



## THE EXISTENTIAL DRAMA

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### Abstract

The central issue which I intend to discuss in this article is what made the existentialist proclaim that *existence* comes before *essence*. Secondly, what is the line of difference between the phenomenologist especially Husserl and the existentialist especially Sartre?

Key words: Freedom, For-itself, In-itself

### Introduction

The issue which I intend to discuss in this article is what made the existentialist proclaim that *existence* comes before *essence*. What is the line of difference between the phenomenologist especially Husserl and the existentialist especially Sartre? In the ontology of being in Sartre; *for-itself* and *in-itself*; the notion of good faith and bad faith is linked with it. Even the idea of anguish, is related with bad faith. There is a distinction between good faith and bad faith as propounded by Sartre. Is there a way out from the tragic human predicament in which man finds himself "situated" in the world? I aver that in Sartre's thought the way a situation may develop (worst-case) still there is nothing that prevents man from doing optimism and good.

### THE HUMAN CONDITION

Sartre maintains that amid 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 drama, 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 good faith for purposive existence or life way. I believe in Sartrean framework of thought it is good faith which is the unique condition, by virtue of which one's life or existence could be declared as right, and on the other hand it is bad faith which is the sole criterion by virtue of which one's position in life is declared offside/wrong.

Since the existential match of human predicament is without the referee and linesman, it is good faith which is on all accounts, the right faith for right living. Furthermore, good faith comprises existing personal commitments, freedom, fortitude, action, choice, responsibility and accountability. Though the thought of Sartre is highly complex to delineate, nevertheless, the relevance and optimism of his thought for life is worth considering.

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."<sup>1</sup>

Sartre maintains that man is free to choose but he cannot choose to be free. So the Sartrean point is 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*.

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."<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> 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/herself as he/she is, and

puts the responsibility for his/her life or existence upon his/her 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 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 outcome of that extra free moment; and these would-be-possible-extra-free moments can go on. 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*." <sup>2</sup> 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 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."<sup>5</sup> 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*.”<sup>4</sup>

## Husserl and Sartre

Edmund Husserl was a dominant figure in the German philosophy in the nineteenth century. He saw that his century was dominated by the quarrel between realism and idealism, the realists insisting that the objects exist independently of human consciousness, and the idealists insisting that one can never go beyond the mind, as objects are known through consciousness. Husserl launched the new philosophical discipline of phenomenology as a third way out of the two camps of idealism and realism.

According to Husserl phenomenology is to be a new way of looking at things which can contrast with the prevailing habits of thought and with the natural attitude of experience (*Erfahrung*) at every point. Pure or transcendental phenomenology was to be not science of facts (*Tatsachen*) but a science of essential Being which was solely concerned with formulating knowledge of essences (*Wesenserkenntnisse*). Phenomenology dealt not with the real or with the real world but with transcendently reduced phenomena or purified experiences which were excluded from every connection within the real world. These non-realities are focus of phenomenology. Phenomenology is not interested in singular particularities (*Einzelheiten*) but in essential Being. When individual being of every kind could be other than *what it is*, it implies that it is essentially different or could be essentially other than what it is, argues Husserl. Thus the contingency of man has the attribute of essential necessity and a relation with essential universality. As a formal epistemic principle, if anything is contingent, then something is necessary, something is essential. The meaning of contingent has the import that it must have essential being, an *Eidos* which can be grasped in total purity. An individual according to phenomenologist is not a unique individual but is an individual *in itself* who has essential predicable, and it is the essential nature which in fact is the proper mode of being of the individual. Every individual has an essential nature and a universal meaning-essence that is *individual in general* or *man in general*. It is the *Eidos* or essence of the individual in its ultimate and intimate self-being which reveals *what man is* or *what it is*. This *what it is* or *what man is*, is an object of new type, it is not an empirical possibility but an essential possibility which is a datum of essential intuition. The essential intuition gives the pure essence. In Husserl’s view positing of the essence does not imply any positing of individual existence. Essence makes no claim regarding facts (*Tatsachen*) or matter-of-factness (*Tatsachlichkeit*). Husserl regarded man as merely a datum of essential intuition. Man for Husserl is a *meaning* of some sort. Man implies something *meant* in the human mind. It is an intentional experience which is consciousness of something that is consciousness of the meaning of some sort of the term man. For Husserl man means *man as such* that is man precisely as it is *meant* and consciously known. Existence is referred to as meaning (*Sinn*) by Husserl. Meaning is the object intended by consciousness. Husserl is not concerned with man as an individual, living, or existing entity but his concern is ‘man in general’.

Elaborating further Husserl says in *Ideas* that the essence of colour is different from the essence of sound present in our awareness as such, that is the essence of the color and sound is different as it appears in our awareness. The essence of color and the essence of sound are not experienced as empirically real but as intuitively present to essential vision, similar is the case with human existence which is not experienced as empirically but as intuitively present to essential vision. According to the phenomenologist, existence cannot deliver truth regarding existence. Husserl puts existence in brackets. Existence along with all the sciences which relates to the natural world are *disconnected* because they do not serve as the foundation for discovering the truth concerning the realities of the world. “It is likewise clear that the *attempt* to doubt any object of awareness in respect of its *being actually there necessarily conditions a certain suspension (Aufhebung) of the thesis*; and it is precisely this that interests us.”<sup>6</sup>

Intentionality or intentional experience has its intentional object, that is, its objective meaning. To have a *meaning* is the salient feature of consciousness. Phenomenology is concerned with the objective meaning of man. Existentialism is concerned with the subjective, concrete, individual, existence of man. Husserl is concerned with the foundations of knowledge; Sartre is concerned with the *living* individual. Sartre is concerned with existence and existence is not knowledge. The concern of Husserl is the intentional experience, pure intuition, the *noetic* but for Sartre it is the life experience which matters. For Sartre it is the man who *lives* is the focus. It is self-determination and acts of freedom which are of prime concern for the Nobel Laureate.

Husserl illustrates the phenomenological sphere through an example of an apple tree. He says that while looking at a blossoming apple tree and its fresh, green leaves with pleasure, the perception and the pleasure that ensues is different from the perception and pleasure that accompanies when the tree is *perceived as such*. From the natural standpoint the apple tree exists. But from the phenomenologically pure experience standpoint that is from the reduced perception standpoint the *perceived apple tree as such* does not exist in the real, objective world. The apple tree that exists in the transcendent reality of space enters its ‘brackets’. The *perceived tree as such* exists as reduced perception, purely reduced and immanent in form, that is, as *Eidos*, *disconnected* with the tree of nature, that is with the tree there in the garden. So the plain, simple, apple tree in bloom that stands before us is different from the apple tree which is *perceived as such*. “The tree plain and simple can burn away, resolve itself into its chemical elements, and so forth. But the meaning—the meaning of *this* perception, something that belongs necessarily to its essence—cannot burn away; it has no chemical elements, no forces, no real properties.”<sup>7</sup> Thus for Sartre the concrete, individual, person who acts, who wills, who decides, who chooses, who faces the problems of life, who confronts the predicaments of life, who commits, who responds, and who makes himself/herself by doing, that is, by his or her actions is the focus whereas for Husserl man was simply a *meaning* meant. Man for Sartre is not an abstract prototype but a concrete person who *lives* his existence through choices, responsibility, and commitment. Existence does not imply thought. It implies the *living* individual, the individual who *exists*, who makes himself by *doing* something. On the contrary, man for Husserl is intuitional representation of *man in general*. He is an essence who exists in the mode of *meaning*, as an abstract form.

## Notes

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.
5. Ibid. 72.
6. 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. 108.
7. Ibid. 260-261.