

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SARTRE'S EXISTENTIAL HUMANISM

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Humanism is not a well-defined doctrine, and as a result, there have been different versions of humanism. In spite of this, there is a central core of humanistic thought, and this is the recognition that *savar upre manus satya, tahar upre nai* (above all, man is real; nothing is above him). Jean-Paul Sartre, the principal exponent of French Existentialism, accords complete autonomy to human beings, thereby suggesting that there is no reality higher than human individuals. Sartre does not believe in any super human reality, like God. Atheistic existentialism, to which Sartre is one of the most important subscribers, declares that God does not exist, and as such, there is at least one being whose existence comes before his essence, a being which exists before it can be defined at all. This means, in the language of Sartre, that '....man, first of all, exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world--and defines himself afterwards.'¹ This philosophy of existentialism upholds: Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.²

In what follows we want to analyse Sartre's philosophy of humanism in a critical manner.

I

Before entering straightaway into Sartre's own view on humanism, it would be better to take note of, at least, two influential versions of the same, as Sartre takes on them as the rival views. These are Christian Humanism and Positivist Humanism.

The starting-point of Christian understanding of man is the knowledge that man has been created in the image of God. Accordingly, the incomprehensible, immaterial, almighty God, who transcends all existence, all power, all knowledge, wanted to become copies of himself. This, of course, does not mean that He simply impressed His image like a seal on some plastic material, but that He raised man to a creature in which He recognised His own image and came to the consciousness of Himself and that man, then, in a completely decisive way, belongs to the self manifestation of God., that the history of mankind is theology.

There are mainly two types of interpretation of this theological humanism. First, it is held that man like other creatures of the universe is, in essence, a creature; he is nothing by himself, but owes everything, even his existence, to the will of his divine creator. As we are all his creatures, we feel solidarity of universal brotherhood with all fellow-beings. Secondly, the fact God created man after his image determined man's special status before all other creatures. In the fact that one sees the image of God-in-man, which is merely suggested in other creatures, is founded the unity of humanity. The image of God in man is the true sign of his divine destiny and calling, and the ground of the future integration of the humanity. For the sake of his destiny and calling, all men should maintain with each other the greatest possible unity and peace.

Although this Christian humanism made a considerable influence in binding human groups, it fails to accord full dignity and sovereignty to human beings. It is based on charity and love and as such, it could not rise above humanitarianism. Besides, disintegration and conflicts among different religious sects within Christianity have added misery to mankind. The religious conflicts are sometimes engineered for political purposes; economic factors add fuel to them. Even admitting these, it can be said that these are fought in the name of religion, and there is hardly found any effective resistance from the believers quarter. Reason, the most important guide to the path of humanity, is not always accorded by the Church. Only the Renaissance movement raised its voice against dogmatic worldviews, thereby paving the way for true humanism.

At the end of 19th century the French intellectuals came out to formulate a secular humanism based mainly on reason. The principal trend

has been the Positivist humanistic thought. Positivism sees man as an end in itself and as a supreme value. August Comte, the main proponent of positivism, along with his followers preached that God is a useless and costly hypothesis, and we could do without it. Positivism offers an alternative system of values to regulate the whole course of our private and public life, by bringing noble feelings, reason and human actions into a unity. Actually, positivism regards life as continuous and earnest act of worship--worship to elevate and purify our feeling, enlarge and enlighten our thought, ennoble and invigorate our actions. In the words of Comte, it is 'Religion of Humanity' that could replace all imperfect dogmatic systems based on theology.

According to this positivist philosophy, if we are to have a morality, a society and a law-abiding world, it is essential that certain secular value should be taken seriously. These values are seen to have an *a priori* existence ascribed to them. That is, it must be obligatory *a priori* to be honest, not to lie, not to beat one's wife, to bring up children and so forth. These values are, however, thought to be inscribed in an intelligible heaven, although of course, there is no God.

