

A Brief Analysis of Sartre's Philosophy in *Existentialism and Humanism*

Yuan Yiming

Renmin University of China, Beijing, China, 100000

2978294606@qq.com

Abstract

This thesis is divided into six parts and each of them is about an aspect of Sartre's philosophy. In this way, the author tries to clarify the main content of Sartre's work, *Existentialism and Humanism*. And discussing the conception of *Freedom*, *Responsibility*, *Humanism* and so on clearly is my purpose, through which I can find Sartre's logic of his argument.

Keywords: Sartre's philosophy; Existentialism; Humanism; Analysis

1. Introduction

After reading *Existentialism and Humanism*, we find two main features about Sartre's philosophy (i) that Sartre attaches little importance to the tradition but emphasizes inventing your future by yourself, and (ii) that things chosen by you are the proper one, so one should be courageous enough to make his own decision and take the responsibility for himself with no excuse. The center of Sartre's philosophy is about human existence, in which *Freedom* of men is confirmed strongly. Sartre believes that a man can design himself freely as he wants it to be because human beings are *Dasein*. Now here comes the question: what does Sartre mean by saying 'existence' in his philosophy?

In our common sense, if one thing exists, then this thing is equal to both its essential features and its non-essential features. This thing exists if and only if it is in possession of its essential features. This time, we can say that existence depends on essence and even essence comes before existence. However, Sartre has two points against the above thought. One is that there is no such essence as a kind of limitation in human beings; men are infinite possibilities as well. The other one is in the case of human beings where existence precedes essence, and essence is not the decisive factor. Suppose that there is such essence which is concrete and unchangeable in men, this essence decides what men should be. As a result, men would be shaped by the same pattern, that is to say men are slaves of that common essence. In Sartre's thoughts, existence and essence are really two different things. In consequence of that, the freedom of people's activity and men's infinite possibilities can be given full play. So, what's the relationship between existence and essence, especially about human beings?

2. Existence Precedes Essence

'To say that something exists is to say that it is. To state something's essence is to state what it is'(Jean-Paul Sartre, 2001:21). 'Is' equals existence, and 'it is' equals something exists; 'what it is' equals essence. In *Nausea*, Roquentin makes a series of philosophical discoveries. Through this figure, Sartre puts forward the question about the relationship between awareness and objective things. As Roquentin puts it: 'To exist is simply to be there; what exists appears, lets itself be encountered, but you can never deduce it'(Jean-Paul

Sartre, 2001:21). If one thing exists, then its existence is just to be there and we can encounter it. That is to say, existence is appearance: X appears to me to be Y. In this way, we are aware of *appearances* whose existence isn't stipulated but we meet with them and feel such existence penetrating us all over. Here we can come to a conclusion: what is seen is existence. Throwing away its essence, things are not what it is. Instead appearances indicate the presence of things in front of me. The essence is just a veil which veils things---it is.

In Sartre's philosophy, appearance isn't the physical one, but indicates existential appearances for someone. Just be satisfied with appearances of things presenting in my mind, and there is no need to focus on what it is. In addition, existential appearances rely on men, and what things appear to us, then what it is. Therefore, everything could be other than what it is, and also existence is contingent.

In *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre divides the things that exist into three kinds: human beings, artefacts, and naturally occurring objects. In the case of artefacts, essence precedes existence. Sartre takes the paper-knife for example and the conclusion is that essence is equal to a set of functions. Paper-knife can't escape from the design of its advance. Its essence comes from human. In the case of naturally occurring things, existence and essence coincide. Specifically speaking, in this case, essence comes before existence. For example, a seed of a tree will grow into a tree necessarily instead of an elephant. Their being and their being what they are are mutually dependent.

