



## Jean-Paul Sartre's Concept of Atheism as Existential Phenomenological Humanism

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## 1. Introduction

The Sartrean account of freedom is made only if man rejects the existence of God, the Supreme Being, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. This God sets the ends for man. It gives the impression that man is already established by God whatever actions he made in life. In that sense, man is no longer free to do things out of his will. It appears that for Sartre, we cannot talk about freedom if there is God. Thus, rejection of God's existence is a must in order to talk about freedom. Moreover, man is free not because he has the freedom to choose to obey moral laws or not, but because man is absolutely free from boundaries and definitions. He is free to make his own moral laws and create his own values.

Sartre expressed this statement, "Man is condemned to be free" (Sartre 1985: 23). That is, he is no choice but to be free. We are condemned to be free because we are responsible for what we choose to be. Hence, responsibility endowed them freely with meaning. As Sartre would say in his trilogy, *Age of Reason*, "He was free, free in every way, free to behave like a fool or a machine, free to accept, free to refuse, free to equivocate .... He could do what he liked, no one had the right to advise him, there would be for him no Good nor Evil unless he brought them into being. All around him things were gathered in a circle, expectant, impassive, and indicative of nothing. He was alone, enveloped in his monstrous silence, free and alone, without assistance and without excuse, condemned to decide without support from any quarter, condemned for ever to be free" (Sartre 2001: 242-243).

We cannot escape of freedom, neither choose it nor to escape it from such situation. Indeed, Sartre added that to be condemned to be free means "he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free. Once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.... He will never agree that a sweeping passion is a ravaging torrent which fatally leads a man to certain acts and is therefore an excuse. He thinks that man is responsible for his passion" (Sartre 1985: 23).

Man is condemned to this kind of existence because he neither chooses it nor escapes it unless he ceases to exist altogether. This kind of existence includes freedom because man chooses himself, the world he inhabits, and his value. Sartre added that "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" (Sartre 1985: 52). Indeed, freedom entails responsibility. We are responsible for our actions. Hence, whatever we do, whether the consequences of our actions are good or bad, we should not blame others. We can influence the freedom of others by not respecting their freedom; we are to blame ourselves if we do not respect the other's freedom. Yet, we live with others and for others. Thus, man is not only responsible for himself but also for others, and not only for others but also for the whole world as well.

The existence of God is incompatible with man's absolute freedom. Hence, man should reject the Omni-God, for the very idea is contradictory. But why is it incompatible with freedom? Sartre made an analogy of the paper-cutter. In the factory, he said, the manufacturer already has an idea of every object that he creates. God knows precisely the human nature when he created man, and man cannot be but what God created him to be. As Sartre maintained that "let us consider some object that is manufactured, for example, a book or a paper-cutter: here is an object which has been made by an artisan whose inspiration came from a concept. He referred to the concept of what a paper-cutter is and likewise to a known method of production, which is part of the concept, something which is, by and large, a routine. Thus, the paper-cutter is at once an object produced in a certain way and, on the other hand, one having a specific use; and one cannot postulate a man who produces a paper-cutter but does not know what it is used for. Therefore, let us say that, for the paper-cutter, essence – that is, the ensemble of and defined – precedes existence. Thus, the presence of the paper-cutter or book in front of me is determined. Therefore, we have here a technical view of the world whereby it can be said that production precedes existence" (Sartre 1985: 13-14).

If existence precedes essence, then man is responsible for what he makes out of his life. This reflection reminds us of Heidegger's point when he said that in our death, it is only us, who are dying and who will die, should claim our lives as our own and live it. Our task as an individual is to make everyone aware of this truth – the truth of being condemned to be free. Indeed, Sartre would say it in his trilogy, *Age of Reason*, that "when you look at yourself, you imagine you aren't what you see, you imagine you are nothing. That is your ideal: you want to be nothing.... Yes – you want to be free. Absolutely free. It's your vice. It's not a vice, said Mathieu. It's ... what else can a man do?" (Sartre 2001: 13). Furthermore, Baudelaire, a character in one of the works of Sartre, always felt that "he was free which meant that he could look for no help either inside or outside himself against his own freedom" (Sartre 1967: 40-41). It means to say that man is absolutely free from all laws and constraints. Indeed, the mystery of man is the mystery of his being free. Sartre sturdily resisted such view, for to accept God as creator is to deprive man of the opportunity to create himself. If God does not exist, then there is no one to identify the nature of man. Thus, it is necessary to deny God's existence. As what Sartre claimed that "if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept and that this being is man" (Sartre 1985: 15).