II

Sartre vehemently opposes these two versions of humanism. Against Christian humanism he upholds the view that 'If God exists, man is nothing....'³ Human being is the supreme and sovereign reality. Man has no pre-determined essence, rather he makes of himself only through his free activities. Sartre's view will be gradually clear as we go on analysing his existential world-view.

Sartre rejects, at the same time, the positivist version of humanism. Comtean humanism sees man as directed to a pre-determined, fixed end in itself, whereas man according to Sartre, is by nature free, and still to be determined. Sartre thinks⁴ that humanism in this sense appears, e.g., in Cocteau's story *Round the World in 80 Hours* in which one of the characters says, while flying over mountains in an aeroplane, 'Man is magnificent!' This signifies that, although I personally have not built aeroplanes, I have the benefit of those particular inventions, and that I personally, being a man, can consider myself responsible for, and honoured

by, the achievements that are peculiar to some other expert personalities. This means that we can ascribe value to men at large, while only some other individuals are responsible for something.

According to Sartre, this kind of humanism is absurd, for someday some non-human being might come to pronounce a general judgement upon man and declare that man is magnificent. Nor is it admissible that a man should pronounce judgement upon man. Existentialism dispenses with any judgement of this sort: an existentialist would never take man as the end, since man is still to be determined⁵. And as such, we do not have any right to believe that humanity is something to which we could set up a cult after the manner of Auguste Comte. This cult of Religion of Humanity is shut-up upon itself, and, ironically, this might end in Fascism.

III

Sartre endeavours, through his literary and philosophical writings, to erect a new kind of humanism, which he characterised as 'Existential Humanism'⁶ According to him, to be human is to be free. Man is always outside of himself. It is in his projecting and losing himself beyond that he makes man to exist; and on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist. Since man is thus self-surpassing and can grasp objects only in relation to his self-surpassing, he is himself the heart and centre of his transcendence. There is thus no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity, The relation of transcendence as constitutive of man, in the sense of self-surpassing subjectivity in a sense that man is not shut up in himself for ever-presents a human universe.

As already indicated, Sartre elucidated his notion of humanism through a lecture which was later published as *Existentialism and Humanism*. Yet in order to understand the full import of his humanistic philosophy we have to take note, at least, of his two monumental volumes, viz., *Being and Nothingness* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, along with the play *Lucifer and the Lord*.

Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* is an analysis of ontology of human reality. Sartre begins his ontological analysis with a discussion of consciousness as nothingness. Man is by nature incomplete, at every moment

he experiences that he is not what he has to be. This primordial experience of nothingness occurs within the limits of human expectation. It is because I expect to find fifteen hundred rupees in my purse that I find only thirteen hundred. This world discloses nonbeing to someone who has first posited certain possibility. Nothingness is an irreducible experience, which cannot result from prior affirmation. He holds that the necessary condition of our saying 'no' is that non-being is a perpetual presence to us and outside of us, as nothingness haunts being.

Sartre distinguishes between being-in-itself and being for itself in connection with his analysis of human reality. Being-in-itself is the full, self identical being, which has no lack, no incompleteness. It is what it is, being of full positivity. For example, a chair is always a chair. Being-for-itself is, on the other hand, human being as conscious reality, never identifiable with itself. For it, the being-in-itself is a goal towards which consciousness moves, but which it never achieves. That is why consciousness is defined as perpetual negation.

Being-for-itself, i.e., human consciousness has a basic structure which can be stated thus: Consciousness is impersonal, non-substantial being infected with internal negation, which is temporal and the source of values. The nature of consciousness is such that it goes beyond itself, to be what it is not, not to be what it is. In this sense, consciousness is possible, because consciousness is free. That consciousness exists in the ekstatic unity of past, present and future is possible, as consciousness is freedom. This is made clear by Sartre when he says that man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of man and his being free. Not only that '.....human reality does not exist first in order to act later; but for human reality, to be is to act and to cease to act is to cease to be.'⁷ Freedom, being and action are thus the same thing.

