

JEAN PAUL SARTRE'S ETHICS OF AUTHENTICITY

Mrinal Kanti Dey

Abstract: The ontology of Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself has led Sartre to build up his ethical position. His moral philosophy is based on his concept of values. Human actions are right or wrong and oriented with values. Sartre thinks that moral values are invented, not discovered. He does not regard value as something which can be considered as a fact of the world. Value, he thinks, develops in the activities of human life. Man comes to acquire a meaning through his experiences of practical life and values are related to such meaning. Actually, the moral thought of Sartre is a rational synthesis of his idea of freedom, his concept of value along with his conception of the relation between individual and society.

Key Words: Virtue, Freedom of consciousness, Moral values, Concept of responsibility, Universalisability, Free Choice of action, Agent-centric morality.

Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) is one of the most renowned existentialist philosopher of the twentieth century. But he is not just a philosopher but also a novelist, essayist, playwright, editor and political activist. As an existential humanist, Sartre had an original moral philosophy, which is not so much discussed as it should be. Some designates the ethical position of Sartre as virtue ethics, since he takes the virtue of an agent as primary, rather than the ethical view either of the 'good' for the sake of which we act, or of duty, law or reason thought of as providing rules of action. Of course the basic virtue, according to Sartre, is nothing but the freedom of consciousness of an individual agent in his choice of what to do.

Being and Nothingness is a basic philosophical treatise of Jean Paul Sartre. It is an essay on ontology. To elaborate his ethical thoughts it is necessary to explain the category of Being-for-itself – the self-conscious man, who has free choice in his action to encounter the other category, Being-in-itself, the material world. These two categories have extensively discussed in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*.

I

Being-in-itself (*être-en-soi*) : In *Being and Nothingness* the first word 'being' corresponds to Being-in-itself (*être-en-soi*), and the second word 'nothingness' is correspond to Being-for-itself (*être-pour-soi*). Sartre thinks that the entire universe is made up of two fundamental different kinds of things – Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself. This classification of two types of being is roughly in the Cartesian line of distinction of two different substances – matter and mind. In

Sartre's terminology Being-in-itself is the material world and Being-for-itself is the world of consciousness. But unlike Descartes, Sartre does not fall into the trap of designating these two types of being as separate substance. To him, consciousness does not refer to any substance. He describes that consciousness is nothing – i.e. not a thing, but an activity

Going to analyse the nature of consciousness as it is related to the known objects of the world, Sartre realises two types of being in the universe: Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself. Being-in-itself refers to all the material entities of the world. Being-for-itself is the consciousness of man. Apart from consciousness everything in this universe is Being-in-itself. The intentionality of consciousness refers to the Being-in-itself. About Being-in-itself Sartre says, "It is what it is. This means that by itself it can not even be what it is not; we have seen indeed that it can encompass no negation. It is full possibility."¹ Being-in-itself is simply what it is without possibility of negation. According to Sartre, Being-in-itself never be created or destroyed, damaged or improved. All negation and destruction belongs to the consciousness which is in Sartre's terminology Being-for-itself. According to Sartre, it is consciousness which reveals the existent things. In revealing the things consciousness reveals itself. But the existent things have a being independent of consciousness and they appear before consciousness.

The material world, to Sartre, is such a being as is neither active nor passive. Activity and passivity belong only to consciousness, as these categories are understood in terms of means and ends. Being-in-itself, as it is simply something existent, does not have any such end. To talk about the end of such being is meaningless. Again one can not apply the categories of affirmation and negation to such a being. As being is completely full in-itself, it can neither be affirmed nor be negated. To quote the words of Prof. M.K. Bhadra "In fact, being is filled with itself, which can be expressed by saying that being is what it is. The statement may look like an analytical statement, but as the question here is of regional principle, it is synthetic. 'Being is what it is'. Sartre points out that the world 'is' has a special meaning. Beings have to be what they are. But the fact of being what they are is not an axiomatic characteristics, it is a contingent principle of being-in-itself. The in-itself is solid. It is the most indubitable of all; the synthesis of itself with itself."²

Thus, according to Sartre, the material world that is Being-in-itself does not have any possibility of transition or of becoming. It does not have in-itself any negation or destruction. All that there really is, from the point of view of the Being-in-itself, is the rearrangement of the constituent particles of the surface of the planet. This world is always positive. It has no temporal characteristics, because of the fact that temporality arises on the basis of lack. But material world

has no lack. Thus in the observation of Sartre, Being-in-itself is devoid of categories of transition, becoming, negation, nothingness, temporality, lack, possibility etc. These categories may be applied to Being-for-itself or consciousness. Thus, Being-for-itself has significant role in building the moral life of man

Being-for-itself (*être-pour-soi*) : Being-for-itself is the kind of being that pertain to one's own existence that is to say it is human existence, or categorically speaking human being having his own consciousness. According to Sartre, Being-for-itself entails the existence of consciousness and consciousness of itself. It is the centre of conscious awareness present in each of us, as human beings finds him or herself to be. Being-for-itself is being in the sense of being someone. It is that kind of being which assumes each human being of the fact that 'I am it'. As it is the existence of consciousness it entails that directness towards the world, called intentionality, which consciousness entails. And so Being-for-itself in the observation of Sartre, is partly constitutes by the presence of Being-in-itself.

