Chapter 38
Jean Paul Sartre’s Concept of Human Existence

Key Words:
Existence, being-in-itself, being-for-itself, being-for-others, subjectivity, consciousness, facticity, givenness, being, subjectivity or consciousness, transphenomenality, nihilation of the in-itself, freedom, responsibility, anguish, authentic existence.

Introduction

This chapter will elaborate the three important concepts in Sartre’s philosophy: being-in-itself, being-for-itself and being-for-others. We have already discussed the first two briefly in the previous chapter. We shall now examine them in detail along with the third concept, being-for-others. Philosophically, the most important influence on Sartre has come from the German phenomenological tradition and the two philosophers Husserl and Heidegger who have been the greatest inspiration for him, both in identifying the central themes of his philosophy and in adopting a peculiar approach to them.

The problem of being is the centre of phenomenological explorations of Heidegger and Sartre too begins his philosophical investigations with this problem. We have already seen in the previous chapter that how Sartre had critically appropriated Husserl. He criticizes the Husserlian project that aims at uncovering the meaning or essence of phenomenon through phenomenological reduction. Instead, Sartre is of the view that phenomenon has no meaning or essence. He maintains that being is only the ground upon which objects can reveal themselves to consciousness. According to him, what is important is consciousness and hence man’s being.

While discussing the important features of man’s being, Sartre identifies three constituents of being; being-in-itself, being-for-itself and being-for-others. The being-in-itself refers to the objects that are just there. These objects have no awareness of or value for themselves. On the other hand being-for-itself refers to the being of man. Sartre reminds us that contrary to other things, human beings are aware of themselves and their consciousness of their own existence is central in their being. Again, while the being-in-itself is the principle of objectivity or facticity, the being-for-itself stands for the principle of subjectivity or consciousness. The being-in-itself refers to the being of things i.e., to their essences which are fixed and hence are neither active nor
passive. The being-for-itself refers to the being of individuals and their existence. Man defines his own essence and gives meaning to his own existence through the choices he makes.

Sartre argues that, though the being-in-itself and being-for-itself mutually exclude, they are nevertheless combined in human being. Man is both being-in-itself and being-for-itself. These two aspects of being—in-itself and for-itself—represent facticity and transcendence respectively. Facticity stands for the givenness of our context, which we cannot change and transcendence refers to our ability to transcend facticity through our choices. We humans are always “more” than our situation. Sartre maintains that, though the being of man is characterized by facticity, it nevertheless does not prevent us from being free and exercising this freedom.

Another important feature of man’s being is its essential temporal nature. Man exists in time; past, present and future. The aspect of facticity refers to our past, which remains without any change. Future becomes relevant only for man, as he projects himself to the future. In this sense, man’s essence is never completely fixed. He is yet to be. Let us now discuss the three aspects of being in detail, which is present in the being of man.

**Being-in-itself**

With the concept of being-in-itself, that which is defined by facticity and an essence, Sartre rejects Aristotele’s doctrine of potentiality, where things are conceived as potentially evolving to higher and higher points of realization of their essential nature. Aristotle has cited the example of a seed evolving into a tree in order to highlight this evolutionary aspect of reality. Contrary to this Sartre claims that, whatever is, manifests itself in actuality and there cannot be any potentiality for other than itself. Accordingly, an object is no more than what it is in itself. The idea of being-in-itself refers to the being of objects and entities other than humans.

Sartre says that the being-in-itself is neither passive nor active, neither an affirmation nor a negation. It is massive, rigid and still and is that which it is. Therefore, it excludes other being and is unrelated to other beings. It is a synthesis of itself with itself, fully positivity, dense, massive and is beyond time. It is radically contingent, inexplicable and absurd and there is no ultimate ground for the existence of a being. [Bochnesky, p. 175]
On the other hand, being-for-itself or the being of human beings suggests the presence of a free and knowing being such as a man in a rigid, immobile and deterministic universe. [Bochensky, p. 175] But Sartre says that man is both in-itself and for-itself. Hence there is an ambiguity surrounding man’s being. It involves both facticity and freedom. Men are both physical objects—and hence Being-in-itself—and self-consciousnesses—and hence Being-for-itself. But the fact that the being of man is always a subject, and never an object affirms that man is a fundamentally different kind of being.

