



RECOGNITION OF A POSSIBILITY: ANGUISH

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Abstract: This study centers on the issue of possibility as a free option available to human reality. Due to this option man can make himself. Wanting to emphasize the coherence of possibility and anguish, this study not only simply presents their relation but also adapts them with the account of freedom as propounded by Sartre.

Key words: possibility, anguish, free

Sartre considers that anguish is nothing but consciousness of freedom that is freedom reveals itself through anguish because atemporal objects like mathematical theorems or other temporal objects like rivers, mountains, etc., will not feel anguish because they are unfree that is they are not nothingness. The fact that the for-itself is anguished implies that it is free. Where there is unfreedom, there is no anguish. Where there is anguish implies that there is complete freedom. Since it is up to the for-itself alone to actualize the possibility, the for-itself or human reality is anguished. Human reality or the for-itself feels anguish because the possibility to realize a possibility depends on the for-itself irrespective of the fact what the for-itself *have been*. The separation of the for-itself by nothingness, from what it has been, anguishes the for-itself. The facticity of men and women cannot determine their freedom of action. Each time they have to make altogether new and fresh effort to *make* themselves because human reality is transcendence. *De facto*, there can be a free for-itself only as occupied in a defying and challenging world. Since

nothingness separates man from *what he has been*, he is anguished, because the total responsibility to *constantly* make himself falls on him alone and designates his total freedom. The decisive conduct will flow from a self which the human reality is not yet. Sartre writes, “Anguish in fact is the recognition of a possibility as *my possibility*”. (Sartre 1992, 73) Illuminating further, Sartre says, I have been wanting to write a book, which has been conceived by me, and which is interesting to write. Now, no matter how much portion of the book I have written and no matter *what I have been*, there is *nothing* which can compel me to write further. I am separated by nothingness from what I shall be. Even up to the writing of the last word of the book, I am separated by nothingness from what has already been written, i.e., nothing can compel me to write even the last word just as nothing compelled me to not to write at all. The writing of book exists as *my possibility* and I am not certain whether I will continue tomorrow because my freedom can exercise its nihilating power and the writing of book as my possibility could become a non-being—that is my possibility to not to write. The possibility to write and the opposite possibility to not to write exist as *my possibilities*, this anguishes me because I can do nothing about my possibilities except to choose or decide to write; or to choose or decide not to write. I want to suspend my freedom and refrain from choosing at all—I want to be unfree, I want not to be free—but I can not do it, because either choice—to write/not to write—involves *my freedom*, and this anguishes me. Sartre writes, “I discover that the permanent possibility of abandoning the book is the very condition of the possibility of writing it and the very meaning of my freedom” (Sartre 1992,75).It is the comprehension of the fact of writing the book as *my possibility* which anguishes me. Thus the agent feels anguish in relation to himself or herself that is in relation to his/her complete freedom, that is, in relation to his/her action as *his/her possibility*. It is, “In anguish I apprehend myself at once as totally free and as not being able to derive the meaning of the world except as coming from myself”; affirms Sartre. (Sartre 1992, 78)

As far as writing is concerned, there is no real rationale for writing a book just as there is no real rationale for not writing, because one can give reasons for writing a book inasmuch as one can give reasons for not writing.¹ Reason cannot prompt me to write or not to write. Reason is not the foundation for my writing a book or for not writing it. If explanatory reason was the foundation i.e., if complete reason could prompt me to write or not to write a book, then I could not be anguished because my action would then become justifiable and I would not feel the anguish.² It is freedom which is the foundation of my writing or not writing a book therefore I am unjustifiable and this anguishes me, that is, there is consciousness of anguish, the for-itself exists as being conscious of anguish; the for-itself affects itself with anguish. Anguish is not external to for-itself or human reality but human reality is anguished. I exist as anguish. My attempt to hide my anguish or flee from my anguish is a bad-faith attitude because my flight from anguish will only make me conscious of anguish which I am trying to flee. According to Sartre, we are (I am) anguish. Since the being of consciousness is consciousness of being, I am anguish.

It follows that my freedom is the unique foundation of values and that *nothing*, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, this or that particular scale of values. As a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable. My freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself without foundation. It is anguished in addition because values, due to the fact that they are essentially revealed to a freedom, can not disclose themselves without being at the same time “put into question,” for the possibility [*Sic*] of overturning the scale of values appears complementarily as *my* possibility. (Sartre 1992, 76)

By unjustifiable, Sartre means that I am without any excuse, my acts are inexcusable and the responsibility for my action lies *absolutely* on me. Incidentally, in the deterministic model, firstly my actions are unavoidable that is whatever happened, *as my act*, was unavoidable due to some

antecedent and prior conditions, situations, and circumstances; secondly, whatever happened was the only thing that could occur, and the occurrence was the logical consequence of prior conditions. These conditions are nothing but series of causes. In determinism, whatever that would have to have been different, could not have been different; the action of agent does not depend on the agent. Whatever the agent did do or does do, the agent had no choice or alternative and the acts of the agent were unavoidable. In determinism everything is full and given or as Sartre says, “The ultimate meaning of determinism is to establish within us an unbroken continuity of existence in itself.” (Sartre 1992, 567) In Sartre, nothing prevents a free agent from acting according to her/his choice and nothing constrains the agent to act otherwise. “No actual existent can determine strictly what I am going to be.” (Sartre 1992, 68)