But in the case of human beings, existence precedes essence. Human beings' existence is not only just standing there, but the sum of their life contents as well as a set of choices, correspondingly, their efforts. If there is a common pattern or feature, then it must be the result of their own choices, namely, human beings are free. We have no essence as human beings, and 'only the totality of choices we make in life makes us the people who we are'(Jean-Paul Sartre, 2001:26). In this sense, we enjoy our freedom. We are profoundly free. Fate is held firmly in our hands, and no one can decide who we are. We can say this is the beginning to find release and the time has come for human beings' freedom to be found. We can boldly make a hypothesis, if a God's believer really understands what Sartre has said and knows Sartre's philosophy well, this devout believer may say: 'I'm done believing in God, but God doesn't know what I'm feeling. In fact, I'm more than what God made of me. Once I followed the voice God gave to me, but now I've got to find my own. In this sense, we don't need God at all. We are all born free. This time, however, joy for freedom and painful anxiety are parallel.

To sum up, the difference between human beings and other things is that only men's existence precedes essence, that is to say, there is no such essence prior to existence in human beings, and hence this thought releases a theme that men are free. And in *Nausea*, Sartre has clarified his three points (i) that all existence is its contingency; (ii) there is no common or general existence; and (iii) in the case of human beings existence precedes essence.

3.Freedom & Responsibility

Just like the role we play in the case of a paper-knife, we decide what a paper-knife is before it becomes a fact. In that case, we are in the position of God. But in the case of human beings, we find we don't need such God because we have existential freedom. We determine to shape ourselves by choices and efforts, or rather willing. For existentialists, they dare to say: 'We don't need a God to tell us what we should do, or even decide what we are. We will go our way and make our plans. We'll change our pace of life and make a protest, rather than follow God's voice but listen to willing in our mind.' Destiny is just in our own hands. As we see, Sartre's existentialism is atheistic.

Existentialist makes a detailed inquiry about the truth of people's life. Sartre says: 'In any case, we can begin by saying that existentialism, in our sense of the word, is a doctrine that does render human life possible: a

doctrine, also, which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity' (Jean-Paul Sartre, 2001:27). If this doctrine comes true, making 'rendering human life possible' possible, it must deny that God exists and insist that human beings are free, as well as the existence of people becomes the first one.

Here is Karl Löwith's conclusion: "As a result of the absence of a God who conceives the idea of man, man is alone and thrust upon himself. He cannot explain himself by reference to a fixed and given idea or to human nature and values. Man's nature is reduced to a universal 'human condition,' without any external determination, therefore without excuse and justification, absolutely free and responsible for itself" (Karl Löwith, 1949:123). The philosophical implication of this doctrine is that men are all free. Goodness or evil for people is caused by men themselves, for instance, good actions make a person to be good. And this 'making' equals creating, that is to say, everyone creates itself. Sartre bases his doctrine upon pure subjectivity, attaching great importance to the solitary individual instead of community. This doctrine just ignores the commands of God's will and all values prescribed as external.

Subjectivity underlines men's initiative, which manifests men's freedom. Values come from people's construct and shaping, or rather, the construction of freedom. If I say X is good, that is simply because I have chosen X. This selection is voluntary, relying on my own will. Man is 'condemned to be free' and, at the same time, free to make or rather 'invent' himself. 'Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism' (Jean-Paul Sartre, 2001:29). So this 'will' must make a determination seriously and efforts need paying out. In a word, I should take the responsibility for myself. And the next question is what the relationship between Freedom and Responsibility is.

You have the freedom, and you have the right to say 'Yes' or 'No', or to choose this one and refuse that one. Because of your own choice, you are responsible for what you have done. In other words, if and only if you are free, you could have done otherwise, nevertheless you must take the responsibility. It relates to the question about the ability. If you can't do X, you aren't responsible for X. For example, at present you are a student of one department, and the headmaster of the college ask you to regulate the financial management in your department. But your present situation shows that you don't have the ability to do this thing. You just can't. Then once made a demarcation that you are unable to do one thing, you don't have the responsibility for this thing at all. Ability is the precondition of your responsibility. That is to say, freedom is the precondition of the responsibility.

As a result, Sartre says: 'the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders' (Jean-Paul Sartre, 2001:29). The person must be free, if you let this man be a 'person liable'. We can conclude that:

Responsibility \rightarrow Freedom,
then, \neg Freedom \rightarrow \neg Responsibility.

