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## CRITICAL EVALUATION OF ATHEISTIC ETHICS OF SARTRE

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper is critically evaluates the possibility of atheistic ethics in the light of Sartrean Existential Phenomenology. His ethics is founded on his conception of human reality and freedom and their relation to the world. For Sartre, human nature is nothingness. It is human realities who define oneself through one's action. Though Sartrean ethical evolution has three stages, the paper concentrates on the second level which is realistic and materialistic in character. It is where Sartre realises that human being is much more than mere freedom alone. Therefore, he relieves the morality to some extent from freedom. He envisaged integral humanity as the ultimate attainment of human reality. In evolving through his ethics, Sartre rejects the theological and a priori foundations of ethics. For Sartre, the ethics emerged on the basis of theological and a priori foundations are alienating morality. These moral norms do not promote integral humanity. Therefore he had rather introduced his own sources of moral norms as human needs.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Human Reality, Integral Humanity, Alienating Morality and Freedom.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is still not digestible for many to imagine the possibility of ethics devoid of 'God' even with the greater advancement in the field of science and technology of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Jean-Paul Sartre has made an attempt to portray his ethical views based on human needs rather than ethics being grounded on theological or cultural foundations. Sartre's ethics has evolved into at least three levels; first, the idealistic ethical standpoint based on his ontology of *Being and Nothingness* in 1940s, second he has moved towards realistic and materialistic ethics in

1960s and power and freedom based ethics is the final evolution in his attitude towards ethics. It should be noted that his ethical standpoints have slowly evolved from one stage to another. The present paper deals with the second stage. It is where Sartre realises that human being is much more than mere freedom alone. Therefore, he relates the morality to some extent from freedom. He envisaged integral humanity as the ultimate attainment of human reality. It should be kept in mind that Sartre never completely ignored normative principles; rather he is simply concerned about the status of those principles.

In twentieth century, many ethical theories have emerged in the continental tradition with the background of Nietzsche's critique of morality. So it has been argued that Continental philosophies of ethics in a way Nietzschean model of ethics. Obviously, there was a rethinking of ethics against the traditional models. But it is not to be concluded that they were adhering to Nietzschean model of ethics. They have rather elaborated new ethical theories with re-evaluating the philosophical basis of ethics and its possibilities and limitations. For instance, Heidegger made an attempt to re-evaluate the ethical theories by doing away with the metaphysical tradition from Plato to his time. Derrida had questioned the limits and *aporias* of ethics as the very possibility of ethical decision. It is Sartre who was attempting to eradicate the theological foundation for ethical values. He wanted to ground his ethics on human needs. He rather founded his ethics on human reality. His conception of human reality provided him the basis, measure and goal of his ethics. Sartre went on to say that ethics is not a theoretical principle but rather it is the very condition of human existence. His ethics is fundamentally humanistic. As he writes in *The Transcendence*: "Ethics finds its bases in reality... No more is needed by way of a philosophical foundation for an ethics and a politics which are absolutely positive."<sup>1</sup> The following question arises whether Sartre's theory is tenable with the subjectivist standpoint of ethics in the present day scenario of domestic violence, act of terror, discrimination by name of religion, caste, creed, sex, etc. Could this atheistic ethics leads to ethical anarchy among human beings or pave way for authentic moral human beings?

## CRITIQUE OF TRADITIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF ETHICS

Traditionally, ethical theories are said to arise from following three basic sources: God and the laws of religion, *a priori* moral truths and humanity. Ethical norms would have been easy for those who accept God; all that they have to do is to consult the scripture in order to find out what is right and what is not. But Sartre writes from an atheistic position where there is no God. Sartre also questions the ethics based on *a priori* moral truth. The acceptance of ethics of *a priori* moral truth would lead to preconceived nature of human being. If humans are designed by God and made for some purpose then we have some essence, some designed purpose before we are

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, F. Williams & R. Kirkpatrick (Trans.), New York: Noonday Press, 1957, p.105-6.

born. But for Sartre, it is not the same in reality. For him, there is no God and thus we have no essence before we begin to exist. Therefore there can be no *a priori* meaning for human being. Since human being has no pre-existing or pre-given meaning of human reality, each and every one must create values within one's own condition. Sartre also believes that an *a priori* view of humanity removes freedom and responsibility from human reality. Freedom and responsibility play a vital role in human condition. He further adds that this responsibility includes the responsibility of the individual's action and its affect upon humanity as a whole. Therefore, for Sartre, *a priori* moral truth as basis for ethics also does not arise.