Sartre differed from the other existentialists, for he "emphasizes the importance of the individual and attributes to human existence an ontological freedom that cannot be diminished" (Reynolds 2006: 52). Although my freedom is limitless, it is never abstract. Freedom, for Sartre, is always freedom in a particular situation, and in every situation there are givens (facticity) to which freedom must respond. My body, my past, and my relations with others are among the factors that define my facticity (Kamber 2000: 17). Here, freedom requires situation. Sartre wrote that "we should observe first that an action is on principle *intentional*. The careless smoker who has through negligence caused the explosion of a powder magazine has not *acted*. On the other hand the worker who is charged with dynamiting a quarry and who obeys the given orders has acted when he has produced the expected explosion; he knew what he was doing or, if you prefer, he intentionally realized a conscious project" (Sartre 1992a: 559).

## **2. Objective of the Study**

Based on the aforementioned reason, the study aims to present, explain, and analyze what Jean-Paul Sartre says about atheism as an existential phenomenological humanism. In other words, it draws insight and implications on an existential value of a human person.

## **3. Method**

The researcher uses the historical and hermeneutical approaches in analyzing Jean-Paul Sartre' concept of atheism as existential phenomenological humanism.

## **4. Results and Discussions**

### **A. Sartre's Existential Phenomenology**

The existential phenomenology has never appeared until existentialism and phenomenology influenced the realm of philosophy. However, this movement gives us a problem like "which comes first when man lives with consciousness, existentialism or phenomenology?" Solomon claims, "Most existentialists are phenomenologist, though there are many phenomenologists who are not existentialist" (Solomon 1972). Here, we can say that a good number of phenomenologists are attributed as existentialist like Heidegger and Marcel, but only two accepted it namely Sartre and Camus, and only Sartre was a phenomenologist.

Sartre was attributed as an existentialist, and he received it. In fact, he is the most influential exponent and articulate spokesperson for the philosophy of existentialism. At this instance, we can speak out that indeed his ideas are truly a revelation of a new strand of philosophy. It opens the core to other fields of knowledge. Mostly, in the work of Sartre, phenomenology becomes a support the loophole for his existentialism. This support is not simply the support of a set of philosophical thesis but to the theory of human action and freedom (Solomon 1972). The discourse is gradually reflecting to the condition of consciousness to the human as living in his world. Stewart and Mickunas explain that "existential phenomenologist followed out more rigorously the implications of the doctrine of the intentionality of consciousness... for existential phenomenology, the modalities of consciousness experience are also the ways one is in the world. This shift of the notion of the *lebenswelt* (lived-world) to the emphasis upon being-in-the-world expanded phenomenology in a way that allowed it to consider the totality of human relationships in the world in terms of the individual's concrete existence" (David and Algis 1974: 64).

Sartre emptied consciousness of even its most intimate emotional states, moods, affections; consciousness is no more a psychological process than it is a biological process (Edie 1967: 152). When I am reflexive to say to myself that I am sad or in love, it comes from within myself who shows that I have operated the transcendental reduction because I am conscious of a state of being sad or of state of being in love. Thus, my consciousness can no longer be sad, since sadness is a state that affects the being of which I am conscious. Sartre explains that "phenomenology has come to teach us that

*states* are objects, that an emotion as such (a love or a hatred) is a transcendent object and cannot shrink into the interior unity of a "consciousness." Consequently, if Paul and Peter both speak of Peter's love, for example, it is no longer true that the one speaks blindly and by analogy of that which the other apprehends in full. They speak of the same thing. Doubtless they apprehend it by different procedures, but these procedures may be equally intuitional. And Peter's emotion is no more *certain* for Peter than for Paul" (Sartre 1957: 95).