Sartre reiterates that it is only by pure wrenching from himself and the world, that the worker, e.g., can understand the suffering as unendurable and as a result can make of it the motive of a revolutionary action. Sartre does not think that there is any action without cause; rather his idea is that every action must have an end, and in the light of this end, the cause functions as cause.

Obviously Sartre does not believe in the so-called objectivity of values. Human individual is the being that gives rise to values. Man wants to proceed to a form of existence from the present position, as past does not satisfy him. He has a goal, a purpose, and he thinks that realization of that goal will satisfy him. Sartre would call this process of realization surpassing. Due to this act of realizing a purpose, an object receives significance, becomes endowed with value. This paper which I write now, for example, comes to have a meaning only when it is related to some purpose.

Sartre connects man's movement of surpassing the present with his desire to reach the future. Just as a crescent moon can be understood with reference to the full moon, so also an individual being is to be understood with reference to the complete to be realised. And value there becomes an extended nothingness that always haunts us. This emptiness is ingrained in his nature in such a manner that it can never get rid of it, That is why his consciousness is always fragmented, he is in anxiety. To get beyond this anxiety he takes refuge in bad-faith, which is nothing but a lying to oneself.

Thus we find that, according to Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, freedom is the only foundation of values. Man, who is thrown into this alien world, is denied any external value to support him. Man is alone, unjustified, and irreducibly free. He uses his freedom by constantly interpreting and signifying the world around him, by making fresh judgements in every new situation, and above all, by an ever renewed effort of self-justification.

In his play '*Lucifer and the Lord*' (*Le Diable et le bon Dieu*) Sartre throws all burden on the individual's shoulders. His existential atheism is expressed in clear language through the mouth of the hero, Goetz: "I tried to make myself a pillar and carry the weight of celestial vault. I'll tell you a secret; heaven is an empty hole"⁸ He says: "God is loneliness of man. There was no one but myself: I alone decided on evil and I alone invented God. It was I who cheated I who worked miracles. I who accuse myself today, I alone who can absolve myself, I, the man. If God exists, man is nothing; if man exists..."⁹ He goes on to declare: "There was no trial; I tell you God is dead ... we have no witness now, I lone can see your hair and your brow. How REAL you have become since He no longer

exists."¹⁰

Thus we find in Sartre the clear picture of a solely human universe, which results from man's self-transcending and constitutive subjectivity, his freedom of choice. Man is with total freedom, along with inevitable responsibility of the whole world. Sartre's existential humanism '... puts every man in possession of himself as he is and place the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders.'¹¹ An individual is responsible for war which he has not started, not even fought. This is because he lets the war to be fought!

IV

The above discussion gives the impression that Sartre is advocating absolute individualism that hardly leaves room for social and collective construction. But a true humanism has to accommodate both the individual and the social aspects. The individual must be harmonized with the society. Though Sartre is not very positive on this issue in his *Being and Nothingness*, he is aware of this problem of individual subjectivism. To overcome this narrow world-view he endeavours to relate the autonomous individual with the social being, first in his *Existentialism and Humanism*, then in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Instead of the previous stress on the basic and deadly conflict of freedoms in the field, he now tells us that in choosing our freedom we also choose freedom for other fellow-beings. He comes to declare: "When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that everyone of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself, he chooses for all men."¹² Sartre explains, in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wishes 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. Furthermore, what a man chooses is always the better, and nothing can be better for him unless it is better for all. If we admit that existence precedes essence and wish 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 it is generally supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole. To be specific, when a man commits himself to anything fully realising that he is not only choosing for himself but also comes out as a

legislator deciding on behalf of the whole of mankind-in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility.¹³

Sartre means to say that man in discovering himself discovers also the others. I do not get a true picture of my existence unless there is intervention of the other. So others are necessary for my own existence and self-knowledge. This fact of knowing others through one's own existence is called by Sartre inter-subjectivity. In addition, he speaks of a human universality, and it is the condition of man's actions. These conditions are objective, as these exist at all places. An individual has to lead his life according to these conditions. This universality is not, of course, completely pre-given, it is being built up; all the time. I go on constructing this universality by my choice. This same idea is expressed in an interview with R.C. Solomon.¹⁴

