translated by Gerard Hopkins. Introduction by David Caute. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in Association with Hamish Hamilton.
- 27 Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1986 *The Age of Reason*. Translated by Eric Sutton. Introduction by David Caute. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in Association with Hamish Hamilton .
- 28 Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1989. *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. Translated by S. Gilbert and I. Abel. New York: Vintage International.



- 29 Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1992. *Being and Nothingness : A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. Translated and with an Introduction by Hazel E. Barnes, University of Colorado. New York: Washington Square Press.
- 30 Sartre, Jean-Paul. n.d. *Words*. Translated by Irene Clephane. Penguin Books in Association with Hamish Hamilton.
- 31 Solomon, C. Robert. 1987. *From Hegel to Existentialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 32 Srivastava, P.K. 1988. *An Odyssey with Jean-Paul Sartre*. New Delhi: Spick & Span Publishers.
- 33 Warnock, Mary. 1965. *The Philosophy of Sartre*. London: Hutchinson University Library.
- 34 Wild, John. 1966. *The Challenge of Existentialism*. Bloomington Press.