Here, we can draw out Sartre attempting to purify consciousness of all ecological structure. Sartre would say that "the very nature of consciousness is such that for it to be and to know itself are one at the same" (Sartre 1957: 112). Indeed, this discovery on consciousness was the basis for both Sartre as an existentialist and Sartre as a phenomenologist. Jones adds that "for the one, the transparency of consciousness excluded all those 'syntheses' that Husserl had emphasized and thus led to an ontology very different from that of Husserl. For the other, the nothingness of consciousness meant that we are not imprisoned in a ready-made self but are free to become the self of our choice. Whereas the phenomenological method had appealed to Husserl because it seemed to reveal those apodeictic evidences that satisfy our thirst for certainty, the method appealed to Sartre because it seemed to reveal those harsh existential truths that every individual must face and overcome to be an authentic individual, reconciled to living with uncertainty" (Jones 1975: 334).

Since man is consciousness, the being encompasses not the whole being because there is an object and a man of the same substance as the object. In his philosophical novel, *Nausea*, Sartre described the threat to the autonomy of consciousness. Nausea designates the ever-present feeling man has; it is the sickening awareness of his existence as a part of an impersonal, unconscious nature (Edie 1967: 144). He said that consciousness exists like a tree, like a blade of grass. It is like being bored, ennui of something we experience of the brute of in-itself. Sartre's description is worth recalling that "consciousness forgotten, forsaken between these walls, under this grey sky. And here is the sense of its existence: it is conscious of being superfluous. It dilutes, scatters itself, tries to lose itself on the brown wall, along the lamp post or down there in the evening mist. But it *never* forgets itself. That is its lot. There is a stifled voice which tells it: 'The train leaves in two hours,' and there is the consciousness of this voice. There is also consciousness of a face... There is a consciousness of this body walking slowly in a dark street" (Sartre 1969:170). Thus, the knowledge of human being is the epistemology of consciousness.

## **B. Humanist Atheistic Existentialism**

Sartre, who is the principal exponent of French Existentialism, thought that humanists like him were all wrong. However, he clarified that *Existentialism Is a Humanism*; the understanding of the word "humanism" has two very different meanings: firstly, "by humanism one can mean a theory which takes man as an end and as a higher value," and secondly, "man is constantly outside of himself; in projecting himself, in losing himself outside of himself, he makes for man's existing; and it is by pursuing transcendent goals that he is able to exist" (Sartre 1985: 49-50). The former is the positivist version of

humanism in the person of August Comte; the latter is the existentialist humanism in which Sartre is the main proponent.

Sartre accorded complete autonomy to human beings, thereby suggesting that there is no reality higher than that of the human individual (Pal 2003: 575). His unbelief in God's existence made him formulate a new version of the humanistic view, which is existential phenomenological humanism. In his lecture in Paris in 1945 on *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, which was subsequently published in 1946, he began by proclaiming that his position is to defend existentialism against its critics. These were Catholic critics who accused it of offering nothing but a nihilistic counsel of despair and equally those communist critics who maintained that it provided no basis for affirming the solidarity of mankind (Baldwin 2013: 673). Against such critics, Sartre upheld that *Existentialism Is a Humanism* in the sense that it is a doctrine that renders human life possible, and he ended the lecture precisely by affirming his existential phenomenological humanism.

Sartre combated passionately these two versions of humanism. He argued with the Christian humanism using the view that "if God exists man is nothing" (Sartre 2000a: 168-169). Human being is the authentic revelation that, indeed, there is no God. Man has no fixed essence, rather he makes out of himself through his free choices and actions. Whatever the outcome of his choice, he is responsible of it.

