UNIT 13: SARTRE: FREEDOM

UNIT STRUCTURE

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13.1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- define what is freedom
- analyse the relation between consciousness, nothingness and freedom
- explain how freedom redefines man.
- explain the distinction between authentic and inauthentic choice
- discuss critically Sartre's account of freedom.

13.2. INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall discuss Jean Paul Sartre's concept of freedom with its significance and different implications. The concept of freedom can be considered as the central theme of Sartre's philosophy around which his entire philosophical argumentation moves. Sartre's motto is to bring forth the uniqueness of man as a free subject from which everything gets meaning. Sartre realises that to elevate the status of man it is not enough to define man only as a rational animal. The structure of man, according to him, includes much more that rationality

and animality. He places his philosophical arguments against the established definitions of man that treats man either as a language user, symbol user or tool user. Further, he denies man as a being created in the image of God.

We have already read that Sartre defines man as a being who first exists and then he creates his own essence through his self chosen projects. Hence, his existence precedes essence. While defining man, Sartre holds that man's "existence precedes essence"; emphasising on freedom, he further stresses that rather it is man's freedom that precedes his essence. Sartre advances his doctrine of freedom against the various theories of determinism which claim all events to be necessarily and inevitably occurring. In the traditional debate the notion of free will has not got any significant emphasis, except their approval of the fact that free will may reside in man as a mysterious capacity. Sartre realises it as a real threat to the purposeful effort of man, his responsibility, commitment and morality. Through his phenomenological analysis, he brings it from the mysterious abode to the empirical level of understanding and establishes free will as the intrinsic and necessary condition of human reality. The undeterred freedom of man is realised in the very structure of consciousness as being-for-itself. Through the notion of being-for-itself Sartre brings forth a unique concept of free and active man who does not follow the necessarily occurring events but chooses his course of actions in situations.

13.3. FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM

While emphasising on freedom Sartre significantly maintains the compatibility between free will and determinism. However, there are other philosophers as well who talk about such compatibility. But, when the motive is to bring free will to the capacity of man to facilitate his purposeful effort, these arguments fail to provide the adequate ground for it. For example, Descartes holds that free will and determinism must be compatible, but their connection can not be comprehended by man, as

according to him, God maintains such orders. Leibnitz criticises Descartes and says that Descartes could not unravel these knots…but preferred to cut them with a sword. Nevertheless, the same remains the problem with Leibnitz as the solution he suggests for showing the compatibility between free will and determinism also remains under the control of the Supreme Being. Thus, the concept of free will remains a problematic issue often discussed within the periphery of the omniscience of God. If freedom is considered as a capacity within the control of God then human free will lacks real significance. Though freedom comes with determinism, the determination that comes from the Supreme Being or God becomes more powerful over human freedom. Hence, an attempt is made to found a human ontology of freedom in connection with determinism in the existential phenomenology of Sartre introduced through the structure of consciousness as nothingness.

13.4. CONSCIOUSNESS AS NOTHINGNESS OR FREEDOM

We have already found that Sartre advocates a thoroughly atheistic philosophy and lands everything on the concrete man, who is free from the control of any Supreme Being or God. Further, we see that in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre talks about two modes of being and defines human consciousness through the opposite nature of these two modes. Through these two modes of being Sartre distinguishes between the conscious subject and the non-conscious object. The being of the subject is called being-for-itself (*pour-soi*) and the being of the object is called being-in-itself (*en-soi*). Being-in-itself is the solid, inactive undifferentiated stuff which cannot give itself a meaning, because, it is not conscious to act on itself or anything else. It is devoid of all meaning and significance imparted by the conscious subject. Hence, Sartre defined it as “what it is”. On the other hand being-for itself is consciousness. It does not have any fixed essence. It is active all the time and can curve out the meaningful lived world out of the

undifferentiated stuff of being-in-itself. To show the relation between in-itself and for-itself, Sartre brings in the Husserlian notion of intentionality of consciousness. Intentionality implies the object directedness of consciousness. Consciousness is nothing in itself. Rather, it always directs itself towards the external world. Only because of such directedness, we can say that we are conscious of this or that. Consciousness is total emptiness, which always intends towards object. Being intentional in nature it totally blows outside itself; it is never self-contained. All physical, psychophysical and psychic objects, all truths, all values are outside consciousness. Consciousness, being intentional is nothing in itself. Hence, while being-in-itself is defined as what it is, being-for-itself is defined as "what it is not". Sartre identifies human reality with consciousness calling it the "being-for-itself". The "for-itself" is always conscious of not being the "in-itself", which is full of content, static, non-conscious, passive and non-free. More appropriately, it is defined as the embodied consciousness or the active body-subject. The essence of being-for-itself or human consciousness is to negate what is given.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Whom does Sartre assign the characteristic of freedom?

