

Consciousness as Freedom: A Sartrean Analysis

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Abstract:

No other concept is more central in existentialist thought than that of freedom and no other existentialist makes so much acute and elaborate analysis of freedom as does Sartre. In Sartre's philosophy, the term 'freedom' has been used at least in three different senses. The first and foremost is existential freedom, which is the very basis of Being and Nothingness, and the other two are authenticity and consciousness. This paper engaged itself with the last sense of the term 'freedom', how consciousness being intentional, transcending and nihilating constitute the very nature of freedom.

Key words: freedom, consciousness, intentionality, transcendence, nothingness, being-for-itself, being-in-itself.

What is at the very heart and centre of Existentialism is the absolute character of the free commitment by which every man realizes himself ...

(Sartre 1957, 47)

I

In spite of overwhelming diversity in the writings of Sartre ranging from philosophical and ontological treatise to political journalism, film reviews to varied literary works, the central theme lies in his passionate thinking about human freedom. Sartrean existentialism which highlights the significance of human existential predicaments has its basic theme contained

in his major philosophical treatise *Being and Nothingness*. There are at least two aspects of this treatise which make it as a model of existentialist thought. First, its unique treatment of the individual human being i.e. being-for-itself and the second is its acute treatment of the concept of human freedom. According to Sartre freedom has to be conceived as strictly identified with nihilation. And the for-itself or individual human reality is the only being which nihilates his own through its constant nature of transcendence. It is infected with lack of being, and this lack of being is in turn inseparable from the desire to become the in-itself. Therefore:

Freedom can arise only as being which makes itself a desire of being; that is, as the project-for-itself of being in-itself-for-itself. Here we have arrived at an abstract structure which can by no means be considered as the nature or essence of freedom. Freedom is existence, and in it existence precedes essence. (Sartre 1984, 695)

Man is not merely a thing among other things, also he is not simply a living being; rather is a self-conscious being. And self-conscious is nothing else than freedom itself. An action is considered free only when it is consciously done. The agent's consciousness of the ends and means together with his contemplation of the possible results of what he himself decides to do is the precondition of the action being free. An action, in other words, cannot be regarded as free, unless the doer is fully conscious of the end, that means, as also of the possible consequences of it, even before he actually does it. To be self-conscious is to be free, to do anything consciously is to do it freely. Everyman as a self-conscious being is free by his very nature and habitually cast himself into the world as a free, psycho-physical agent. A man in 'action' is freedom embodied.

Now, one might ask what exactly meant by self-consciousness. To answer this question, at the very beginning, we must say that the Cartesian cogito cannot be considered enough for the exposition of the meaning of the term. As, in the Cartesian sense, self-consciousness cannot virtually be

consciousness of anything. Self-consciousness is not merely consciousness of consciousness itself. The conscious human being is himself a project that necessarily entails the agent's choice, decision, motives, contemplation of results, anguish, abandonment, responsibility, and so on. All these constitute the quality of consciousness. Therefore to be conscious of itself is to be conscious of all these traits which are inseparable from freedom i.e. self-consciousness. For further clarification of this position, we should concentrate on the notion of consciousness after Sartre.

II

As pointed out by Mrinal Kanti Bhadra (1978, 4-7, 40-43), in his book *Transcendence of the Ego* Sartre posited the idea that consciousness is solely in the world. If the ego is to be found anywhere, it is to be discovered in the world and not in the hidden transcendental centre of consciousness. The book on *Emotions* also elucidates the idea that consciousness wants to realize a project in the concrete situations in the world. And, in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre's main concern is to show how consciousness and the world can be related to each other. This paper emphasizes on the view that it is freedom through which consciousness related with the world. It should be noted here that though consciousness has a relation with the world, it is also existentially separate from the world. This existential separation gives rise to two different realms of being, the being of phenomenon and the being of consciousness, being-in-itself and being-for-itself. Sartre gave effort to reach an existential harmony that would establish that both are included in the being-in-the-world.

Let us now concentrate on the characteristics of consciousness. Here, for the present purpose, we will be attentive to three character of consciousness, viz. intentional, transcending and negating. As Husserl has shown, all consciousness is consciousness of something. Every consciousness posits a transcendent object. Therefore, all

consciousness is positional in that it transcends itself in order to reach an object. As pointed out by Cumming (2003, 51),

The term 'transcendent' must not be confused with "transcendental". The object of an 'intentional' act of consciousness "transcends" this act in that I am conscious of it as not an "immanent" or subjective component of the act itself. "Transcendental" designates that region of consciousness which survives, and is opened up for investigation, by the phenomenological reduction.