As Sartre presented it, our freedom to choose the meaning of our condition is completely undetermined, and thus has no structure or essence; however, freedom also cannot rely on anything when making choices, and thus cannot justify them in any way (Landau 2012: 3). Certainly, the values we have try to justify the choices we make. Hence, we cannot rely on them when making our basic choices because our freedom is the foundation of our values. Moreover, this foundation of values is the truth. Indeed, Sartre claimed that "my freedom is the unique foundation of values and that nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular values, or this or that particular scale of values. As a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable. My freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself without foundation" (Sartre 1992a: 76). In the same way, we invoke reason when we choose something. So, we can also say that our free choice is the foundation of our reasons. Sartre said that "what must be noted here is that this choice is not absurd in the sense in which in a rational universe a phenomenon might arise which would not be bound to others by any *reasons*. It is absurd in this sense – that the choice is that by which all foundations and all reasons come into being, that by which the very notion of the absurd receives a meaning. It is absurd as being all reasons" (Sartre 1992a: 616).

Since our freedom is undetermined, it is the foundation of our world without itself having any foundation. However, it acquires to be absurd for our choices have no foundation. Thus, Sartre declared that "such a choice made without base of support and dictating its own causes to itself, can very well appear *absurd*, and in fact it is absurd" (Sartre 1992a: 616). Indeed, man by nature is in search. Sartre added that "man is constantly outside of himself; in projecting himself, in losing himself outside of himself, he makes for man's existing; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent goals that he is able to exist; man, being this state of passing-beyond, and seizing upon things only as they bear upon this passing-beyond, is at the heart, at the center of this passing-beyond. There is no universe of human subjectivity. This connection between transcendency, as a constituent element of man – not in the sense that God is

transcendent, but in the sense of passing beyond – and subjectivity, in the sense that man is not closed in on himself but is always present in a human universe, is what we call existential [phenomenological] humanism” (Sartre 1985: 50-51). It is humanism because for him “we remind man that there is no law-maker other than himself, and that in his forlornness he will decide by himself” (Sartre 1985: 51). Man makes his own law for he is the law itself. He can do something that could not harm to himself; otherwise, he is prone to bad faith. The whole message of Sartre’s lecture is to make us realize that our humanity is projecting beyond our expectations, choices, and ways of life towards our goals.

In Sartre’s philosophical novel, *Nausea*, written in the 1930s, the protagonist, Roquentin, tries to find the meaning and the purpose of life in humanism. Roquentin nauseates his own alienated life as an unsuccessful historian looking for meaning in truth. The tone of the book changes into a state of metaphysical ecstasy in which familiar categories melt away, and things float free from their names (Baldwin 2013: 673). One of the aspects of bourgeois life, which was characteristic of French culture of the 1930s and of which Sartre expressed his contempt in *Nausea*, is the positivist view on humanism led by August Comte. Here is a small part of Roquentin’s scornful diatribe against the whole tribe of humanists “the humanist philosophers who bends over his brothers like a wise elder brother who has a sense of his responsibilities; the humanist who loves men as they are, the humanist who loves men as they ought to be, the one who wants to save them with their consent and the one who will save them in spite of themselves... the one who loves death in man, the one who loves life in man, the happy humanist who always has the right word to make people laugh, the sober humanist whom you meet especially at funerals or wakes. They all hate each other: as individuals, naturally not as men” (Sartre 1969: 117).

Sartre alluded to this passage in his later lecture on *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. The mark of that kind of bad humanism, which is positivist humanism, Sartre claimed, sees man as directed to a predetermined, fixed end in-itself (Pal 2003: 577). That is, Comtean humanism upholds man as the end in himself and as the supreme value. Sartre contrasted it with his own view as an existential phenomenological humanism which holds that “man is all the time outside of himself: it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist” (Sartre 1985: 50). In other words, man by nature is free and still to be determined. He elaborated it when he wrote that “humanism in this sense can be found, e.g., in Cocteau’s tale *Around the World in Eighty Hours* when a character, because he is flying over some mountains in an airplane, declares, ‘Man is simply amazing.’ That means that I, who did not build the airplanes, shall personally benefit from these particular inventions, and that I, as man, shall personally consider myself responsible for, and honored by, acts of a few particular men. This would imply that we ascribe a value to man on the basis of the highest deeds of certain men” (Sartre 1985: 49).

