

SARTRE’S CONCEPTION OF ART GROUNDED ON HUMANIST EXISTENTIALISM AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY

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- Abstract -

This presentation would be considered as an attempt to introduce a new bridge between philosophy and art. The main problem of this presentation is “how can a conception of art grounded on humanist existentialism and phenomenological ontology be possible?” For the answer, this presentation concentrates on Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophy. Existentialism and phenomenology are the two influential concepts of contemporary philosophy. Sartre brings these two concepts together and develops a new type of existentialism. Answering the question “how would the existence of human being be without belief in the existence of God?” Sartre develops his humanist atheistic existentialism. Sartre’s existentialism indicates a new understanding of the human being that comes after the destruction of onto-theo-logical constitution of the conception of the human being essential to western metaphysics. Thus Sartre introduces the concept of “phenomenological ontology”. Throughout this presentation, the fundamentals of Sartre’s conception of art are tried to be explored. By doing so demarcations between Sartre’s philosophy and his conception of art are tried to be shown. To sum up, firstly the root of existentialism in the history of philosophy is summed up. Then Sartre’s humanist atheistic existentialism is explained. And thirdly Sartre’s great contribution to the contemporary philosophy, namely “phenomenological ontology” is introduced. In the end a new idea of art formed by phenomenological ontology is tried to be explained.

Key Concepts: *Jean-Paul Sartre, existentialism, phenomenological ontology, philosophy of art, imaginary, work of art, plays, novels.*

JEL Classification: Z00

1. INTRODUCTION

“The crisis of language which broke out at the beginning of this century is a poetic crisis.” (Jean-Paul Sartre, 2001: 8)

As a philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre inherits and synthesizes ideas of great philosophers of nineteenth century and of the first part of twentieth century. His ideas might be considered as a junction point of depth theories or “depth models”¹ that formed the map of twentieth century philosophy. As is known to all Sartre is an existentialist philosopher and at the same time he is an artist, author and playwright. If the question “why do we categorize Sartre as an existentialist philosopher?” is asked, the answer could be that Sartre is an existentialist because the ground of his philosophy is rooted in the human individual as conscious subject, and because of his recognition of the feeling of meaninglessness and nothingness as essential characteristics of human existence.

2. THE ROOTS OF SARTRE’S EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism’s two main symptoms are a human being that is conscious of and in search of being and the feeling caused by this consciousness. The first explicit expressions of existentialism were made by its forerunner, Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard had asked questions that are still tried to be answered by many philosophers. Some of these questions essential to existentialism are as follows:

“One sticks a finger into the ground to smell what country one is in; I stick my finger into the world – it has no smell. Where am I? What does it mean to say: the world? What is the meaning of that word? Who tricked me into this whole thing and leaves me standing here? Who am I? How did I get into the world? [...] Why was I not asked about it, why was I not informed of the rules and regulations but just thrust into the ranks [...]? How did I get involved in this big enterprise called actuality? Why should I be involved? Isn’t it a matter of choice? And if I am compelled to be involved, where is the manager – I have something to say about

¹ The phrase of “depth theories” was coined by Jameson. Jameson detects four depth theories as follows: “(1) the dialectical one of essence and appearance (along with a whole range of concepts of ideology or false consciousness which tend to accompany it); (2) the Freudian model of latent and manifest, or of repression [...] (3) the existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity whose heroic or tragic thematics are closely related to that other great opposition between alienation and disalienation, [...] (4) most recently, the great semiotic opposition between signifier and signified, which was itself rapidly unraveled and deconstructed during its brief heyday in the 1960s and 1970s.” (Jameson, 1991: 11)

this. Is there no manager? To whom shall I make my complaint?" (Kierkegaard, 1983: 200)

Existentialist philosophers agree with each other that human existence is fallen and human life is being lived in suffering, guilt and anxiety. This dark picture of human existence leads them to reject hedonism, enlightenment's belief in development, utopian dreams and the serenity of Stoicism. For them because of the lack of necessary or rational connections between human actions, human life seems to be inexplicable and absurd. There is no reason and no necessary connection in human existence. Human life is meaningful only contingently. Absurdity of human existence was expressed by an early forerunner of existentialism, namely by Blaise Pascal. He states the following:

"When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened, and am astonished at being here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me?" (Pascal, 1941: 75)

