



JEAN-PAUL SARTRE AND EXISTENTIAL LIBERTY

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Abstract. To date, numerous Sartre's existential thoughts are still misunderstood. One of the reasons is that many authors have studied his life and thoughts in two separate parts. From the methods of logic and history, comparison and contrast, the article clarifies the interrelationship between life and the philosophies of J-P. Sartre. This is also a scientific approach based on the relationship between nature and phenomena to examine the essence of his conception of liberty and existentialism in general.

Keywords: Sartre, existential liberty, life, interrelationship

1. Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) is a world-famous philosopher of the twentieth century in terms of both thought and personal life. As for ideology, he is the only existential philosopher who bravely¹ identifies himself as a philosopher and has existential *rhetorics*² that are difficult for those who are not knowledgeable about existence to accept. Regarding his life, Sartre is famous for events that not everyone understands. It can be said that Sartre and his thoughts are an existential combination.

Therefore, realizing the values of this relationship in the digital society and the course of the industrial revolution 4.0 will be of outstanding academic significance.

¹ With existentialism, there is a peculiarity that philosophers reject the title of existence. Because when you admit to being existential, you are no longer existing because you have lost your point of difference (Existentialism is unique) admitting that you are like other philosophers.

² For example: One only exists after death. One is only free when playing.

2. Relationship between life and philosophy of liberty

Umberto Eco³, when talking about the origin, essence, and subject of reflection of art and philosophy, affirmed: “The function of the poet, the thinker, and the philosopher, is to attentively observe what happens and tell it to others” (See 9, *Issues Across the Century*, 2016:76). It shows that a person's thought is not self-generated but is the result of a combination of many factors. In this thought, there is at least the encounter of two elements: historical circumstances and personal life. Jean-Paul Sartre was born in 1905. He saw and was in two world wars. Sartre saw World War I (1914–1918) in daily newspapers. During World War II, he directly participated in the fight against the fascists because of his patriotism and was taken prisoner (1940–1941).

Talking about Sartre, we can briefly state that he has numerous talents, significantly different from others but not eccentric. He devoted his whole life to existentialism in general and liberty in particular. According to Sartre, liberty is the way up for human⁴. Therefore, liberty is a constitutive part of a human being, the two sides of personality.

In our country, the works on Sartre's philosophy, in general, and his liberty, in particular, have been quite diverse at different levels. However, these works still bear the imprints of the former Soviet academic circles or report the assessments of predecessors, leading, more or less, to the reduction of their scientific content. Some scholars still consider existentialism as an ideology; they approach existentialism from political viewpoints. It must be said that existentialism has never been the ideology of the ruling class in the West. Numerous people have an unbiased view of the phenomena of the existential movement⁵, such as anti-state and street protests, because they do not put this philosophy in its specific historical context.

Sartre *armed* himself with radical ideas about *advanced* thoughts on philosophy and about outstanding figures of the 19th and 20th centuries. According to him, philosophy plays an essential role in transforming society. And to do that, philosophy must be an open system capable of overcoming its limitations. That is, philosophy must also change and not fall into stagnation⁶ (See Sartre J-P. *Critique de la raison dialectique*, 1960a:16). And Sartre's thoughts on

³ Umberto Eco (1932–2016), a famous Italian writer and scholar.

⁴ But do not let that means that liberty is the essence of an existing human being. An existential man is a person without essence. Existential liberty is unmatched, so it does not remain in the choice or responsibility to become the essence of liberty. See Nguyen Tien Dung (2021), *Facing Existential men*, Hue University Journal of Science: Humanities and Social Sciences, Vol.130, No.6B, p.5.

⁵ In the West and South Vietnam before 1975, existentialism was also called the existential movement.

⁶ Sartre J-P. *Critique de la raison dialectique*, 1960a:6.

liberty play the role of formulating the roadmap of that philosophy. Examining the states⁷ of being (an existence) reveals liberty as the central force determining the extent and significance of other situations.