In Sartre’s masterpiece, *Being and Nothingness*, is an exploration of the various ways in which this illusory realist faith that there is some absolute justification for values which would enable one to justify one’s life permeates our ordinary consciousness and activities (Baldwin 2013: 676). Sartre thought of it as a search for foundation and wrote that under this allusion, “each human reality is a passion in that it projects losing itself so as to found being and by the same stroke to constitute the In-itself which escapes contingency by being its own foundation, the *Ens causa sui*, which religions call God.

Thus the passion of man is the reverse of that of Christ, for man loses himself as man in order that God may be born. But the idea of God is contradictory and we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion” (Sartre 1992a: 784). Indeed, such useless life leads to the nihilist conclusion that “all human activities are equivalent... and that all are on principle doomed to failure. Thus, it amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or is a leader of nations” (Sartre 1992a: 797).

Despite this, it is not Sartre’s view that all activities are doomed to failure but to know that there is an absolute foundation for values. For Sartre, this insight is to induce anguish as “it is anguish before values which is the recognition of the ideality of values” (Sartre 1992a: 76). This anguish manifests our sense that “as a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable. My freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself without foundation” (Sartre 1992a: 76). Here, we can say that if we internalize and understand this anguish properly, then a quite atypical manner of life becomes possible. In fact, Sartre proposed it to discuss morality in a future work explicitly. However, this work which Sartre was referring to, was never published and was, therefore, left to be reconstructed using his lecture.

It is precisely clear that existential phenomenological humanism does not only make a different way of life possible but also offers us a way in which human life is not doomed to fail. Sartre sketched lines of thought in his wonderful *War Diaries* which do not appear so clearly in *Being and Nothingness*. His thoughts included the following passage that “if human reality is for its own end, if morality is the law that regulates *through* the world the relationship between human reality and itself, the first consequence is that human reality is obliged to account only itself for its morality.... The second consequence is that there’s no way to determine the prescriptions of that morality, except by determining the nature of human reality. We must take care here not to fall into the error which consists in deriving values from facts. For human reality is not a fact” (Sartre 1984: 108-109). It is the last part of this which is revealing for the realist illusions of the Comtean humanism is that one can derive values from facts about human nature; whereas the existential phenomenological humanist denies that human reality is a fact and, precisely from this denial, seeks to determine the prescriptions of morality (Baldwin 2013: 677). Sartre explains that “it took two centuries of crisis – a crisis of Faith and a crisis of Science – for man to regain the creative freedom that Descartes placed in God, and for anyone finally to suspect the following truth, which is an essential basis of humanism: man is the being as a result of whose appearance a world exists” (Sartre 1955: 184).

Sartre’s preparatory sketches for the book *Notebooks for an Ethics* was followed by *Being and Nothingness* and provided a positive account of his existential phenomenological humanism. In the latter part of his notebook, he discussed the theme of the quasi-religious conversion which is supposed to make possible the realm of morality. This conversion was described by Sartre as taking “human freedom as the foundation of the world’s being. But this goal is not given; it is willed” (Sartre 1992b: 470). Our foundation of freedom to choose values is completely uncertain. Hence, we cannot rely on something when we cannot justify what we have chosen. The concept of freedom is the concern of Sartre for the sake of which he must reject God’s existence. Furthermore, it is thereby giving “a foundation to one’s being by creating something outside oneself” (Sartre 1992b: 470).