4.Man's Authenticity

At this moment, we can make a comment on Sartre's existentialism that his philosophy encourages an individual to be a person to play, responsible as well as positive. Man simply is. Man is simply free and has the ability to make a decision for himself. Man shapes himself according to his own commitment. 'Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject and, on the other, that man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity' (Jean-Paul Sartre, 2001:30). While Sartre finds that human beings tend to avoid acknowledging their freedom as well as the responsibility. Sartre calls this state of men 'inauthenticity'. However men's authenticity indicates that men are aware of existential freedom face to face. Sartre believes 'A

life lived in awareness of existential freedom is an authentic life, one that realizes the most genuine possibilities of human existence.' You are forced to be free. Self-selection cannot be escaped, and you can choose everything other than freedom. Man is free, and man is freedom. Man is condemned to be free.

In fact, subjectivity includes two aspects: one is about the individual; the other is about all men. Freedom doesn't mean you can do whatever you want, but you do things regarding others. These regarding concerns are inter-subjective, 'In fashioning myself I fashion man'(Jean-Paul Sartre, 2001:30). So this is different from the Cartesian 'I think' which is just about the solitary individual. Man is responsible for all men. David E. Roberts concludes that "The fundamental claim of existentialism is simply that since each man knows reality only through himself, it is important to recognize that 'himself' involves the whole man and not just the intellect"(David E. Roberts, 1952:470). In this sense, we can also find Sartre tells us that not just you are free, and the entire human race is free as well. Everyone is equal and must respect, protect as well as be aware of the freedom authentically. Regard the dignity of men as the highest thing. Man chooses his life facing others, so his choice shouldn't go with his own instinct. But it is one aspect of this matter; the other aspect is that 'an existentialist will never take man as the end, since man is still to be determined'(Jean-Paul Sartre, 2001:44).The past things absolutely cannot determine what present or future is.

5. Being-for-itself

Action is emphasized greatly by Sartre. He thinks that man is nothing, but the sum of his actions. It's useless to talk about ability, but the practical actions do matter. So his philosophy is full of optimism because it resorts to actions instead of contemplation which resorts to inaction.

The root of Sartre's philosophy is consciousness. Consciousness is nothingness which indicates 'being-for-itself', that the one can say 'No'. Being-for-itself is the conscious Self, which is fluid and perfectly free. Jacques Hardré said: 'This Self is unceasingly being faced with the necessity of choosing and by its choice, of engaging itself in life. This compulsion, in turn, is what causes it to exist in a state of anguish'(Jacques Hardré, 1952:538). In Sartre's opinion, nothingness is internal in human beings' consciousness, and nothingness means man can negate. Just because of this nothingness, freedom can be possible. Freedom is based on nothingness. Cartesian *Cogito* is partitioned with external things and just about the solitary subjectivity. Instead, Sartre's subjectivity is being in the world which underlines two things: one is situation; the other one is the connection with others, namely people's sociality. The feature of being-for- itself is 'is what is not and is not what is'. There is no antecedent essence fixed in me. There is no the principle of 'ought'. Therefore, what is of importance is making ourselves out of the inauthentic state.

Sartre's philosophy is anxious to safeguard and to develop the inner freedom of the individual person. This kind of existentialism has its positive side. Just as David E. Roberts said: 'The achievement of true selfhood is seen as involving a capacity to endure isolation, a willingness to suffer for the sake of creativity, a readiness to defy group pressures whenever they tend to make man a cog in a machine'(David E. Roberts, 1952:469-470). Existentialism gives priority to the subjective over the objective, telling people that they are born to free and no one can decide who they are or determine their 'faculty'. A general power of choice and self-determination are of significance.

