Unit 12: SARTRE: ESSENCE AND EXISTENCE

UNIT STRUCTURE

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12.1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- define what is existentialism according to Sartre
- analyse the statement “existence-precedes essence”
- discuss the difference between subjectivity and objectivity as advanced by Sartre
- explain critically Sartre’s view on existence and essence.

12.2. INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall discuss the views of the French existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre on human essence and existence. Sartre’s analysis of human existence and essence is largely based on his atheistic stand which he maintains throughout his philosophical and literary works. Emphasising on the priority of human existence Sartre tries to rediscover the challenged position of the individual human being in the Christian milieu. He insists on an active and engaged life of each individual instead of an idle living with pre designed essence. Taking into account these features of Sartre’s doctrine of human existence, here, we

shall discuss how Sartre presents his form of humanism emphasising on the priority of human existence.

12.3. WHAT IS EXISTENTIALISM?

While discussing the basic features of existentialism we have already found that existentialism primarily emphasises on the priority of existence over essence. The main goal of existentialism is to establish the dignity of man as a conscious and active subject. However, the philosophical arguments offered by the existentialists asserting human dignity are varied and challenging. There are lot many differences within the trend itself. There is not a particular principle following which the exponents place their views. Rather, most of the existentialist philosophers deny the tag of existentialist. In a nutshell, the philosophers who talk about human predicament and individual authenticity are discussed under the umbrella of existentialism. Philosophers like Kierkegaard and Heidegger never accepted the tag of existentialist willingly. But, there views made them get considered so. In brief, existentialism may be defined as a philosophical theory which enquires for categories of authenticity to understand human existence.

Clarifying the definition of existentialism Sartre says that there are two types of existentialism, theistic and atheistic. Theistic or the Christian existentialists include philosophers like Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel etc. The branch, to which Sartre and Martin Heidegger belong, is called atheistic existentialism that does not rely on the existence of God. Their common belief is that existence precedes essence or subjectivity must be the starting point. This is what they mean when they refer to the doctrine of existentialism.

12.4. SARTRE ON ESSENCE AND EXISTENCE

Sartre advanced his doctrine of existence in his famous lecture *Existentialism Is a Humanism* that he delivered in Paris on October,

1945. What he emphasises here is a view against the essentialism of Plato. While Plato considers human essence to be prior to his existence, Sartre gives priority to human existence and declares that in case of man his “existence precedes essence”. It is the reversal of a dictum of Plato which asserts that essence precedes existence. Through this statement Sartre, like the other atheistic existentialists, intends to express the priority of the subject. He asserts that each existing individual is significant in crafting out his own essence after being born as a conscious agent. Sartre says, “subjectivity must be our point of departure”.



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Here we may note the fact that “Existentialism Is a Humanism” is a stenographer’s note that he jotted down in shorthand of a lecture that Sartre delivered in Paris on Monday, October 29, 1945.Sartre did not prefer the publication of the lecture and he hardly made any alteration of the shorthand copy. The text of the lecture was published in 1946 by Éditions Nagel.

Sartrean Existentialism is said to be a revolutionary philosophy of the present age, representing man’s rebellion against all attempts to ignore or suppress the uniqueness of individual subjectivity. “Existence precedes essence” is the dictum expressing the philosophy of Sartre from which we can find out the importance of active and responsible living of man fashioning his own identity, his own way. Man, according to Sartre, can transcend the givens and carries the potentiality of becoming the author of himself, i. e. an authentic being.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1:Which country does Sartre belong to?

Ans:…….....

…….....

Q 2: What are the two branches of Existentialism?

Ans:..…….....

…….....

12.5 EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE

Now, what does Sartre mean when he says that existence precedes essence? The main goal of Sartre is to present a thorough humanism which starts and ends with man. Hence, he emphasises on the philosophy of active man who does not idly follow his already designed life but creates his own identity. Existence precedes essence highlights on human reality that is not designed by any higher authority but, by man through his self chosen activities. Here, it is significant to note that the phase “existence precedes essence” was first advocated by the German existentialist Soàen Kierkegaard. Sartre adopted this phrase and used it more elaborately while analysing human existence and essence.

For Sartre there is no pre-designed human nature. We cannot explain the nature of man in the same way we explain the nature of other manufactured objects. He gives the example of a paper knife in order to show the difference between man and other manufactured objects. A paper knife is manufactured by someone who had in his mind the conception of it. The paper knife, thus, is an object produced with a definite purpose. According to Sartre, if the procedure of manufacturing of the paper knife and its serving purpose means its essence, then we see that the essence of a paper knife precedes its existence. Its essence is pre-determined.

