

Humanism in Sartre's Philosophy

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ABSTRACT: *The best part of Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980), the most prominent figure of existentialist movement was his advocacy of humanism. As an atheist and a humanist, his primary concern was man. He gave much importance on human freedom. In his word man is born free. Sartre equalised human existence and freedom. Whatever happened in the world had its significance because of man. For Sartre, it is man who builds up the world by his actions. So, man's action needs to be considered with reason, justification and an understanding that one's decision will have an impact on the rest of the society. The basic concept created by existentialist movement was 'existence prior to essence'. Sartre believes that a man first of all exists and it is through all of his actions that he is able to define who he is and before actions are executed, man is nothing more than a thought. Sartre's humanism is the philosophy of eternal concerns of man which are today more pressing than ever before. Since Sartre's existentialism is concerned with man's freedom and its aim is to change its readers or to free from illusion, therefore it always been taught as a practical philosophy. Thus, present paper is an attempt to analyse Sartre's humanism and its distinctive features.*

KEYWORDS: *Essence, Existentialism, Freedom, Humanism, Illusion*

I. INTRODUCTION

Sartrian existentialism is a popular kind of philosophical activity which flourished in the 1940's and 1950's is a somewhat incompatible set of ideas taken from the writings of Karl Marx, S. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bergson, Husserl and Heidegger. Being the creative writer, social scientist Sartre gave an anti-science version of humanism that is still strongly influencing the members of the humanist community especially in Europe. In 1946, Sartre published a book entitled "Existentialism and Humanism" in which he presented existentialism in the form of humanism. His existentialism is concerned, unlike other philosophies with the problem of being than the problem of becoming; more with the particulars than with the universals; more with existence than essences. So, it would not be exaggeration to say that an account of Sartre's existentialism is identical with that of his humanism.

II. CENTRAL THEME

In his earlier work 'Nausea', Sartre rejected the kind of humanism which he found unacceptable which denies the primacy of individual choice. According to this humanism, one may take credit for the achievements of others on the grounds that we share humanity with them, so that their achievements are own. But there is another concept of humanism implicit in Sartre's existentialism. Sartre's humanism always emphasises the ability of individual beings to transcend their individual circumstance and act on behalf of all humans. The fact that Sartre maintains the only universe we have is a human universe and the laws of universe are made by human beings. There is no God operating behind the scene to give human reality a goal outside himself and to generate laws to govern human behaviour. Sartre says, by nothing that even if there were such a God nothing would be different and humans would have to remain their own moral compass.

III. THE DISTINCTIVE FACTORS

Sartre's humanism involves some distinctive features. When we analyse his account of existentialism the following points will stand out in favour of humanism—

- 1) The central theme runs through all Sartre's work is his passionate interest in human beings. Sartre lays greater emphasis on human existence. Before Sartre, St. Thomas Aquinas also had given greater emphasis on existence than essence. Sartre holds that there is only one being whose existence comes before its essence- that being is man. He wrote, "First of all man exists, turns up, appears on the scene and only afterwards defines himself." So, for him, man first of all is nothing. In fact in the philosophy of Sartre, the idea of existence gets associated with the idea of nothingness. To exist, in the primordial sense is to be nothing. One is here reminded of Hegel's celebrated statement "spirit is the negative". To exist means to exist as being-for-itself. Being-for-itself is characterized by consciousness. Consciousness, in the philosophy of Sartre is pure spontaneity confronting the world of objects. The world is characterized

by inertness. Consciousness while confronting this inertness appears as spontaneity. So, we can say that in Sartre's philosophy existence is itself characterized by spontaneity.

- 2) In explaining the nature of human existence, Sartre brought the idea of transcendence also. An element of self-transcendence is clearly present in human existence. Sartre wrote, "Human reality is its own surpassing towards what it lacks". The experience of lack or absence itself is painful experience. So, human reality or existence is so constituted that an element of suffering is clearly present in human existence. Therefore, human existence is called by Sartre, an unhappy consciousness. The idea of unhappy consciousness first appears in Hegel. Sartre borrowed it from Hegel. But for Hegel, unhappy consciousness is a stage in the process of development while for Sartre is existential predicament.
- 3) The third significant concept involves in Sartre's humanism is the concept of freedom. Man is born free. He cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. Sartre holds that our existence is absolutely free and it consists in developing our life in full freedom. This freedom brings responsibility. Freedom exists for us in two forms—(a) freedom of choice, (b) choice of freedom. If we are free—(a) we must be free to choose, but (b) we can make either a choice which really makes me free or a wrong choice which enslaves us again. Since we are free to choose our actions therefore we are responsible for all our actions. That is why man can control his nature. When we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible for his own individuality but that he is responsible for all men. What we choose is always better; and nothing can be better for all unless it is better for all. Thus, our responsibility is much greater than we had supposed for it concerns entire mankind.
- 4) In Sartre's humanism, apart from the idea of individual freedom, the idea of human uniqueness is also recognised. Sartre always emphasises upon individual existence. Existence means for them a full, vital, self-conscious, responsible and growing life. Man cannot enjoy a holiday. Every moment he is creating himself. Man cannot define his pre-history of birth. But it is possible to define himself gradually. He knows that he is not complete and not perfect. According to Sartre, I am free to perform chosen acts, free to impose meaning and significance upon the brute facts. The recognition of this factor enables Sartre to introduce a very important factor. This factor is the distinction between levels of existence i.e. the authentic level and inauthentic level of existence. In authentic level of existence I realise that I am not endowed with readymade essence. I am originally nothing. I am to create my essence through my freely chosen acts. So we can make ourselves. Man is the own maker of his fate. Thus, a kind of activist programme is present in Sartre's humanism.
- 5) A very important concept is the concept of abandonment, a favourite word of Heidegger. I am abandoned in this world. This concept goes hand in hand with Sartre's atheistic existentialism. In fact in the philosophy of Sartre, humanism and atheism is closely associated. Nietzsche had declared that God is dead and Sartre by following him upholds atheism. According to Sartre, because there is no God therefore, there is no value following from God. Man is always a possibility. Man is to create his value and project his values upon the external world. We ourselves decide our being. As F. Ponge has truly written-'Man is the future of man'. That is what Sartre meant by 'abandonment'.

IV. CRITICISM

It is usually admitted that Sartre has overemphasised upon tragic part of human existence. It is due to his one sided observation. A despair of existence cannot be the finality of life. The feeling of joy has been established by the mankind as a positive goal because this feeling is its own free choice. Critics have pointed out that it is error to state that despair is the law of reality and hopelessness is the final word regarding the universal process.

V. CONCLUSION

However, the above mentioned objection is not tenable. We suffer from anxiety and despair because we are worried about the result of our action. Thus, in conclusion it would be wrong to say that Sartre's humanism is a philosophy of quietism since it defines man by his action; nor as a pessimistic description of man since the destiny of man is placed within himself; nor is it an attempt to discourage man from action since there is no hope except in his action and the one thing which permits him to have life is the deed. Therefore, Sartre's humanism is not too individualistic as to negate social dimensions. Sartre clearly states that when I choose something I choose it for the entire mankind. Thus, we find ourselves in a world that is of 'intersubjectivity' in which man has to decide what he is and what others are. If man expresses his genuine humanity in his behaviour he will never deceive himself. Sartre's humanism is the philosophy of eternal concerns of man which are today more pressing than ever before. Since Sartre's existentialism is concerned with man's freedom and its aim is to change its readers or to free from illusion therefore it always been taught as a practical philosophy.

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