Ans: ……..……..

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Q 2: What are the two modes of being?

Ans: ……..……..

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The ontological foundation of the "being-for-itself" is to be presence to itself. Every moment it negates and invents its identity. It is not wholly itself. This implies that the being of consciousness never coincides with itself in a full equivalence. It is a lack, which always

transcends to fulfil its possibilities. This 'lack' implies the feature of nothingness in "being-for-itself". Thus, ontologically explained, Sartrean phenomenological ontology brings in being of consciousness or "being-for-itself" as nothingness, as the nihilation of "being-in-itself" and further nothingness brings in the concept of freedom, adding to the structure of human reality. According to Sartre, the "for-itself" being nothingness, and having no essence given, is free to create its own essence.

13.5. HUMAN REALITY REFINED

Sartre does not prefer to define free will as a mere state of consciousness. Rather, according to him, will, if it is free, must be necessarily negativity with the power of nihilation. Negation and imagination play major roles in Sartre's explanation of consciousness and freedom. Freedom with the structure of negation and imagination gives a new image to the definition of man as "being-for-itself", the active and engaged consciousness. Being essentially free, even from the control of God, man has to bear the responsibility of his identity creation. Man cannot idly wait for the future events to shape his identity, because, there is no one to determine his future. Time gets meaning through the projects man undertakes. It is not that in order to be free man exists first and becomes free in a subsequent moment. Rather, he insists that man exists as freedom. Hence, rather than defining freedom as one of the properties of man, Sartre defines man as freedom. He argues, "my freedom is not a quality added on or a property of my nature. It is very exactly the stuff of my being...."

The structure of human consciousness is such that it always transcends or goes beyond. Man is meant to overcome the obstacles created by situations. Sartre terms the adverse situations as facticity. In *Being and Nothingness* he defines facticity as "coefficient of adversity of things". Facticity presents all kinds of obstacles to man in the form of situational complexities and difficulties. But the structure of consciousness is such that man cannot remain stuck in facticity. Rather,

all these prepare the ground for his exercise of freedom, going beyond which he defines himself in his chosen way. Human actions are always a striving to transcend the facticity. All the time he has to exercise his freedom of choice. If one possibility is blocked he has to strive to create another and thus, go on defining and redefining his essence. This exercise of freedom is a constant effort which man cannot forbid if he wants to stand as an authentic being.



LET US KNOW

Sartre's philosophy can be discussed in two phases, early and later. In early phase Sartre talks about absolute freedom of individual without considering the situational hurdles. But in his later writings he brings in the situational complexities and discusses freedom within socio-political situation and admits the limitations of it. Of course the concept remains undeterred.

Man can not wait for the God to control his fate, or to any principle to guide his value decisions. Pertaining to the indifference towards the concept of God it is maintained that there is no *apriori* value serving as the basis of judgement for any human action. Sartre frames his ethical arguments against the possibility of the existence of God or any other higher authority or principle. Since God has no role in founding basic moral values for man, values are ultimately dependent on free individual choice. The only principle, man is left with, is to work, to create and maintain the identity of man. As Sartre maintains, "Man is nothing other than his own project...he is nothing more than his sum of actions...". Emphasising on absolute individual freedom, in *Being and Nothingness* he holds that there is no limit of human freedom except freedom itself. Nothing readymade is there for him either to receive or to accept. The very being of man is freedom. Man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all. He is abandoned in a situation where from he has to rise by choosing himself. Because, "...for human reality to be is to choose oneself".

Sartre states, “Man is condemned to be free”. He is condemned because there is no way to escape responsibility except self-deception called “bad faith”. Man has no meaning without the exercise of freedom and without choice. He cannot escape choosing because even not to choose also constitutes a choice. It is only man who is separate from this objective world by structure. Though being a physical object he is one in the world, being consciousness he can always question and go beyond it. There is no other way to define man except his freedom. He is compelled to invent himself every day. Sartre claims that it is within our life time that we create our image through our activities. There is no possibility to change or improve this image once the life is over.