Now, if we try to understand man from the same perspective then, the concept of man in the mind of God, the creator, can be compared to

the concept of paper knife in the mind of the manufacturer. This is a case if we believe in God. Just as a paper knife is the fulfilment and realisation of a definite conception conceived by the manufacturer, the essence of man may also be pre-conceived by God before his existence and man may be a mere fulfilment of it. If this view is accepted, then in case of man also we have to say that his essence precedes his existence. But, in Sartrean argument the idea of God reveals to be a self-contradictory idea. According to him, whatever exists, must be contingent. If God exists, then God would also be contingent. But, this view goes against the theistic view of God which affirms the necessary existence of God. Sartre points out that necessity and existence cannot go together. Thus, the idea of God becomes self-contradictory and hence, rejected. However, the common tendency in philosophy does not go with such view. A pre-designed human nature is unquestionably accepted in philosophical enquiries. Sartre laments that this has remained the tendency in the philosophical tradition even till Kant. They believe in a definite "human nature" which is found in all men like a universal concept. Sartre rejects such stand and claims that the non-existence of God makes it evident that there is no prior conception of man in the mind of God. Man is not like a paper knife. He does not have a pre-conceived nature made with a definite purpose. Since there is no God, there is at least one being in whom his existence precedes essence. That is man, the subject who crates his own essence after his existence in the world. Whenever Sartre refers to existentialism, he means, "man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself…Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it…man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism."

12.6 SUBJECTIVITY AGAINST OBJECTIVITY

The view of Kierkegaard that "subjectivity is truth and truth is subjectivity" is accepted by Sartre. So, he insists on the priority of

subjectivity. Then what does the term subjectivity stand for? When we talk about subjectivity, it may be a confusing term for ordinary understanding. To be simply understood, subjectivity in philosophy refers to the conscious, active being or man who is opposite to the material objects. In Sartre's philosophy these two concepts subject and object, are broadly discussed under the heads of "being-for-itself" and "being-in-itself".

"Being-in-Itself"

"Being-in-itself" refers to the unconscious, inactive, thinglike existence. It is what it is. It means, it has no capacity to choose or create its essence. It does not have the capacity to reflect on itself as self consciousness has. Loosely, it may be identified with the SaAkhya concept of prakriti, which is material, solid, unconscious and inactive in nature. According to Sartre, "Being-in-itself" is opaque, complete and wholly filled in itself. It is simply what it is. Whereas, on the contrary, "being-for-itself" or consciousness is defined as being what it is not. The "in-itself" has nothing to reveal from within since it has nothing in secret. The terms like transition, becoming etc. which suggest some processes of growth are outside of it on principle. Though it is understood as a material existence, it cannot be exemplified by making reference to any object since an object gets named only when it gets interpreted by human consciousness. Rather, it serves as the background condition for objects to appear. But it is to be noted that in our ordinary living rather than experiencing the undifferentiated stuff, we experience the differentiated objects like tree, house, pen, pencil etc. which clearly mark that this is not that, a tree is a tree not a house and vice versa.

Then how does nothingness come into picture? It leads, therefore, to the intuition that "being-in-itself" gets affected by some other being, a being of which the property is to nihilate or negate. Here appears the second mode of being, the being of consciousness which Sartre calls "being-for-itself".

"Being-for-itself"

"Being-for-itself" is called the being of consciousness. It is nothing but the essence of man. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre presents man

as consciousness having the capacity to curve out our phenomenal world by differentiating one object from another out of the undifferentiated stuff or "being-in-itself". He defines "being-for-itself" as conscious, essence- less and content-less mode of being which always transcends towards the meaning of its being through its freely chosen projects. At every moment man has to choose his own actions and has to go on creating his own essence through these self chosen activities. Man, identified as "being-for-itself", is always more than what he is at the time of birth.



LET US KNOW

Besides the two kinds of being, viz, being-in itself (*en-soi*) and being-for-itself (*pour-soi*), there is another type of being called being-for-others (*pour autrui*) by Sartre. It is the being for itself dominated. It is pertinent in the intersubjective discussion of Sartrean existentialism.