Among the Existential Humanists, he is the representative among them. In fact, he admitted himself that he is an atheist. In his autobiographical terms, he delineated his position first on December 1, 1939 in the *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* (War Diaries). Then, he launched an autobiographical account of his childhood: "I lost my faith at the age of twelve. But I think that I never believed very strongly. My grandfather was a protestant, my grandmother a Catholic.... I barely have any religious memories: nevertheless I see myself.... at age seven or eight setting fire to the.... curtain with a match and that memory is linked to the Good Lord, I don't know why.... God existed but I didn't preoccupy myself with him at all. And then one day at La Rochelle, while waiting for the Machado girls who accompanied me in the morning on my way to high school, I became impatient because they were late and, to occupy myself, I decided to think about God: 'Well!', I said to myself, 'he doesn't exist.' That was an authentic revelation, even though I absolutely don't know on what it was based. And then it was over, and I never thought about it again, I didn't occupy my mind with that dead God any more than I had worried about God alive. I think it would be difficult to find anybody who is less religious than I am. I settled the question once and for all at the age of twelve" (Sartre 1984: 265-267).

Sartre concluded his ruminations about God, atheism, and his personal attitude by remarking that "I have never taken the world seriously.... But I was an atheist out of pride... my very existence was based on pride. *I was the embodiment of pride*. There was no place whatsoever for God beside me, I was so perpetually the source of my own origins that I could not see what role as Omnipotent Being could play in my life. Afterwards, the lamentable poverty of religious thought resulted in reinforcing my atheism. Faith is silly or it is bad faith.... Lacking faith, I have limited myself to giving up on seriousness" (Sartre 1984: 577).

In 1964, Sartre concluded in his autobiography, *The Words*, with the following ambiguous note that "death was reduced to a transitory rite and earthly immortality presented itself as a substitute for eternal life.... The myth was a very simple one and I swallowed it without difficulty. Protestant and Catholic, my twin denominational adherence preserved me from believing in the Saints, the Virgin and eventually in God.... I thought I was giving myself to Literature what I was, in fact, taking holy orders" (Sartre 2000b: 155). Sartre ceased in believing in God at an early age, but his personal struggle to develop a philosophy on an atheistic basis did not free him from the framework of Christianity (Hoven 2010: 81). Thus, Christianity was still his guide to develop atheism.

## 5. Conclusion

Sartre upholds existential phenomenological humanistic approach which dismisses God based on being a creator who determines our essence in advance. This approach is an awareness that man is not closed in on himself but is always present in a human universe. For Sartre, existence precedes essence so that man must continually create his own essence to be fully human. Man exists first, and then he takes on an essence through his own actions, and through his own manner of existing. Man can achieve this because his freedom is absolute, and God's existence is irreconcilable with human freedom. To think God is contradictory because He is both in-itself and for-itself

simultaneously. He cannot be both free at the same time conscious since to be free is to be conscious, and to be conscious is to be nothing. Sartre declared that even if God exists, it will change nothing because it depends on man's choices.

This claim is being reinforced by the relevant elements of Sartre's idea. The meaning of life must invade our sincere concerns about the mystery of our existence through existential phenomenological humanism. Therefore, the researcher concludes that existential phenomenological humanism is a humanism which is based on existentialist and phenomenological reading of human existence which proposes that man is responsible for everything because when he finds himself thrown; he discovers that he is responsible for everything. It is existential because it says that man is thrown into the world with no inherent purpose. It is phenomenological because it deals with the life-experience of being thrown into existence. Furthermore, the researcher's study is situated not on metaphysical speculation of divine causes nor transcendent external principles (as with Scholasticism) but on concrete life experience of an individual thrown project. Lastly, it is humanism because since man is thrown, has no purpose and is restricted to an analysis of his thrown life-experience. Thus, values must spring from man himself.

The researcher acknowledges that the present study has not completely exhausted the possible grounds in which a good exposition of Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of atheism may be made. There may be other grounds which the researcher might have overlooked to consider. This study does not offer an absolute or ultimate claim but rather a possible claim in the exposition of Sartre's concept of atheism as phenomenological humanism. Moreover, the researcher agrees with the scholars that great minds never think alike, such as that Sartre is a complex thinker. But the researcher hopes that this study is an accessible exposition of Sartre's concept of atheism. In line with this study, the researcher recommends the further elaboration of Sartre's concept of atheism in the context of good faith and his concept of freedom and responsibility in the pursuit of human authenticity. These topics, the researcher believes, might give us a better understanding of Sartre's concept of atheism as a way to be able to live authentically.

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