To Sartre, Being-for-itself necessarily possess some existential structures like facticity, temporality and transcendence. Facticity should not be confused with factuality. Factuality points to an objective state of affairs observable in the world. Facticity may be recognised as the inner side of factuality. It is not an observe state of affairs, on the other hand it is in a word existential awareness of one's own being as a fact that is to be accepted. To Sartre and other existentialists, my existence, your existence, his existence, her existence are in each case characterise by facticity that is in a word, existential awareness of one's one being. According to Sartre, man, as Being-for-itself is facticity and transcendence at the same time. What is actually happening to our inner world of existence is facticity. All such happening are due to our body, our position, or our environment. As consciousness cannot be identified with facticity, so at the same time we possess transcendence. Transcendence is our possibility. This possibility can be used in two senses: "(1) what we might be doing or what might be happening to us; (2) what we are actually doing, though it is not necessary for us to have chosen this action. Transcendence thus does not mean far-fetched possibilities, but believable ways of behavior. Sartre thinks that we keep bad faith in existence by reducing facticity into transcendency, and transcendency into facticity."³

Sartre thinks that temporality is also a main characteristic of human existence or consciousness. The movement of consciousness starts from the past and proceeds to the future through the present. Temporality is negative in character, as it is possessed of destruction. Present is the destruction or negation of the past, past is that which has no existence at present and future

is that which has also no existence at present.

In regard to the future, Sartre says, man makes the future. It is only man who brings future to this world. Future is the possibility of a being which is its own future. Man is a being, he is Being-for-itself. To a man future is that at which we cannot arrive but at that he wants to arrive. Future is that which a man wants to be. Man runs from present to that being of which he has lack. According to Sartre, man starts his journey to the future with the material world outside him. Man's future stands in front of his present. Future stands before our present with all the possibilities which we do not have at present but which we desire. So as human beings we take up some projects by which we want to fulfill the lacks of our present. But after the completion of our projects we again find out our lack, in other words, nothingness. According to Sartre, again this lack or nothingness waits for a new future which stands before our present. In this connection Sartre says, "The Future is the continual possibilization of possibles – as the meaning of the present For-itself in so far as this meaning is problematic and as such radically escapes the present For-itself."⁴

Sartre thinks that, the Being-for-itself has full possibility in relation to itself. So it splits itself in an inner duality. As a result it is capable of assuming a particular perspective on the world of the Being-in-itself. This is its capability of valuing the Being-in-itself. Since the Being-for-itself can value the Being-in-itself. The Being-for-itself has an interest or a desire in what happens to the Being-in-itself. That is why man always desires the existence of value which arises in his consciousness. It is only the Being-for-itself or human being who considers this or that as a value and establishes it as an existence. So Sartre says, "... human reality is that by which value arrives in the world."⁵ According to him, the existence of human being is based on the capability of his estimation. This estimation is nothing but the assumption of a particular perspective on the reality of the Being-in-itself. As capable of valuing the world and possessed of possibilities there arises destruction in the Being-for-itself. 'We see, therefore' says Neil Levy, "that it is because the for-itself *values* the world that it can be destroyed or degraded. The for-itself, Sartre will say, is the origin of negation."⁶ Dr. Levy further comments, "We have seen that it is because the for-itself can value being that, for it, being can be destroyed. This might suggest that the valuing is primary and the negation is secondary. In fact, it is the other way round: the for-itself is able to value things only because it is the origin of all negation. What accounts for this extraordinary ability of the for-itself, to produce nothingness? Sartre suggests we take that question – in fact, *any* question – as the 'guiding thread' in our enquiry. We can interrogate the question itself, and see what it presupposes."⁷ According to Sartre, our natural ability for questioning gives rise to nothingness in our

consciousness, in as much as the ability to question something presupposes that we can take a certain distance from what we question. So the Being-for-itself is nothing but nothingness. And this sharply distinguishes it from the world of the Being-in-itself.