**Sartre on Consciousness: Reversal of Husserl’s Absolutism**

Consciousness is related to the things in the world, which constitute the being-in-itself in a peculiar way. It reduces the being in-itself to what it is for consciousness. Till this point Sartre is in agreement with Husserl, who proposes the intentionality principle in order to characterize consciousness. But unlike Husserl who isolates the transcendental consciousness from the rest of the things in the world, Sartre conceives the subject as ontologically united to the things in the world to which it is present to. Since consciousness is a being to which things are present to, it cannot be an in-itself and passive. Sartre thus maintains that, consciousness could not be what it is unless it is related to a being, which is distinct and independent of it. This being is in no need of consciousness, as it is independent. On the other hand, consciousness is entirely dependent upon it. This is therefore a reversal of Husserl’s absolutism, which asserts that the entire world owes its being to the ego.

Husserl confers a transphenomenality to consciousness and asserts that it is for consciousness or ego the world exists. Contrary to this, Sartre confers transphenomenality to being and argues that being does not exhaust itself in its appearing. The being of that which appears does not exist only in so far as it appears. Therefore, according to Sartre, consciousness is consciousness of something as it appears to it, for example, a pen or a table.

Consciousness must be other than being and its activity and hence Sartre contends that it is a process of nihilation. It arises through a negation or nihilation of being in itself. For instance, while I perceive a pen, I am also conscious that I am not the pen. Hence every instance of being conscious of something involves a nihilation. But this is not a complete negation. Since everything which is must be a being, man
cannot be a complete non-being. Therefore, man is also a being-in-itself. Certain things are fixed for man like the body, place of birth, historicity, facticity etc. But man is more than these fixed certainties. Man’s being is not just that fixed sum total. He is not just his facticity. Sartre says that man has the ability to project himself to the future. Hence he is not a mere being-in-itself. He is not just a thing among other things, but is consciousness. Since man lacks any particular definite essence, apart from the ways he has created himself through the various choices he makes, we may say that man is not any particular thing or object; man is “no thing”.

This aspect of man’s being brings man in connection with nothingness in a peculiar manner. Man’s being can only be non-being and therefore must consist in nothing. Sartre says that nothing comes into the world through man. The human self is both itself and not itself. Sartre holds that it is paradoxically present to itself in the mode of negation. According to him consciousness, which characterizes man’s being, is distantiating or separation from being. Hence man is the being through whom nothingness comes into the world. Man is the being-for-itself. But without being the nihilation of the in-itself, there can be no for-itself. Sartre says that its nothingness places it in a perpetual struggle towards the in-itself.

Sartre holds that nothingness becomes apparent in man’s freedom. As Heidegger points out, temporality is a feature of man’s being. Again, man projects himself to the future. By doing this, he refuses to get freezed in his past. If we are determined by our past, we would not be able to choose. But man makes choices and defined his essence through that process. Hence he negates his past. Man projects himself to the future by virtue of negation of facticity and freedom.

Freedom has been a central theme in Sartre’s existentialism. It is a fundamental fact concerning the being of man. Because man is not a being-in-itself, and hence is separated from being, he is not determined by being and is essentially free. Sartre says that human freedom precedes the essence of man and makes it possible. Man makes himself through his choices and therefore, he is nothing else but what he makes of himself.

In a sense Sartre proposes an inescapability of freedom. But his theory of man’s being is not a metaphysical theory of human subjectivity. He conceives freedom as an actual feature of lived human experience. Again, the concept of freedom does not suggest a metaphysical theory of human nature. Inescapability of freedom does not mean that each individual can choose whatever he wants. Sartre
argues that, freedom is inescapable as it determines the nature of our being. This inescapability suggests that we have to make choices with responsibility. Even when we do not make a choice, we are exercising our freedom and are actually making a choice. Even to choose to be a slave of someone else or blindly imitating others are all instances of freedom.

But the idea of freedom also calls for the notion of responsibility. If we are free to make choices in our lives, we are also responsible for those choices. Hence freedom is linked with the possibility of authentic or truly human life. Sartre affirms that, what is important is not what is chosen, but in what manner it is chosen. Hence in order to have an authentic life one has to recognize the inescapability of freedom and accept the responsibility associated with it. Since responsibility is associated with freedom, one cannot escape the anguish that may follow the inescapability of freedom. Anguish therefore, is a condition for freedom and action.

Freedom is the freedom to make choices in life. It also implies that there are no eternal guidelines or norms that have any transcendental validity which would help us while encountering alternatives. Hence there is uncertainty about the future. Each choice will have consequences, on which we have no control. Some of these consequences are better than others, but we can never know which choice leads to better consequences. Our existential situation is our objective situation and it leaves us as free individuals who have no objective guidelines. The choices we have are not dependent on circumstances external to us. By choosing we make ourselves.