With these ideals in mind, Sartre further broadens his understanding of human condition that involves three aspects of human life. First, human being is thrown and or abandoned into the world at a specific place and time. Upon being thrown into a specific place and time human being is given distinct facts such as being male or female, white or coloured, poor or rich, so on. These facts as Sartre calls them are what make up the world, and it is within these un-escapable parameters that we must act. Though we must act within these parameters we are still free because our choice to go against the parameters is still ours. Human being, however, is completely responsible for the actions upon which he or she projects himself or herself. Again he is not only responsible for his own actions, but how they will affect all others in the world. For Sartre this creates anguish, a term he derives from Martin Heidegger's 'angst.' Finally, with this freedom to choose whichever path one wants and the anguish of knowing ones choice affects humanity as a whole that leads to the human condition of despair. Despair stems from the finality of human's choices, for once man or woman has made his or her choice, he or she is unable to go and change it. For Sartre, these are universal conditions and 'existential norms,' which are possible ways of meaningful existence which lie before us as men and women.

Existentialists uphold that there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Therefore, human being has to bear the burden of responsibility of creating values and ethics for humanity. We need to embrace this responsibility for the sake of all. It borders on Kantian ethics because we need to consider whether actions are permissible for everyone to do. The responsibility that is conferred upon the removal of God from the ethical system causes anguish to an individual, ignoring this anguish is a bad thing, we need to face this responsibility and although it is quite big we must act to support it. Therefore, we have no excuses because there is no innate nature to be blamed. The humanity is that we have created it. In other words, there is no determinism, man is condemned to be free and man is freedom. So, in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, no justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses. Sartre argues that we need to take responsibility for the actions of humanity.

The major element of the human condition that is emphasized the most throughout Sartre's ethics is freedom loaded with responsibility. Since no human lives completely free on their own accord, the responsibility of one's actions extends out to all men and women. This implies that when we make a choice it is not subjective to just the person making the choice, but it is inter-subjective to all mankind. Sartre believes that if a man or woman is aware of his or her human condition it will lead him or her to make decisions that is good for not only themselves but all of humanity.

## HUMAN REALITY AS POINT OF DEPARTURE

The starting point of Sartrean ethics is human reality. His ethics is founded on his conception of human reality and freedom and their relation to the world.<sup>2</sup> He added further that "human reality by which values arrives in the world."<sup>3</sup> Sartre has clearly said that his philosophy is "Atheistic existentialism ... It states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence - a being whose existence comes before its essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it. That being is ...the human reality."<sup>4</sup> He adds further, "man is nothing other than what he makes himself."<sup>5</sup> Sartre's human condition begins with the ideal of nothingness. Sartre goes on to state that human beings enter the world which is devoid of meaning. In other words, it is devoid of any essential human nature. In turn, this leads to his ideology that human beings begin to define themselves through their actions. However, according to Sartre, actions are very specific, for man or woman is not defined through his or her perceptions of himself or herself but his or her actual will-full actions. This fulfils Sartre's ideal that man or woman is free. Therefore there is no preconceived human essence. Human essence rather it comes after human beings have existed and made choices. Each one is creating a certain image of oneself of one's own choosing. In choosing oneself, one chooses human nature. Human beings are the future of Man and woman.