V

As is evident from the above, Sartre speaks of an ontological harmony between the individual and the social. But he did not fully explain the matter till the publication of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. He came to the realisation that a complete account of the problem is required, as he gradually engaged himself in political action, and when existentialism is seen as the philosophy of political commitment. In the beginning of 1948 he founded a political group known as 'Ressement Democratique Revolutionaire'. He felt that he has found a political platform which could resolve the contradictory positions of Existentialism and Marxism. It was practically an attempt to discover a non-communist left group that would give rise to an 'existential subject of history'. However, this attempt did not succeed. Another occasion for a new turn was the experience of the Resistance movement in which Sartre had taken an active part, followed by the era of liberation and painful reconstruction. In this new situation Sartre's liberation of human existence, instead of taking the form of escape into world of beauty and artistic creations, finds its prime expression in the social struggle more and more, specifically in the commitment to the cause of social revolution in the interest of the least free members of the society, viz., the proletariat. But while he accepts the Marxist diagnosis of the class-struggle,

he rejects all the more strongly the metaphysics of the dialectical materialism that underlies it. Sartre points out that both Marxism and Existentialism are philosophies of freedom, as well as theories of a project and commitment. According to him, existentialism is a humanistic philosophy of action, of effort, of combat, of solidarity, in other words, a supplement to Marxism. Sartre puts emphasis on individual decision which bourgeois determinism and vulgar Marxism habitually undermines.

If we look at his career, we would find that Sartre sought to uphold absolute autonomy of individuals up to 1957. He wrote in a private note, 'All my political efforts are directed toward finding a group that will give a meaning to my transcendence, that will prove by its existence,....that my contradictory position was to true one.'¹⁵ In 1960 he came to develop his philosophy of social and historical ideas in a systematic way. In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* he comes to explore the possibility of a social and historical anthropology and to determine the limits of Marxism as a dialectical mode of thought and free it from dogma. In the first part of the introductory section (which is separately published also as *Search for a Method*) Sartre shows the importance of Marxism in our times, though he thinks that it has been reduced to a dogma. Sartre writes "Far from being exhausted, Marxism is still very young, almost in its infancy; it has scarcely begun to develop. It remains, therefore, the philosophy of our time ... Existentialism, like Marxism, addresses itself to experience in order to discover their concrete synthesis..."¹⁶ He thinks that Marxism has to take in consideration the existential mediations which correct the economic base with concrete action. He opines that Marxism is inadequate, as it fails to accommodate the concept of a project to reveal the subjective level of social experience.

It is indeed inside the movement of Marxism that we discover a flaw that is to be plugged namely, that the free individual is to be rehabilitated. The very notions, such as exploitation, alienation, reification, etc. which the Marxist employs have to be clarified with reference to existential structure.

Sartre thinks that the most important philosophical question is the status of dialectic. He regards it as both the method of thought and the structure of reality, while reason and the object of knowledge which are

both in motion are mutually dependent on each other. Dialectic may be located in the world but it is constituted through man in the process of totalizing his experience.¹⁷ It is true that man is within nature and the process of nature is the foundation of human life. But it is not true that human knowledge reduces itself to the model of nature. Human reality differs from the physico-chemical processes. To say the truth, the dialectic of nature is paradoxical as at first human ideas are imposed upon human reality and then our knowledge is re-imposed upon human reality with the belief that it originated in nature. The Marxists who call themselves materialists are in fact idealists who regard their ideas about nature as existing superhumanly. But he is always ready to accept the dialectic in explaining the possibility of comprehension of history.

Human relations, according to Sartre, are governed by a dialectical principle that man is mediated by the things to the extent that things are mediated by man. Each man begins his work upon nature as a solitary individual, but two solitary workers may be unified by a third person who brings both of them into a single totalization.¹⁸ The concept of this third party stresses the collective background of individual actions implying their social mediation. Similarly, the dialectic of dyad individual nature leads to the unavoidable fact of scarcity, for there is not enough for everyone. Like need, scarcity also unifies the practical field of multiplicity of men. The scarcity would be eliminated only when goods are shared equitably and when labour is reduced to a marginal fact of life through automation.