II

Moral Philosophy : The ontology of Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself has led Sartre to build up his ethical position. His moral philosophy is based on his concept of values. According to Sartre, it is the human being, the Being-for-itself which introduces values in the world. In his words, "..... the meaning of being for value is that it is that towards which a being surpasses its being; every value-oriented act is a wrenching away from its own being toward - ." ⁸ Human actions are right or wrong and oriented with values. According to Sartre, the ontology of the Being-for-itself is necessarily connected with the ethical problems of human life. That is to say it is connected with man's actions as right or wrong in the perspective of values.

Sartre thinks that moral values are invented, not discovered. He does not regard value as something which can be considered as a fact of the world. Value, he thinks, develops in the activities of human life. Man comes to acquire a meaning through his experiences of practical life and values are related to such meaning.

Sartre is an atheist existentialist. So there is no divine authority on the distinction between right action and wrong action to direct some value system. Rather, each person is free to create his own values through action. In *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre emphasized that there is no universe except the human universe and we can not escape human subjectivity.⁹ So we need not look outside our lives to answer the question of how to live. Each individual is free to choose how he should live. Man is an existent individual – a Being-for-itself. Unlike a Being-in-itself, possessing no self-consciousness and freedom of will, he has self-consciousness and freedom of will that is the power of self-determination. Each man fashions his own future by his own choice and self-conscious efforts, without being dictated by an external authority.

The Concept of Responsibility : According to Sartre, values belong only to the world of each individual man. Everybody is uncomfortably free to invent them. Yet beginning from *Being and Nothingness* he has tried to provide us with strict criteria for deciding between right and wrong which points to some absolute morality on the basis of his insistence of the concept of responsibility.

Human beings are what they make for themselves. It follows that everyone is wholly and

solely responsible for everything he does. Responsibility in Sartre's moral philosophy has also another dimension. In choosing for himself man is implicitly choosing for others. That is to say, as he is solely responsible to him for his free action, he is also responsible to others for this Sartre writes, "The essential consequence of our earlier remarks is that man 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."¹⁰ What is meant by this dimension of responsibility is that whenever I am doing any action with my free choice, I am prescribing the same course of action to the rest of humanity.

Thus it may be thought that Sartre somehow believes in the moral philosophy of universalisability which was strongly advocated by Kant. We know Kant like Sartre tried to establish an universalisable morality designing it as categorical imperative, the fundamental law of Kant's ethics. In his best-known formulation, it states: "Act only on that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."¹¹

In Sartre's *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1945) we find a moral idea of good. This idea of good reveals Sartre's objective approach to humanity almost similar to that of Kant. As Sartre writes in his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, "Note that the universal structure of good is necessary as that which gives its transcendence and its objectivity. To posit the good in doing it is posit others as having to do it. We can not escape this."¹²

So it appears that universalisability provides Sartre with a test distinguish between rightness and wrongness of our actions. If an action cannot be consistently universalised, than it is immoral. On the contrary, if the action can be consistently universalised it is moral. In fact, to Sartre man has to realise the full burden of his responsibility to the humanity, which in terms, may provoke in him the deepest sense of dread and anxiety. To remove this discomfort he plunges himself into bad faith. Facing one's freedom requires facing one's responsibility. Generally man does not want to face his responsibility, so he denies his own freedom. But this denial ultimately acts upon him. He thinks he must have to accept the objective facts of freedom and responsibility. But he tries to escape. These facts endure through his pretends (Bad faith). As a result he has to spend his life in anguish.

So far we see that Sartre emerged as a moral objectivist despite of his rejection of theoretical foundation of ethics.

But as an existentialist Sartre emphasised, the freedom of individual human being and his own choice of action. According to him, the individual subject, the performer of an act by his own

free choice in a given situation is the best judge of his own action. So, all values are to be subjective, the creation of the individual subject. As a result there should be no objective, the universal values binding upon the individual. Sartre was aware of this. What he thought is that the meaning of life depends on the life which we build up. Nevertheless the meaning of life, according to Sartre, is not merely subjective, it has also objective dimension.

The matter has clearly been exposed by Sartre in his *Existentialism and Humanism* (Lecture in 1945, published in book-form 1946), in this essay he is supposed to express his ethical standpoint. Some thinkers like Mary Warnock do not give much importance to this essay. According to Warnock, "..... we must abandon the attempt to consider *Existentialism and Humanism* as a proper statement of Sartre's moral philosophy or of Existentialist moral philosophy in general."¹³ Sartre himself also does not give much importance to this essay written for popular lecture. But we can not think so. If Sartre was really unsatisfied with this essay, he could not give permission to publish it in book-form. Sartre wrote the essay to react against the communists and the catholic Christians to whom existentialism is anti-humanism. After refuting them, he categorically established that existentialism is humanism. He can not deny that as a philosophy humanism has necessarily a moral footing. So we could not agree with Mary Warnock that the essay *Existentialism and Humanism* should not be considered as a proper statement of moral philosophy.