Sartre has developed existential humanism that is completely distinct from that of other humanistic thought for it does not make being human the end at all. Instead, the existential humanists believe that human beings constantly shape themselves by their actions. Furthermore, meanings and values are created by the purpose of those actions. This can be described as a universe of human subjectivity where human being projects oneself outward to achieve transcendental aims. Therefore, Sartre's existentialistic ethical theory is quite different from

<sup>2</sup> Thomas C. Anderson, *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity*, Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1993, p.147.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Hazel E. Barnes (trans.), New York: Philosophical Library, 1956, p.93.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Carol Macomber (Trans), New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, p.22.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.22.

the traditional understanding of Aristotle, Mill and Kant. They have rather proposed a prescriptive kind of ethics whereas existentialism makes a comment about the nature of ethics themselves. The nature of ethics are created by human beings, they do not exist before we create them.<sup>6</sup>

Sartrean understanding of human existence is based on his existential phenomenology. According to existentialists, man first exists and then seeks to acquire an 'essence' for himself. This is what Sartre means '*existence precedes essence*'. Sartre came up with a novel conception of human and new outlook by making human existence as the real frame of reference. His existential phenomenology is a study of the basic structures of human experience. The human individual will not be anything unless and until one will be what one makes of one self. He also shared the same idea as Heidegger that traditional metaphysics was impoverished by leaving out the full range of our experiences of the 'world' around us. So he wanted to focus more on human situations, the concerns of human living, emotions, values, etc. He holds that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity.<sup>7</sup> According to Sartre, human being is the foundation of all thought and action. He holds that human first of all exists, encounters oneself, surges up in the world and consequently defines the self. The emphasis of the existentialists on personal existence and subjectivity has led to new dimensions of human's freedom and responsibility.

According to the existentialist thinkers determinism, whether genetic, social or environmental, does not offer adequate explanation of human's inner potentialities and capabilities. Existentialists hold that each human being is unique and reveal one's inner potentialities and creative skills only because of one's freedom. First of all, human exists in the world and with the utmost freedom, he or she creates himself or herself through each and every actions. A person is the maker of himself or herself. Human being is the project which possesses subjective life and apart from this projection of self, nothing exists. And therefore each one has to complete the project in and through one's freedom. Hence there comes responsibility for whatever one does and, in this way, the whole responsibility of one's action falls on one's own shoulders. As Sartre states in *Being and Nothingness*, "man is being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being."<sup>8</sup>

In Sartre's understanding of human experience, consciousness of individual plays a vital role. Sartre holds that consciousness cannot exist merely by itself. Consciousness always involves some object. In other words, consciousness is always is the consciousness of something. To be conscious of something is to be aware of being

<sup>6</sup> Charles Carlson, "Jean-Paul Sartre: Existentialist Ethics," *utinrotophilosophy.blogspot.in*, N.p., 27 March 2006, Web, 8 Dec. 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit., *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, p.10.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.553.

conscious of something. In this sense, the human consciousness can never become its own object. The object of consciousness is what it is; wholly there, totally given, without any separation from itself. Each human experience has the dual aspect: on the one side there is consciousness and on the other side an object. Without the object no experience can be materialized. At the same time, the nature of consciousness is different from the object. The consciousness is unstable. It is always fleeting. It has no permanency. It is fluid, non-self-identical and dynamic in character. Consciousness is not itself a something. It is not complete and self-contained the way that being-in-itself is, we are always conscious of something else. We are conscious of a certain fact, of a certain emotion, of a certain object, of a certain desire, of a certain value, etc. It is through constant choices we direct our consciousness. We also define and determine the nature of our consciousness. Consciousness is a mere possibility whereas matter is an actuality. For Sartre, consciousness has no 'essence in itself and it is inheritable 'nothing', 'lack of being'. 'Being-for-itself' is embodied human consciousness. Sartre differentiates being-for-itself from being-in-itself. Being-in-itself is viewed as solid, self-identical, passive and inert. However, both are mutually exclusive in character yet human beings combine them together.<sup>9</sup> Sartre holds that man is most inexplicable among the beings in the world because of his consciousness. The human mind just finds itself in a certain situation, that is, it finds itself existing. But *what* the human mind is 'is of its own choosing'. The mind is consciousness, but consciousness is 'nothingness', a space or void for other things to enter. Sartre is further critical about the human nature and human essence as such. He argues that the nature human is essence is created by one's own existence.