Sartre adopted these questions as a framework for his philosophy and in the search for the answers he eventually arrived at humanist existentialism. Almost all existentialist philosophers, including Sartre, claim that the human being lives always in certain situations. And no matter whether we like it or not some of these situations are unavoidable. For example the situation of "being-toward-death". "I would not turn over to the other side. Either to attain or to avoid. I am dying death. And what could divert me?" (Kierkegaard, 1987: 37) The other unavoidable characteristics of human being is the action of thinking. It is not possible to stop thinking. Thinking is also a work expected to be done by some people that are called philosophers. "Experience shows that it is not at all difficult for philosophers to begin. Far from it, it begins, in fact, with nothing and therefore can always begin. But it is always difficult for philosophy and philosophers to stop." (Kierkegaard, 1987: 39)

For Sartre the life of human being passes in strive for happiness in order to escape anxiety and the deep, hopeless depression which is despair. But the truth is that human being live in anxiety and despair. And worst of all is that there is no escape from anxiety and despair. This anxiety is not known and experienced objectively in real life but it is lived totally subjectively. Some of the existentialists, like Kierkegaard and Sartre do, give up the hedonic life for the life of duty and responsibility. Kierkegaard's offer was choosing the way of faith and the leap to

God. Sartre was opposed to this decision and he insisted that religious way of life can not overcome the contingency and absurdity of human existence.

3. HUMANIST ATHEISTIC EXISTENTIALISM

Sartre regards Nietzsche as the second great existentialist after Kierkegaard. For Sartre Kierkegaard's religious solution to the problem of the meaninglessness of life was untenable. Because Kierkegaard represents the human being as weak and cowardly. As for Nietzsche all the fundamental structures of religion have been collapsed for a long time. This collapse was named by Nietzsche as the "dead of God". In his book *The Gay Science* this phenomenon is announced from the mouth of the madman as follows:

"Where is God? [...] I will tell you! We have killed him – you and I! We are all his murderers. [...] Where are we moving to? Away from all suns [...] Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing? [...] How can we console ourselves [...] What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? [...] There was never a greater deed – and whoever is born after us will on account of this deed belong to a higher history than all history up to now!" (Nietzsche, 2007:119-120)

For Sartre by the death of the source of great values we have lost the ground of our truth and value. The greatest need of humanity now is to develop a new type of human being who will be totally independent. Sartre appropriates Nietzsche's atheistic approach and combines it with Heidegger's critique of traditional metaphysics as onto-teo-logically² built construction. On this basis Sartre develops humanist atheistic existentialism. This new type of existentialism indicates a new understanding of the human being that comes after the destruction of onto-theo-logical constitution of the conception of human being that was essential to western metaphysics.

Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's existentialism were lacking social relations and they considered the human being as isolated from its historical development. These deficiencies are overcome by Sartre's humanist atheistic existentialism. And the place of God was taken by the human being. In Sartre's play *Lucifer and The Lord* the main character of the play, namely Goetz, expresses to Hilda the situation of the human being after the dead of God as follows: "There was no trial; I tell you God is dead [...] we have no witness now, I alone can see your hair and your brow. How REAL you have become since He no longer exists. Look at me,

² For a detailed explanation of the term of "onto-teo-logy" by Heidegger see "The Onto-Theological Constitution of Metaphysics" in Heidegger, 2002: 42-76.

don't stop looking at me for a moment: the world has been struck blind; if you turned away your head, I should be afraid of annihilation.” (Sartre, 1965: 143)

Death of God for Sartre is not the end of the life of God but the logical result of the action of man. What makes a human being exist is only its own action grounded on its own decision thought self-consciously. There is no more a prior or dogmatic procedure to be adopted for life, because “life is nothing until it is lived.”³ (Sartre, 1966: 54) There is no prior determiner for the existence of the human being. In this way a human being becomes free from all bondages. So, if there is no God then human beings would be condemned to be free. As a result, Sartre uses the argument about the death of God as the proof of the free nature of the existence of human being. Sartre's humanist atheistic existentialism gives primacy and priority not to essence but to existence. It recognizes existence as a conscious subject and does not assign to it any essence prior to this subject. This existence is appropriated only by human existence and it can not be reduced to a Platonic idea, or to a Cartesian cogito, or to a neurological mechanism, or to a social security or citizenship number.

4. PHENOMENOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY

The way to explore human existence is full of traps. Because of this developing a method to approach concrete human existence is of vital importance for humanist atheistic existentialism. And it makes usage of a descriptive approach. This method of thinking is called phenomenology and it recognizes everything as phenomenal being. Phenomenal being does not need any authority to manifest its essence as well as its existence. The phenomenon does not rest on an external true being. It just “reveals itself as it is”. It manifests itself as the “well connected series of manifestations.” (Sartre, 1956: xlvi) From this phenomenological standpoint Sartre describes a phenomenon, for example the genius of Proust as follows. “[It] is neither the work considered in isolation nor the subjective ability to produce it; it is the work considered as the totality of the manifestations of the person.” (Sartre, 1956: xlvi)

In the search of human existence the use of phenomenological method helps us avoid psychological, positivistic, utilitarian, instrumental, rationalistic or sentimentalistic traps. Phenomenology, as Husserl defined it, is a true science of psychology that is “a priori, pure psychology”⁴. Through phenomenology true

³ For “Existentialism and Humanism” see Sartre, 1966: 23-56.

⁴ p. 22, Edmund Husserl “Phenomenology” (P) For his article written by Husserl for the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1927) see Peter and Elliston: 1981: 21-35.

understanding of psychic life of the human being becomes possible. Because now in the frame of this new science psychic life of the human being is no more considered in isolation from others, but it is thought in the life of community with others:

“Psychic life is accessible to us not only through self-experience but also through experience of others. This novel source of experience offers us not only what matches our self-experience but also what is new, inasmuch as, in terms of consciousness and indeed as experience, it establishes the differences between own and other, as well as the properties peculiar to the life of a community.” (Husserl, P: 23-24)

Especially in the time of crisis the discovery of human existence may help to determine what changes the human being undergoes and what shapes it assumes. The most effective way to record the findings related to this topic is the usage of the power of creative literature in the form of stories, novels, plays and autobiographies. So did Jean-Paul Sartre. In Sartre’s works of art, namely in his novels and plays, we witness the psychic life of the human being in its entirety including the life of community with others.

As for ontology, Sartre is much indebted to Heidegger for his concept of ontology. For Heidegger someone’s death is one’s most authentic moment: “Death is possibility of Being which Dasein itself has to take over in every case with death, Dasein stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. [...] Its death is the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there [Nicht-mehrdasein-könnens].” (Heidegger, 1985: 294, pr.50) This personal potentiality of death can be suffered by the same person alone. No one lives another’s death. Sartre inherited these explanations about the features of the human being from Heidegger. He admitted death as another characteristics which renders human existence absurd. By making use of Husserl’s phenomenology and Heidegger’s ontology Sartre developed phenomenological ontology. This new method of thinking made it possible to describe and record all human experiences including the experience of death and nothingness.

By means of phenomenological ontology Sartre embodied the concrete being of here-and-now existence. In his masterpiece, the novel titled *Nausea*, Sartre conveys experiences of the novel’s main character Roquentin about his own here-and-now existence. In the case of Roquentin’s existence, the dominant feeling that accompanies his existence is the feeling of nausea. The feeling of nausea is like a space that surrounds Roquentin’s existence. He says that: “The Nausea isn’t inside me: I can feel it over there on the wall, on the braces, everywhere around

me. It is one with café, it is I who am inside it.” (Sartre, *Nausea*: 35) Roquentin tries to explore a proper way to express and record his own here-and-now existence, and in the beginning of the book he decides to keep a diary and make a record of everything he experienced. The reason for keeping a diary is that in a work of art the here-and-now existence of human being could be shown as interwoven in necessary relations. But in contrast to the work of art, in the real world the existence of human being is contingent and for this very reason it is free. From the mouth of Matthew who is the main character in the novel *The Age of Reason*, this absurd freedom is announced as follows: “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 or evil unless he brought them into being i.e., endowed them freely, - and hence responsibly – with meaning. All around him things were gathered in a circle, expectant, impassive, and indicative of nothing. He was alone, enveloped in this monstrous silence, free and alone, without assistance and without excuse, condemned to decide without support from any quarter, condemned forever to be free.” (Sartre, 1947: 289-290)

5. THE WORK OF ART

Sartre’s new conception of art grounded on humanist atheistic existentialism and phenomenological ontology is understood clearly in his idea of “the existential type of the work of art”. The first principle of this conception of art is that “the work of art is an irreality.” (Sartre, 2010: 188) This means that in a picture the aesthetic object is an irreality. As it is well known the work of an artist is a kind of realization of previously thought images. So that we believe that an artist first has an idea as imaged and then realizes it on the canvas. Sartre argues that this idea is a great error: “The error made here is the idea that the artist can, in fact, start from a mental image that is, as such, incommunicable and at the end of the work deliver to the public an object that anyone can contemplate. It is then thought that there was a passage from the imaginary to the real. But this is in no way true.” (Sartre, 2010: 189) The task of an artist is not to realize a mental image. Artists could only constitute a material analogon for the people that will grasp the image when they gaze at the analogon. “There is no realization of the imaginary, nor should one talk of its objectification.” (Sartre, 2010: 189)