All the intentions of consciousness are directed outside itself. If there is anything as knowing consciousness, it can be knowledge only of the object. But for the knowledge to be possible, every consciousness must be conscious of itself as being that knowledge. For example, if consciousness of the 'table' is not also a consciousness of being conscious of the consciousness of the table, then it would be a consciousness ignorant of itself. The fact of being conscious of being conscious of the table makes it possible for us to be conscious of the table. (Cumming 2003, 50-53) When consciousness knows consciousness, or if consciousness of consciousness is knowledge of consciousness, consciousness becomes the object of consciousness.

But Sartre denies this Husserlian interpretation of consciousness of consciousness as knowledge of consciousness. If consciousness is reduced to knowledge, then the typical subject-object distinction enters into it. Then the knower-known dichotomy will be introduced, the knower is to be known by a third term. Thus, a fallacy of infinite regress may occur. (Sartre 1984, 12-13) As Cumming says,

...either we stop at anyone of the term of the series—the known, the knower known, the knower known by the knower, etc. In this case the totality of the phenomenon falls into the unknown; that is we always bump up against a non-self-conscious reflection and a final term. Or else we affirm the necessity of an infinite regress, which is absurd. (2003, 102)

If we are to avoid this infinite regress, we must accept an immediate, non-cognitive relation of the self to itself. This leads to Sartre to the idea that every consciousness of consciousness is a consciousness of existing. Consciousness does not know anything, but exists as a consciousness. This consciousness is not different from positional consciousness, rather at the same time; it is perception of object and consciousness of perception, something that is revealed in revealing. As Sartre mentioned in *The Transcendence of the Ego*,

...a consciousness has no need at all of a reflecting consciousness in order to be conscious of itself. It simply does not posit itself as an object. (1960, 45)

Macann also pointed out, “When I see a table, I am implicitly conscious of myself as not being the table which I see” (1993, 114). Rather, being conscious of the table immediately implies that there is a consciousness which is conscious of the table.¹ For Sartre, every act of consciousness involves both a positional consciousness of an object, which he calls intentionality and a non-positional consciousness of itself, which he named inwardness. In the case of seeing a table there involves two levels of consciousness, viz. positional consciousness of the table and non-positional consciousness of oneself who is seeing the table. It should be noted here that these two levels of consciousness are not two separate acts of consciousness.

Intentionality constitutes the character of consciousness as transcendence. According to Sartre intentionality and transcendence are same and transcendence is the constitutive character of consciousness. Consciousness always refers to something which is not itself. There cannot be any consciousness without reference to a real object. As Sartre mentioned, “By intentionality consciousness transcends itself. It unifies itself by escaping from itself” (Sartre 1960, 38). He

¹ Consciousness itself is nothing. Consciousness is nothing more than an emptiness that defines itself in relation to the objects that it is conscious of.

further stated, there are two types of unity of consciousness:

There exists an *immanent* unity of these consciousnesses: the flux of consciousness constituting itself as the unity of itself. And there exists a transcendent unity: states and actions. The Ego is the unity of states and actions...(Sartre 1960, 60-61)

Immanence is the inner unity of itself in consciousness. As mentioned by Daigle and Landry (2013, 94), something is transcendent if it lies outside of consciousness, and consciousness as a movement is transcendental in that it reaches out to the transcendent; it is constituted by the transcendent object of which it is conscious. The immanent unity of consciousness depends on its movement towards the transcendent. 'Consciousness as intentionality is transcendence', in itself it is empty. "Before the transcendent movement nothing exists. The immanent unity is born only after the encounter between transcendental consciousness and the world of objects." (Daigle and Landry 2013, 94) The Ego is born out of this encounter. Transcendence is coextensive to consciousness. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre defines immanence as pure subjectivity. But this pure subjectivity is nothing and this nothingness constitutes the pure possibility of transcending. As Sartre says a nihilation is "exercised in the very heart of immanence" (Sartre 1984, 84). Transcendence is the inner negation which reveals the object or in-itself while determining the being of consciousness or for-itself. Negation is fundamental transcendence which makes things exist.

Nothingness arrives in the world by a being whose nature is nothingness. According to Sartre, "nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being like a worm" (1984, 19). As nothingness inseparably linked to the being, man can never be limited to his past or present. Man not only negates past but also annihilates the present in order to achieve the future pregnant with infinite possibilities. Because of this inherent

Then the question will arise, how conscious can be aware of itself? To answer this question Sartre introduces a new term, the *pre-reflective cogito*.

nothingness, man also never becomes identified with the other beings of the world. He can assume an annihilating attitude towards the world, the solid, massif entity, tearing himself off from the worldly determination and thus transcends it. Therefore, as a being, situated in the world, man negates the world on the basis of his inherent nothingness, expressed through his negative acts, such as imagining, questioning, doubting, and so on. And according to Sartre these nihilating acts are the expressions of man's freedom. Thus the man's freedom inseparably linked with nothingness. As Sartre writes, "Human reality is free because it is perpetually wrenched away from itself and because it has been separated by nothingness from what it is to what it will be" (1984, 440).