According to Sartre human beings are what one makes of oneself. Human being is always surrounded by a 'situation'. He holds that there is only one being whose existence comes before its essence and that being is 'human'. Human is indefinable, because to begin with human is nothing. According to Sartre, there is no human nature. Sartre's phenomenology of human nature replaces traditional philosophical arguments. The traditional philosophers from Plato to Kant had taught that essence preceded our existence. In other words, it means we are predetermined to be what we are by some 'innate' or 'a priori' principle such as God, Nature or Reason. Sartre explains human subjectivity from atheistic point of view. He made human beings totally responsible for their acts. According to Sartre, freedom is the very essence of human being. Freedom is not a mode but it is the existence. Freedom is extension of the notion of consciousness. Freedom makes a person to be authentic.

## REDEFINING GOAL OF ETHICS

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp.79-83.



Sartre had admitted that his ethics moved from an abstract idealistic ethics to a realistic materialistic ethics as parallel to the evolution of his conception of human reality and freedom and their relation to the world.<sup>10</sup> He also admitted that his first idealistic ethics was placed so high that it could not have been practicable for the concrete human reality which was immersed in historical world. The abstractness of his first ethics was inevitable because the freedom was center of his ethics. Freedom was absolute and unlimited no matter what the circumstances. The ethical values are considered as nothing other than free creations of human beings. According to him, there are no intrinsic values for ethics. Certainly, he did not admit that one should love and value every free choice or project of others especially, the choice of ugliness over beauty, ignorance over knowledge, deceit over truth and possessions over life. He was adhering to a Classless society and freedom for all. In the second ethics, he moved toward a concrete understanding of human reality. In the first ethics, he had equated freedom with human reality. In the *Notebooks for an Ethics*, he made freedom to be one's primary goal and value which is to be sought. Here he advocates authentic love and generosity towards others. He asks to value their concrete freedom.<sup>11</sup>

Integral humanity is the goal of the second ethics which is significantly more concrete and richer in content. The main reason is that Sartre recognizes human being as much more than freedom and freedom is its most important ingredient. For him, freedom is our most fundamental human need besides many other needs. He insists on the importance to our body and its needs. He went on to emphasize our need for others in particular for their love and valuation. He has listed out some of the basic needs for human being to be human such as need for knowledge, for a meaningful life and for culture. In his opinion, without fulfillment of these needs we cannot become human. For him, freedom must play a vital role in the fulfillment of all these needs. The freedom must choose our relationships and create our social structures. In other words, Sartre was not interested in simple culture, knowledge and meaning rather he was insisting that freedom must produce our own culture, knowledge and meaning. The second ethics is more competent than the first ethics in achieving the integral humanity as human organism in all its dimensions. As a result, the second ethics promotes, directly or indirectly, the fulfillment of the various needs of the human organism.<sup>12</sup>

## **BASIS FOR ATHEISTIC MORAL VALUES**

Sartre stuck to the point that “human reality is that by which value arrives in the world.”<sup>13</sup> So Sartre completely rejects the existence of human values in the eternal platonic world or they being imposed by some superhuman

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit., *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity*, p.147.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.148.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp.148-49.

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit., *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, p.93.

absolute being. He rather founded his moral norms on human needs which he calls as ultimate sources for true morality. His second ethics (realistic morality) begins with a phenomenological analysis of everyday moral experience in order to ascertain the ontological structure of its moral norms and values which he criticized as being unaware that all values arise from human freedom. In other words, he has realized that ordinary human moral experience is the 'reality' in which the realistic ethics is grounded. Sartre's change of attitude toward ordinary moral experience is the fundamental difference between his first and second moralities in case of the ultimate source of moral values or norms concern. In other words, the first ethics rejected any version of intrinsic value by claiming that all values or norms are ultimately nothing but the free creations of human persons. Whereas, the second ethics is willing to admit that there is a given, imposed character to true moral norms but he never totally wanted to reduce it the values and imperatives of an individual, society, class, or group.<sup>14</sup>