Wars have always been reasonable because there is always calculation and guidance of humans. Wars are absurd in terms of why people need them, and the most irrational things can still happen. But that does not mean that Sartre thinks liberty is a product of war⁸. From *Nausea* (*La Nausée*, 1938) through *The Roads to Liberty* (*Les Chemins de la liberté*, 1945–1949) to *Critique of Dialectical Reason*⁹ (*Critique de la raison dialectique*, 1960), the representative work of each decade, we find there many imprints of predecessors and contemporaries, such as Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Henri Bergson (1859–1941), and Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). But the man who took a dignified position in his reception of liberty was probably F. Nietzsche (1844–1900). He laid the first foundation for the notion that individual liberty must begin with respect for the body and the true owner of the body—however, Sartre’s thoughts of liberty were more thorough.

F. Nietzsche used all his strength and intelligence to mould Superman. That person symbolises the value of liberty, with the terrible power of instinct. Superman has the right to determine his own values and be proud of those decisions. However, in the majesty of *Superman*¹⁰, there is still a stop because Superman makes his own value but keeps himself on the top of the tower of human development¹¹. Sartre’s liberty is the chain of discontinuity and continuity¹² in the endless journey of liberty. Thus, Sartre’s liberty is not blocked in any way. *Liberty is infinite*. In that way, P. Foulquié (1893–1983), a French philosopher, explained the essence of existence as change and continuous transformation from possibility to reality. In existential terms, those are the leaps of liberty¹³.

Studying Sartre's thoughts on liberty, we see that he had a liberty view from a different frame of reference. It is the liberty of man as an individual, of a *Self-made man*; liberty is interrupted in the historical journey and separated from social relations, so it is more or less

⁷ Existentialism is a non-rational philosophy, so it does not use abstract concepts, but it must be understood that this division has only a relative meaning because language itself is abstract. We use categories to name each state (attitude) of being when present. See Nguyen Tien Dung (2005), *Existentialism: History, Presence in Vietnam*, Universal Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, p.97.

⁸ It is not different from arguing that the cause of existentialism is war.

⁹ It is noteworthy that in this work he acknowledged the greatness of Marx's philosophy. In the preface to his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre wrote: I affirm that Marxism is an insurmountable philosophy in the twentieth century.

¹⁰ Superman or overman

¹¹ F. Nietzsche argued that the superman is the pinnacle of human development.

¹² See the Marxist–Leninist philosophy of movement.

¹³ See Foulquié P. (1970), *Existentialism*, Saigon, Nhi Nung.

metaphysical. Meanwhile, the liberty of Marxism is the product of history, the unity of perception and application of necessity: "Liberty is not in the imagined independence from the laws of nature, but rather in the awareness of those laws and the ability – acquired through this awareness – to force those laws to work in a planned manner for definite ends. Thus, the more *liberal* one's judgment on a given matter, the more the content of that judgment will be determined with a greater *necessity*; and indecision, resulting from ignorance, leads to an arbitrary selection of various and contradictory possibilities, but this very reason proves that it is not free, it is governed by the object it is supposed to govern. Therefore, liberty is in the domination of oneself and external nature, domination based on the awareness of the necessity of nature; liberty is, therefore, an inevitable product of historical development" (See Marx – Engels, *Collection*, V.20, 2004:164). Hence, Marx's liberty is not a personal luxury to see others¹⁴ as wretched in preserving the subjectivity that Sartre once resentfully exclaimed: *Hell is other people*. Marx's liberty is "an association, in which the liberty development of an individual is the condition for the liberty development of all" (See Marx – Engels, *Collection*, V.4, 2004:628), that is understanding, which is the condition of existence of subjectivity and the comprehensive development of people in the new society.

One of the issues, which is the core of Sartre's thought of liberty, is the relationship between liberty and the human body. Both Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Heidegger (1889–1976), one after another, to varying degrees, came to the same conclusion that the highest meaning of life was on this earth. According to Sartre, existential emotions (conditions) such as *nausea*, *anxiety*, *death*, and *life experience* are states of the living organism. Therefore, something can be nothingness, but liberty cannot, and because of liberty, it is possible to abstract (deny) the presence of something else.