Being aware of this error Sartre warns us that work of art is not a representation but a new reality, it has a life of its own. From the beginning of western philosophy of art, the work of art has been understood as a result of the multi level process of imitation. This theory of mimesis was inherited from Plato. For him all

mental images is conceived as the representation or copy of a supersensual ideal and original world. Sartre puts an end to this mimetic theory of art. In Sartre's philosophy this world of archetypical figures is transformed into the world of analogons. In reality the only proof of the existence of the work of art is the analogon of the work. Physical appearance is the analogon of the work of art. For example the real sounds of the *Ninth Symphony* of Beethoven are the analogon of this work of art. "It is not simply outside time and space – as are essences, for example: it is outside the real, outside existence. I do not really hear it, I listen to it in the imaginary." (Sartre, 2010: 193) It should be made clear that for Sartre the work of art is no longer a representation of nature or of any supernatural world. For a flower in the canvas there is no more an original, archetypical world that would be looked at to copy for the realization of the picture. Consequently, aesthetic experience of a work of art is not an act of realizing. Although Sartre refuses Plato's mimetic theory, for him the work of art still functions as an analogon: "It is simply that what is manifested through it [work of art] is an irreal ensemble of new things, of objects that I have never seen nor will ever see but there are nonetheless irreal objects, objects that do not exist *in the painting*, nor anywhere in the world, but that are manifested through the canvas and that have seized it by a kind of possession." (Sartre, 2010: 190-191)

Creation of the work of art is started by an imagining consciousness that posits the aesthetic object as irreal. And what should be called as beautiful is not the real objects of the nature but the ensemble of the irreal objects that are created in the work of art. Irreal objects that constitute a work of art, for example the novel, poem and drama are created through verbal analogons. The actor who plays Macbeth makes his body serve as an analogon for that imaginary person Macbeth. By this fact the actor irrealizes the play. The actor lives entirely in an irreal world. If the actor of Macbeth cries while he plays then these tears do belong not to this actor but to Macbeth, because these tears would be analogons of irreal tears. When we return to reality for the search of these tears, the result will be a disappointment. Because of this the realizing act of consciousness provokes the nauseous disgust. We should not forget that the real is never beautiful. "Beauty is a value that can only ever be applied to the imaginary and that carries the nihilation of the world in its essential structure." (Sartre, 2010: 193) Because of this Sartre finds it stupid to confuse the moral and the aesthetic. To take an aesthetic attitude to life would be absurd. For the preservation of the work of art and aesthetic experience the world of reality and the world of imaginary should not be confused. This confusion would result in a disorder like a case of paramnesia in which the real objects function as analogons for the imaginary

objects. In this absurd situation the real world would be expected to be as imaginary world.

6. CONCLUSION

Here in this paper, by the use of a descriptive method essential to phenomenology Sartre's philosophy of art has been tried to be explained in its entirety. When investigated closely, humanist atheistic existentialism made a great deal of contribution to the understanding of human being. The principal positive result of humanist atheistic existentialism which could be derived from the explanations made above is that human existence as conscious being should not be unseen and neglected, on the contrary it should be tried to be understood, recognized, developed and encouraged to be free. As a conclusion Sartre carried Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's ontology a step forward. Because what were aimed at by Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's ontology have been fulfilled by Sartre's phenomenological ontology. Sartre changed the meaning of philosopher not only by his philosophy but also by his way of life, since he materialized and verified a life of philosopher "as a humble worker in community with others." (Husserl, P: 35) This is the answer to the question why Sartre is the most popular philosopher of twentieth century. In twentieth century the voices of the phenomenological method and existentialist philosophy are being raised almost in all the areas of civic life, including education, medicine, business life and ultimately art. Consequently, Sartre's phenomenological ontology shows that there is no connection between the existence of things and the essences which we assign to them. Because all existence seems to be merely contingent. There is no necessity to exist and it is futile to ask for any rational parallelism between reality and imaginary. This is the principle on which Sartre's conception of art is grounded. Human existence, this contingent structure has primacy over any reality and any essence imposed upon it. For all of these very reasons Sartre introduces his philosophy of art as the only alternative to the contingency of existence. In the borders of phenomenological ontology art has a privileged place, because for Sartre even if it is unreal, the work of art is the only remedy for the contingency of life.

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