In *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre declares that the choice of action – the decision of man has an objective point of view. On the basis of such decision only man can build up a good human society, when man decides for himself, he also decides for the whole humanity. Since the period of Being and Nothingness, Sartre was a staunch supporter of individual freedom emphasising on the subjective choice of man in every actions. But in lecture *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre changed his outlook in regard to man's place in the world. So viewing his socialistic turn of mind in this lecture, some critics discovered self-contradiction in Sartre's existential philosophy. But in the period of *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre realised that when a man performs an action, he should ask himself whether what he is doing can also done by others. If this question does not arise in his mind he must have been influenced by bad faith. Sartre says, "When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men. For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be. To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to

choose the worse. What we choose is always the better, and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all. If, moreover, *existence precedes essence* and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for the entire epoch in which we find ourselves. Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole.”¹⁴

Agent-centric Morality : In *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre categorically refutes the charge of subjectivism on his existentialist morality and tried to show, in the words of Prof. M.K. Bhadra, that “...there is a human universality and it is the condition of man’s action. These conditions are objective, because these exist in all places. Again, an individual has to lead his life according to these conditions. Sartre says that we can say in this sense that there is a human universality, but it is not given in a universal way. It is being built up all the time. I go on constructing this universality by my choice, I construct this understanding of the intention of others, of men of all ages. So this universality does not effect the relativity of every age.”¹⁵

Going to estimate Sartre’s moral philosophy one thing must be remembered. Generally it is believed that morality is concerned with right or wrong, more specifically right action and wrong action. Sartre does not totally accept this action-centric morality, rather he emphasises on agent-centric morality. Agent-centric morality is not something new. Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) spoke about agent-centric morality in his *Virtue Ethics*. Aristotle advocated the cultivation of moderation, justice, courage and other qualities that the characteristics of a good person. These qualities are virtues by reference to some universally binding conception of human nature. But Sartre can not accept such human nature consisting of a number of virtues. According to him, the only virtue of an active human life is the virtue of authenticity.

III

The Ethics of Authenticity : If we go through Sartre’s approach to moral thought we find that in some way or other he believed in virtue ethics. According to him, it is always upto each of us to choose the manner in which each will live. It is upto each of us to choose our values, what constitutes a virtue for us. Consequently the reason for the action of choice itself gives Sartre a means of assessment of this choice. As Neil Levy observes, “..... Sartre’s virtue ethics contains but a single value. We are all to cultivate the virtue of authenticity in ourselves, where ‘authenticity’ means the acceptance of our place in the cosmos, of the fact that we are each alone, without excuse or reason for being, abandoned to choose our values without reference to anything that could justify them in the eyes of the universe. Authenticity means accepting our burden of radical

freedom, the fact that values are not, as Sartre says, inscribed in an 'intelligible heaven' (EH, p.33), and that therefore we must create them ourselves. Inauthenticity, the one vice on the Sartrean view, will therefore consist in the opposite – the attempt to find an excuse for actions, a reason why we *had* to act that way.”¹⁶

Sartre's ethics of authenticity has been clearly illustrated in the oft-mentioned story which happened in his life. One of the Sartre's students came to him for advice during the war (at a time when France was occupied by the German army). The young man was shorn between two mutuality courses of action. On the one hand he sincerely desired to go to Britain to join the Free French camp. On the other hand, he thought that he should stay with his sick and lonely mother who was still deeply in mourning for his older brother killed in the German offensive of 1940. Sartre told him that he could not give him any advice as to what he should do. The young man would have to freely decide his personal choice for particular action he should do. If he was to accept the advice of anybody, he would also be choosing that advice. That is to say he must be authentic to his choice by accepting the burden of his radical freedom. So in the last analysis, according to Sartre, action chosen in the authentic experience of freedom is moral and the action which is not so chosen is not moral.

Either he is to stay with his mother or he is to leave. There is no third alternative. Similarly, either he joins the Free French Camp or he doesn't. Whatever he decides, his choice will entail the choice of values. It is always up to us to choose the values that will justify our choice. We make our choice without guidance, without excuse. Sartre's advice to his pupil reflected this fact: "I had but one reply to make. You are free, therefore choose – that is to say, invent."¹⁷ But at the same time such choice of action, to him, is not purely subjective or individualistic. That is why Sartre asserts, "What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all."¹⁸

Actually, the moral thought of Sartre is a rational synthesis of his idea of human freedom, his concept of the value of authentic human existence along with his conception of the relation between individual and society.

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