Anyhow, man experiences alienation, which he wants to overcome by his free choice and there is a dialectic of freedom and alienation. But a solitary individual does not have the freedom of choice to alter the situation in order to abolish alienation. This can come about only through grouping. For this, formation of groups is a very important factor in social dialectics. In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Sartre discusses how the individual moves through the 'series' to the 'group-in-fusion'¹⁹ He refers to a number of men standing in a line at the bus stop. They have a common purpose, i.e., getting into the bus, through which they are united. But among themselves they are in condition of solitude. The object (here, the bus) for which they are waiting defines a relation of the individuals as interchangeable and external. In such a situation the relation of one man to another is

togetherness. It seems to have an inertness of matter, but the group possesses a vitality of free projects. To explain the formation of group he cites an example²⁰: In July 1789 the people of France found themselves in a dangerous situation and saw their own selves in the other persons as possible victims. As a result, series was abolished in an explosion of fraternal reciprocity and each person then began to see himself in the other, as he saw himself there as himself. There emerged an absolute reciprocity of praxis in which each person saw in the other the same project as his own. Each individual reaches, in a new fashion, not as mere individual, but as a singular interaction of the common person. Impersonality, isolation, automation etc., which define the series, are thrown away in the intensely personal relations of the group-in-fusion. This group is, according to Sartre, the 'beginning of humanity' where men recover their lost being, their supposed freedom.

VI

From the above analysis it is evident that Sartre, the champion of individual freedom, endeavoured through the later part of his career to establish his existentialism as a true humanism. But in spite of his earnest effort, he could not convince the intellectuals. His excessive love for individual autonomy, his overemphasis of the cartesian cogito stand against his socialist intentions. He felt that the individual could not carry on his progress and welfare without the other, without the society. Yet he could not sufficiently explain how the individual is to be reconciled with collective constructions. He has made an honest attempt in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, but it has remained incomplete. His analysis of collective actions, objective conditions, etc. is insufficient. But still, it may safely be said that he was able to provide us with a new, existential dimension vis-a-vis the so-called positivist, mechanical approach, to humanism.

NOTES

1. Jean-Paul Sartre : *Existentialism and Humanism*. (trans. Philip Mairet) Methuen & Co. London. 1960. p.28.
2. *Ibid*

3. Jean-Paul Sartre : *Lucifer and the Lord* (trans, Kitty Black) in *Jean-Paul Sartre Two Plays*, Penguin Books. London. 1952,pp.182-83.
4. Jean-Paul Sartre : *Existentialism and Humanism*. op. cit. p.54
5. *Ibid.* p.55
6. *Ibid.*
7. Jean-Paul Sartre : *Being and Nothingness* (trans.Hazel E. Barnes) Washington Press. NewYark 1966 p..613
8. Jean-Paul Sartre : *Lucifer and the Lord*. op.cit..o.156.
9. *Ibid.* pp. 182-83
10. *Ibid.* p. 284
11. Jean-Paul Sartre : *Extentialism and Humanism op. cit.. p.29.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.* p.30
14. Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre. : An Interview in Robert C. Solomon : *From Hegel to Existialism*, Oxford University Presss, 1987 pp. 276-99
15. As quoted by M.K. Bhadra in his *A Critical Survey of Phenomenoloty and Existentialism*. I.C.P.R. New Delhi. 1990 p. 384.
16. Jean-Paul Sartre : *The Problem of Method* (trans by Hazel E.Barnes) Methuen & Co.. London. 1963 p.30
17. Jean-Paul Sartre : *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Verso Paperback Edition. London. 1982. pp. 45-6
18. *Ibid.* p.114
19. *Ibid.* p.256
20. *Ibid.* p.405-06