Sartre talks about two levels of existence, inauthentic and authentic. Human life is inauthentic if we remain forgetful about our freedom or the capacities to give situation some alternative direction. This is called “bad faith”. In simplified understanding it may be called a kind of self distraction. It is an attitude when a person denies to transcend facticity or the given situation and thus, remains devoid of freedom choosing himself as an object. It is a status when people avoid taking responsibility for their actions by choosing not to choose. However, it has got larger meaning to be discussed separately. The opposite attitude is the attitude of “good faith” or authenticity. Where inauthenticity is the denial of the truth that we are free and responsible, authenticity is the acceptance and exercise of it. According to Sartre, to be authentic is to understand one’s being in situation and exercise responsibly one’s free choices in order to overcome the situation. It is to choose in good faith assuming one’s responsibility towards himself and mankind as a whole. Sartre argues that in everyday level people often remain inauthentic exercising bad faith. But the real goal of man is to live an authentic life.



ACTIVITY: 13.1

Q. Discuss the relevance of Sartre's concept of freedom in forming an ethical system.

Ans…….....

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CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Tick the correct one

a) According to Sartre consciousness is empty/full.

b) Free choice is responsible/not responsible.

c) The essence of consciousness is negative/positive.

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

According to Sartre,

a) Freedom is a mere quality of consciousness. (T/F)

b) Man is sometimes free, sometimes slave. (T/F)

c) Intentionality means object directedness of consciousness. (T/F)

Q 5: What does Sartre mean by intentionality of consciousness?

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13.6. A CRITICAL ESTIMATION OF FREEDOM

Among all the concepts of Sartrean existentialism the concept of freedom may be said to be the most rigorously criticised concept. While addressing the criticisms we may have a clearer understanding of Sartre's theory of freedom.

The theory of freedom is accused of being abstract, radical, unrealistic, dreadful and pessimistic. However, there are valid points within the analyses of Sartre's notion of freedom itself with the help of which his stand can be significantly defended. Even though Sartre's freedom often gets rigorously criticised, there are some critics who consider Sartre as one of the most important moralists on the basis of the deeper ethical essence hidden in the concept of freedom. It is due to the failure of critics to understand the concept the positive side of it remains unattended. It may be clarified that by identifying man as freedom, Sartre does not suggest men to live being uncontrolled. Rather, through the concept he has propounded a philosophy of responsible engagement. In absence of any higher ordered principle, it is man who is responsible to create his image in an intersubjective platform by choosing his projects. 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. Hence, free choices cannot be to the choice of one single individual.

Sartre is further, criticised of not maintaining difference between free and non-free actions as he is said to have overlooked the situational obstacles coming in the way of free human projects. It is to be noted that these criticisms are limited to Sartre's concept of original freedom. The broader sense of the concept gets overlooked here. Sartre certainly maintains a difference between original and situational, which is neglected by the critics.

According to Sartre while we are always free to posit our own ends, we also must make decision about the means that we will utilize in achieving those ends. These decisions are always made in a particular embodied context, in a given situation, and this situation contains within it certain objective relations of things that serve as obstacles to our freedom and to some extent constrain the means that are applicable to

realising our ends. Sartre calls this the coefficient of adversity of our situation.

In the theory of freedom, freedom and facticity are intertwined notions. Freedom gets meaning only in being engaged in a resisting world. Freedom always requires a given, that is the situation. Thus, emphasising on freedom in situation, Sartre's existential phenomenology places freedom and determinism in a compatible floor. As Sartre holds that each human being is a being towards the future, hence, "for-itself" essentially requires a given being in order to transcend it towards the future. Sartre believes that although our situations put limits to our possibilities and choices, these also contain certain openness and it is up to us how we make choices through these open possibilities.

Thus, when critically examined, we see that the significance of Sartre's doctrine of freedom lies in identifying man as freedom through which he propounds a philosophy of engagement. Further, the emphasis is always there that freedom always carries with it the bounding features of commitment and responsibility. Freedom makes one profoundly committed and responsible for every choice made. Hence, Sartre claims it to be Humanism. Thus, it serves for the active life of man, shaping his identity as per undertaken projects and structuring his ethical life as well in a successful interactive platform. However, there are limitations within the doctrine which may prevent it from getting approved as a universal theory of human behaviour in practical environment.



13. 7. LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed Jean Paul Sartre's view on Freedom. Let us review the unit through the following points:

- Freedom is the central theme of Sartre's existentialism.
- It claims that man exists as freedom and he is condemned to be free while existing in the world and choosing his projects.