For Sartre, human needs as the ultimate source of true norms or values but not human freedom because certain kinds of objects are necessary to fulfill human needs as human beings are a specific kind of organism with specific needs.<sup>15</sup> Thus his rooting of basic moral norms in human needs is significantly different from rooting them in freedom, for it means that such moral norms are not something that humans freely create as values. For Sartre, the objects which fulfill our human needs are experienced by us as norms, as values whether we like it or not. In second ethics, true moral norms or values possess an 'objectivity' that they did not and could not have in his first ethics. By making human needs rather than human freedom as the ultimate source, Sartre grants values certain independence from human freedom, for it can neither create nor remove their normative or value character.<sup>16</sup>

This difference has important implications when it comes to the issue of the universality of moral norms or values. Sartre maintained in both *Existentialism and Humanism* and the *Notebooks for an Ethics* that moral values have a universal character to them. Thus he stated that when a person experience something (justice) to be a moral value he or she experience it to be not just a value for him or her but also a value for others. Here Sartre makes a sharp distinction between norms that are grounded in the needs of human beings as members of the human species as true norms or norms of true morality and norms whose source is rooted in a particular society, class, or culture as universal. For Sartre, things needed by all human beings are protein, oxygen, culture, communication, knowledge, love, and a meaningful life. Therefore such objects are normative or valuable for all

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<sup>14</sup> Op. cit., *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity*, p.152.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.152.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.154.



humans from a moral perspective and they should be attained by each and every one for his or her integral humanity. Integral humanity itself is our ultimate moral norm.<sup>17</sup>

In the second ethics, Sartre wants us to reject the norms and values present in the alienated moralities that are dominant in today's society that are unreflectively accepted by so many. In his opinion, these values do not promote integral humanity or the fulfillment of true human needs. On the other hand, he emphasizes on wants us reflectively to choose the norms or values those as human beings naturally and prereflectively seek to fulfill our needs. The second morality is more positive on the prereflective human experience of moral norms or values because they are essential for human well-being.<sup>18</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Sartre rejects the alienated moralities that are dominant in the present day society. In his opinion these values do not promote integral humanity. Sartre rather upholds the prereflectively chosen norms of true morality. These norms strive for fulfilling our human needs and promote integral humanity. The question could be asked whether his revolutionary atheistic ethics could be accommodated in any of the traditional model of virtue theory or deontological or consequentialism. I would not recommend it to be included in any of these models of ethics. The reason is very clear that Aristotelian virtue theory, Mill's hedonism and consequentialist approach, and Kantian formalism and deontologist approach are quite different but they accept that there is human nature. Therefore, objective knowledge of what makes life worth living. But Sartre holds that there is no human nature and the meaning of life is created. Hence Sartre will no way fit into any of the above models. Sartre rather emphasizes on the integral humanity. In his opinion, integral humanity is the unsurpassable goals of all human reality. At the same time, he entrusts the individual with freedom to decide that which human needs would frustrate his or her attaining integral humanity. He never wanted to pass whether such actions are right or wrong but rather he would be interested to know whether that fulfils his objective of integral humanity and leads to meaningful life.

His critics believe that Sartre's human condition is quite inconsistent with morality. Sartre rejects the validity of the ethical systems as they may be based upon essentialist metaphysics of presupposition of God and *a priori* moral truth. On the other hand, he accepts the values of authenticity and good faith recommending them and passing moral judgment upon those who live in 'bad faith.' Sartre faces criticism of proposing moral relativism. As he recommends human needs are basis for morality. Another problem with regards to his ethical norms is that who is to determine which the prereflective values of human experience are would promote integral

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp.154-55.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.155.

humanity. So how to answer these ethical problem of present day such as domestic violence, act of terror, discrimination in the name of religion, caste, creed, sex, etc. If Sartrean ethics is understood with deeper analysis, it would provide the answer to present day ethical issues. I conclude that Sartrean atheistic ethics does not lead to ethical anarchy rather it paves way for authentic moral human beings.

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