Considering freedom as the first and foremost condition of action, Sartre tells us that man is free to choose but he is not able to choose not to be free. He attests there is no recess of any sort from choosing that is from making choices. A person spends the entire life in the pursuit of making herself/himself. 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 an eventual piece of advice, Sartre had but one reply to make. “You are free, therefore choose—that is to say, invent” (Sartre 1966, 38). In this case, the student is confronted to honor either commitment. He alone has to choose which one to honor because man is freedom.

To be free is to be condemned to be free. Thus the Future qua Future does not have to be. It is not *in itself*, and neither is it in the mode of being of the For-itself since it is the meaning of the For-itself. The Future is not, it *is possibilized*. (Sartre 1992, 186)

Sartre adds:

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. (Sartre 1966, 34)

Freedom: The Existential Reality of Man

Freedom is not an achievement in the philosophy of Sartre, but “man *is* freedom”. He does not become free when he takes (meets) his responsibility rather since he is free he has to take the responsibility for his action. “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism” (Sartre 1966, 28). Existence is prior to essence because freedom is prior to his or her (agent’s) essence/nature; that is freedom is prior to his or her making of himself or herself thus he or she is responsible for his or her choices, decisions and actions. A thing/an object have an essence (fixity, 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. Man is not fullness or plenum, he is nothingness. Man is freedom.³ So the *for-itself* or men and women cannot be defined in the way one defines a sofa or a chair because there is no idea of men and women in existentialism, nothing is given except freedom.

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*. (Sartre 1992, 60)

As regards choice, it is intrinsic to the individual or person, that is, when he or she chooses/decides/acts it is he or she *alone* who chooses/decides/acts *in propria persona*. Just as my death is death of myself, no one can die for me in order to declare me dead, similarly, my freedom/choice, and responsibility are wholly subjective, absolute, and personal. The *making* of man happens exclusively at personal level that is; it is my effort (action) alone which will *make* me, others working (acting) on my behalf cannot make me. "The consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or of an object" (Sartre 1992, 707) carries with it enormous and immense responsibility. Freedom and responsibility are both personal and absolute. Sartre says:

For the idea which I have never ceased to develop is that in the end one is always responsible for what is made of one. Even if one can do nothing else besides assume this responsibility. For I believe that a man can always make something out of what is made of him. (Sartre 1974, 34-35)

Sartre explains that Genet was rigorously conditioned to be a thief but eventually he made himself a poet. Sartre says:

It cannot be a happy freedom, in a case like this. *Freedom is not a triumph*. For Genet, it simply marked out certain routes which were not initially given. (Sartre 1974, 35, *emphasis mine, translation altered*)

Existential guilt occurs when the agent shifts the responsibility of her/his freely performed action elsewhere. This is bad faith⁴ or lack of authenticity.⁵

Conclusion

Eventually, let us end the discussion; I have established freedom in Sartre is not relative. It is also not relational; rather one is free in one's relation that is the agent is free to *recognize* the other. If freedom was relational then certainly it would suggest that there should be self-apprehension and recognition of the one in the other. Well, in Sartre's philosophy, man is already freedom; freedom is not an achievement in the philosophy of Sartre. Since man is absolutely free, there is this tremendous and robust responsibility for each individual action/deed. I have explained that human reality is not a metaphysical entity which is universal, objective, or abstract rather the for-itself or human reality is utmost concrete, personal, particular, and above all absolutely free. I have established that man is *nothingness* that is nothing is given. He is a lack. If he is *everything* then there would be nothing left to choose. The for-itself is not something acted upon, chosen upon, decided upon, willed upon, or felt upon, but the for-itself is a being who chooses, who acts, who deliberates; the for-itself is the principal actor. Sartre says that man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all. A unique character of human reality is that it is without any excuse and each person is accountable *in propria persona*. Thus, a person is not only totally free but also *absolutely responsible* for her/his actions because it is uniquely she/he who *makes* herself/himself due to the *possibilities* available.

Footnotes

1. In *Existentialism and Humanism*, on page 34, Sartre writes: “For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one’s action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism—man *is* free, man is freedom.”
2. In *Nausea* on page 185-186 Sartre says, “ The world of explanations and reasons is not that of existence.” For a careful analysis of *Nausea*, See Levy, Lior. 2014. Doi:10.1111/sjp.12049
3. See. Flew, Antony. 1991. “Freedom and Human Nature.” *Philosophy* 66: 53-63.
4. In *Being and Nothingness*, there is just once where Sartre uses the term ‘bad conscience’ as an alternative for bad faith.
5. For a classic philosophical discussion and distilled insights on authenticity, See. SomogyVarga, 2011. *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal*. New York: Routledge.

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