Through the phrase "being-for-itself', Sartre gives a new image to the definition of man as the active and engaged consciousness. Human reality is free from the cage of predefined human nature determined by any authority. Since there is no God, according to Sartre, there is no possibility of having any pre-determined essence in case of man. It is not possible to design the essence of man the way the essence of an object is determined before its existence. Like Heidegger, Sartre also maintains that man is thrown into the world and abandoned in a situation where he can only confront nothingness. The ontological structure of man is such that he is free from any fixed qualification. Emphasising on the structural freedom of man Sartre defines man as freedom. Since there is no essence given to man at birth, he has to choose. Free choice becomes the standard for his further projects of essence making. From among the verity of opportunities man has to choose his actions which he considers best for his identity creation. The

process goes on till the end of his life. Further, every choice demands commitment and responsibility. Hence, Sartre talks about human anxiety or angst as man is compelled to choose his own course and take the burden of his choices.

These choices, responsibilities and anxieties, all create and recreate the essence of man each moment and the process goes on till he lives. Man, thus, remains beyond the given name or identity. Whatever his essence or identity may be, that always remains in making. Hence, in case of man, Sartre holds that his "existence precedes essence". In Sartre's words, by ""existence precedes essence" we mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself". There is no God to control his fate, no principle to influence human values. The only principle is to work, to get engaged in order to get the identity of man. By the very existence one escapes any reliance on anything for his identity. One starts surpassing the givens and lives as transcendence going beyond the given background or *facticity* of one's reality that comes along in the form of her culture, tradition, environment, language etc. Being one's own nothingness man is forever beyond his existence. His essence is always in making. First of all man exists and then he makes his own essence by exercising his freedom. "Man is nothing other than what he makes of himself".

Thus, Sartre insists on subjectivity against objectivity, by assigning man more dignity over any other material stuff. It insists on the active existence of man whose essence is not given but chosen through his self undertaken projects. Sartre says, "Man is indeed a project that has a subjective existence, rather unlike that of a patch of moss, a spreading fungus, or a cauliflower. Prior to that projection of the self nothing exists, not even a divine intelligence…"



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Tick the correct one

a) Being-in-itself is conscious/unconscious

b) Being-for-itself is active/passive

c) Human reality is defined though being-in-itself/being-for-itself

Q 4: State whether the following statements are True or False

a) Sartre is an atheist philosopher. (T/F)

b) Man has pre-defined human nature. (T/F)

c) Man relies on the blessings of God for creating his own essence. (T/F)

Q 5: What does Sartre mean by "existence precedes essence"?

12.7 CRITICAL ESTIMATION

There may be various criticisms to Sartre's doctrine of existence and essence. The common reaction against Sartre's statement existence precedes essence is that it is highly a subjective exposition. Sartre is claimed to be a metaphysician of subjectivity for his concentration on the individual subject and his free choice. However, a clear understanding of Sartre's account of existence helps us to find that by insisting on free individual existence Sartre has not presented something chaotic. Rather, his doctrine tries to revive human dignity in the mechanical world where individual subjectivity gets dominated by the mechanical rule following kind of attitude. Indeed, this is the main goal of Sartrean existentialism or we can better say, existentialism as a whole. By claiming the priority of human existence before his essence Sartre wants to emphasise that compared to the non conscious objects, like the paper knife, man has a greater dignity. Man is an active being who can all the time create and recreate his own essence through his freely chosen activities. He is a project towards the future.

Further, there is no guideline for man to choose in a particular direction determined by any superior authority. Man is condemned to

choose his own course of action that is also in accordance with the conditions of mankind as a whole. Since there is no one to be blamed for human choice, man is the sole responsible being for his entire life activity. There is no God to create and hold an image of man. It is man himself who is responsible to create his image in an intersubjective platform by choosing his project. However, such free choices cannot be chaotic. One's choice is said to be authentic only when it is made with committed freedom by admitting responsibility for it. A choice is to be made keeping in mind human subjectivity as a whole. Sartre necessarily talks about an intersubjective society where one has to choose keeping in mind that while he is choosing he is choosing for mankind as a whole. If the essence of man is considered as already given or determined by any other authority than man himself, then it becomes easy to blame one's fate or other factors for any unwanted activity or consequence. But, Sartre does not leave such scope. He understands man only through his self chosen responsible activities where there is no escape, but action and commitment. Thus, through the doctrine existence precedes essence; Sartre presents an active and engaged philosophy of man.



12.8 LET US SUM UP

- In this unit we have discussed Jean Paul Sartre's view on existence and essence. Let us review the unit through the following points:
- Sartre presents his view on existence and essence through his famous doctrine existence precedes essence.
- It claims that man first exists, and then he creates his own essence though his freely chosen activities.
- Sartre denies the existence of God as the creator of human nature since God itself is a contradictory idea and hence, rejected.