III

We have now in a position to explain freedom through the interrelation among three characteristics of consciousness, viz. intentional, transcending and negating. Freedom lies in the heart of the being-for-itself and it is the driving force behind all consciousness. According to Sartre there is basically no difference between being a man and being free. Sartre states that human reality is free not because it is complete, full and sufficient, but because man is incomplete and full of possibilities. It has been pointed out that freedom is actually the being of for-itself. It is free to the exact extent that it has to be its own nothingness.

The nature of consciousness, as Sartre understands it, is to go beyond itself. To be what it is not and not to be what it is. In another way consciousness is not what it is and is what it is not. That means human consciousness does not remain satisfied with 'what it is', it is always striving for 'what it is not'. Being-for-itself as consciousness is thus a developing being, he is a project-oriented being who is aspiring for something which is yet to be achieved. As a striving being he is a free being. In the process of realising that which is not yet realised, being-for-itself has to transcend the given states of

affair and project his being towards the future. Every self-conscious human being always lives in the present. The past is imperceptibly melting into the present for making way for the agent's becoming what he is not yet or what he himself wills to become. He constantly transcends that which is there to tie him up with the given states of affair and this act of transcendence indicates that there always remains a gap within the being of man which he has to patch up or fill up through his projective acts. This gap has been technically termed as 'lack' or 'nothing', inherent in the very being of man. Man is insufficient because he is characterized by ever-elusiveness; there is a sort of hole in him through which his 'being' slips out ever and ever. "The For-itself, in fact, is nothing but the pure nihilation of the In-itself, it is like a hole in being at the heart of Being" (Sartre 1984, 786). The for-itself being absolutely empty, has the ability to define itself at any moment through consciously making a choice. This is its freedom. Freedom is the essential being of consciousness. To be conscious is to have freedom; rather to be conscious is to have absolute freedom.

Sartre speaks for the absolute freedom of the for-itself, i.e. the human reality. By absolute freedom he does not mean human power of doing or undoing anything. Man is absolutely free in the sense that he is the sole interpreter and the master of the situation he finds himself in. Freedom is human, and it is absolute, since adversity or coercion of any sort is not a negation of freedom. Freedom is the resultant of interaction of the situation and the intention of a particular individual. Even if a man is compelled to do something under some pressure, he does so involuntarily and his freedom remains intact. As a matter of fact no situation is favourable or adverse in and by itself. Whether a situation is favourable or unfortunate depends absolutely on how an individual human being interprets it.

Sartre's theory of absolute freedom has often been characterised as paradoxical due to its inability to explain actual human condition. Critics have pointed out that if man is

absolutely free, not determined by any causal condition, then he would be capable of doing anything he is craving for. But this never happens in his lifetime. There are innumerable things which handicap our exercise of freedom. Therefore there is something wrong in Sartrean philosophy of freedom. But this is merely a misinterpretation of 'absolute freedom'. Absolute freedom is, as Solomon remarks, "freedom of choice, freedom of intention; or freedom of signification (these are ultimately equivalent) and not freedom of success in action" (1972, 281). In other words "success is not important to freedom." (Sartre 1984, 621) The question is not whether there are conditions that determine man's free choice. Sartre would not deny that there are 'counter resistance and obstacles' which man has not created. According to Sartre, such obstacles to freedom can be categorized under five heads, viz. my place, my past, my environment, other human beings, and my death. But the relation between the given and human being is not unilateral, rather bilateral. An object is not my obstacle unless I consider it in relation to my end. As Sartre says, "...these resistances and obstacles have meaning only in and through the free choice which human reality is" (1984, 599). Merleau-Ponty (1962, 439) also exemplifies this point by saying that a rock is an obstacle, only when a human being with a project of climbing it considers it unclimbable, because of its huge size, steepness and other such and such characteristics. And the aim of a man in a situation entails his freedom of choice of the project. A man is definitely free to intend to climb up the hill, no matter whether he actually does it or not.

Therefore, Sartre's existential freedom is not a freedom in the sense that we can do whatever we want to do. Rather it has nothing to do regarding success. It only makes us aware that whatever be the circumstances, the decision is ours. If we ignore this awareness, we are in bad faith and we are no longer true to the nature of our consciousness which is always in the movement to be what it is not by not being what it is.

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