To exist authentically is therefore a challenge. It is to live with the realization that our freedom is boundless and we have no option but to make individual choices. In the absence of transcendental norms and guidelines, it is bound to encounter anguish and we have to accept this as a fact. It is part of our existential situation. We have to act based on the choices we make and should not blame external factors or circumstances. We have to take responsibility for choosing them as we are free.

**Being-for-others**

The third dimension of being is called the being-for-others, which become relevant in the contexts where human beings encounter each other. When we encounter other people, we realize that we are not encountering mere objects, which cannot react, but
subjects who are conscious agents. We have to explain how do we understand the other? Here we need to explain the bridge from consciousness to consciousness.

Modern philosophy had widely adopted an epistemological explanation in order to account for the encounters of the subject or consciousness with the rest of the animate and inanimate world. But according to Sartre this is inadequate for explaining the relationship between human beings. He says that being is the ground for our relationship to others and hence ontology which deals with the disclosure of being is important.

Sartre further contends that our relations to other people are of the very essence of man. Unlike our encounter with objects, we here experience the other and encounter the subjectivity of the other. The realization that the other we encounter is a subject posits a potential threat to our own subjectivity, as it raises the possibility that we may become an object to the subjectivity of the other consciousness. One experiences oneself as being subjected to the objectification of another subject. In order to explicate this further Sartre describes the phenomenon of shame consciousness.

Sartre cites the example of a voyeur who peeps through a keyhole and suddenly realizes that another person is looking at him and judging him. This experience of shame consciousness is analogous to the pre-reflective consciousness of the consciousness of objects. The voyeur here experiences the subjectivity of the other. This is characteristically different from the experience of objects. The recognition of other’s subjectivity forces certain modifications in our existential structure. It suggests that my self-conception does not depend solely on me, as others can potentially objectify me. The other-as-subject turns the voyeur in a being-as-object.

This aspect reveals a potentially conflict-ridden relationship we have with others. The fact that others can objectify me forces me to see others as objects by denying them their subjectivity. We want to make the other support our own self-conceptions. This may lead to conflicts and in his play No Exit one of Sartre’s characters proclaims that other people are hell. But there is no ultimate solution to this situation. Such conflict-ridden relationships with others are also part of our existential situation which we cannot overcome. This will never be stabilized, as we cannot find ultimate and absolute solace in any metaphysical principle.
Sartre’s philosophy tries to present a picture of individual man and human reality as such with an emphasis on concrete human beings and their problems. He presents a picture of human reality, which does not claim that ultimate solutions are possible for all human problems. Instead, his existentialism encourages man to accept his facticity and inescapability of freedom and urges him to lead a reflective life with awareness by taking responsibility. He does not propose a metaphysical theory of human destiny with a conception of *summon bonum*, but instead reminds us the importance of living an authentic life without quietism and pessimism. Existentialism, claims Sartre, is humanism.

**Quiz**

1. According to Sartre, man’s being is………
   (a) Being-in-itself  (b) Being-for-itself  (c) Both being-in-itself and being-for-itself  (d) Neither of the above.
2. Which of the following is not an aspect of man’s being?
   (a) Temporality  (b) Facticity  (c) Transcendence  (d) Boundedness.
3. Which of the following is essentially true of the being of man?
   (a) Is being-in-itself  (b) Is being-for-itself  (c) Is a subject  (d) Is an object.
4. Which of the following is not held by Sartre?
   (a) Transphenomenality of consciousness  (b) Transphenomenality of being  (c) Consciousness is dependent upon being  (d) Consciousness is a process of nihilation.
5. Which of the following is implied by the notion of freedom?
   (a) Freedom precedes the essence of man and makes it possible  (b) Freedom to choose the alternative that has desirable consequences  (c) Relieved of facticity  (d) Certainty about the outcome of our projects.
6. In the example of shame consciousness cited by Sartre, what does the voyeur experience?
   (a) The other as an object and himself as a subject  (b) The other as subject and oneself as being-as-object  (c) The other and oneself as subjects  (d) The other as well as oneself as objects.

**Answer Key**

1. [c]  
2. [d]  
3. [c]  
4. [a]  
5. [d]  
6. [b]
Assignments

1. Explain Sartre’s concept of freedom and its importance in his existentialism
2. Explain in detail the three aspects of the being of man.

References

Books


Web References