6. Some Points

Here we find some points about Sartre's philosophy which should be paid attention to. Firstly, the duality about the subjectivity:(i)for solitary individual, taking the responsibility for himself;(ii)but the environmental factors outside have an impact on men indeed which are easily to become excuses for men to escape

responsibilities. Secondly, 'subjectivism' and 'subjectivity' are distinct. Subjectivism tends to mean someone is so shut up to his own ideas that he is cut off from the truth. While, existentialists emphasize 'subjectivity' which isn't absolutely opposed to objectivity. They still realize the essential part of objectivity in science and logic and they don't tell us to deny the validity of such knowledge. In existentialists' opinions, to know about the processes of nature and the principles of logical thinking is one thing. To achieve and to enter into a meaningful human existence is quite another. We'd better not misunderstand existentialists on this point. It is in this sense that existentialists give priority to the subjectivity over the objectivity. Thirdly, we have mentioned it above that human beings are condemned to be free. In a way, man is a slave of his freedom. Indeed, existentialists agree that man is both free and enslaved, but this enslavement only befall free beings. Just because of this enslavement which people are unable to get rid of, human beings can be opposed to any forms of determinism from theology, heredity, family, society and even fate. Only human decision enters into human destiny. Finally, Sartre believes only the actions can affirm the feelings and there is a principle that the action is given the priority, furthermore, inner affections coming down to actions or behaviors. People who just follow reason are not as free as they think they are; their own selves should be carried into a decision and then take actions. The key action justifies the key love you devote to.

7. Conclusion: Humanism in Sartre's Philosophy

Existentialism and Humanism is a window for us to know about Sartre's philosophy. Here we will talk about what Sartre means by saying 'humanism'.

Humanism has varied interpretations, and a most vital one in general is that it holds there is a universal and permanent human nature. Jacques Hardré once said: 'To ignore that is to ignore one of the most important beliefs of the humanistic mind'(Jacques Hardré, 1952:536). But we also find that man's condition is always changing. Sartre thinks there is no universal essence of man, but each man creates his own during his lifetime. Human beings are just opposite to naturally occurring things and artefacts. You are going to get vegetables and none other, if you sow the seeds of some vegetable. But when a man is born, we can't predict and be sure of what this man is going to be. Man is *Dasein*---being-for-itself. They don't need the essence which is fixed in them. What you are is changing with your actions. For instance, a man committed a cowardly act yesterday, but this act belongs to his past, which is a part of his Being-in-itself. Nevertheless, he can be a hero today or tomorrow, using the liberty of choosing to accomplish a heroic act. In this way, we dare to say that Sartre has put a new meaning in Humanism. And I agree with Jacques Hardré's speaking that "We need not insist upon this strange definition of humanism-strange, to say the least, coming as it does from a former professor of philosophy! Let us rather examine in more detail some of the main principles of Sartre's 'humanism'"(Jacques Hardré, 1952:543). So the next point is that Existentialism is a kind of Humanism in Sartre's philosophy.

Through Humanism, Sartre tells us that we are absolutely free, but we must always choose and be engaged. Man must play his part in the world and take the responsibility not only for himself but also for all men. In this sense, humanism is full of optimism and initiative. Humanism stands for the liberty. Man is responsible for his own essence, and he is what he chooses to be and he alone is responsible for that choice. Moreover, there are no universal values, says existentialism. Man must create his own values being applicable only to the present situation. The moral value of the choice he makes is his to judge, and no one can do that for him. Sartre redefines Humanism as well as liberty, freedom, and those are what his existentialism mainly maintains. In his emphasis upon individual freedom, together with individual responsibility, he preserves what he thinks possible out of the tradition of liberalism. And 'the underlying concern is to invite us to examine the authenticity of our personal lives and of our society'(Thomas Flynn, 2006:8).

References

- [1]Jean-Paul Sartre. (2001). *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*. Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- [2]Karl Löwith. (1949). Review.*Social Research*, (1), 122-124.
- [3]David E. Roberts. (1952). Faith and freedom in existentialism: a study of Kierkegaard and Sartre. *Theology Today*, (4), 469-482.
- [4]Jacques Hardré. (1952). Sartre's existentialism and humanism. *Studies in Philology*, (3), 534-547.
- [5]Thomas Flynn. (2006). *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*.Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Biography

Yuan Yiming, Doctoral candidate, Philosophy School of Renmin University of China, Research interests: Historical philosophy, Cultural philosophy.