When talking about the reason for the existence of things and phenomena, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) asserted: "Whatever is reasonable is true". So, what is reasonable in Sartre's conception of liberty? It is also how to clarify his contributions of the concept of liberty to humanities and social sciences, besides philosophy.

For an existentialist, subjectivity is his lordly power; personality is his unique aura; living experience is the source of nutrition and 'raw material' of personality¹⁵, and liberty is the power of everything. In illustrating the states of being, such as *nausea*, *anxiety*, *despair*, *alienation*, *death*, *responsibility*, *transcendence*, and *projection*, liberty is placed equally to subjectivity symbolizing

¹⁴ It should not be compared with Inhuman Mutt because the two meanings are different. The inhuman servant has two main interpretations: the arrogance that considers others to be worthless or talking about the eyes of a blind person who cannot see anything.

¹⁵ See Nguyen Tien Dung (2021), *Facing Existential Men*, Hue University Journal of Science: Humanities and Social Sciences, Vol.130, No.6B, p.5.

the two arms of personality. In other words, liberty is the oar of the personality boat, the central force guiding the rest of the situation.

Talking about the attributes of existential liberty is talking about *uncertainty, choice, body, and transformation*. Because of being uncertain, man is condemned to liberty. Liberty emerges as the highest value of choice, and choice is nothing more than a guaranteed road to liberty. Thus, choice carries with it duties and responsibilities. It can be deduced like this, if liberty and subjectivity form the two oars of the personality boat, then choice ensures that the boat does not go astray. Therefore, the choice is the eye of liberty and the direction for transformation.

Existential liberty does not exist outside the existential being. The existential being is a *personality*, which wants to determine the uniqueness of that person. We call an existential being a *life-experienced being* just because we want to discover that person's bloodline. Thus, *personality* or *life experience* is just the floating and sinking part that a person's intuition can perceive. This makes the existential being not framed in rigid concepts like the rationalist man, but very close to an actual being we face every day. That person spends his whole life preserving his F_0 value. That person has a unique desire *to be himself in every situation*. In order to be himself, that person must transcend all conventional constraints of the majority with his *leaps*¹⁶ of liberty.

Various researchers believe that the leap of existential liberty is anarchic. It is a correct statement because it is a leap of solitude that does not follow the general rule¹⁷. There is no free leap of existence that does not begin with *a risk*. It is risky because it is different from others. It is a unique sign of existential liberty. Regarding this issue, Leopoldo Zea Aguilar (1912–2004), a Mexican philosopher, emphasized: "It is absolutely impossible to talk about stereotypes in the field of liberty, because for liberty there can be no stereotypes. Stereotypes will eventually impose new dependencies again. To accept a stereotype is to have accepted a restraint." (See 9, *Transcendence Issues*, 2016:37)

For Sartre, liberty is just personal liberty¹⁸. Thus, he eliminated the dialectic of the individual and society. Therefore, it is difficult to avoid a one-sided view. But we still need to objectively evaluate his liberty views. Whatever you say, his liberty viewpoints satisfied the conception of a part of intellectuals in European countries from 1945 to 1960 because these viewpoints *met their expectations* after years of *bondage* to war. Thus, liberty becomes the gravitational force of the personal aspect. This goes against Sartre's conception that liberty is unique. And one has the right to question whether Sartre's conception of liberty actually exists.

¹⁶ Jumping in the sense of going beyond what is to what will be, are the solitary leaps of a being.

¹⁷ If you follow the general rule, it is not a leap of liberty.

¹⁸ Existentialism's starting thesis makes that clear.

Objectively said, *yes*, but as a movement, it blooms rapidly and also fades away quickly. But that does not mean that Sartre's liberty conception is purely *free will*.

Free will here *should probably be understood* in the way of Frabrice Pliskin (1963) as the *romance of liberty* (Liberté romanesque) to match Sartre's view in literature. Therefore, Niel's remarks must be taken as scientifically serious: "*Sartre's conception of liberty created the romantic and solipsistic stance of an immature state of mind* (Author's emphasis added) that can be self-determination by superhuman acts, for the sole purpose of creating a human being, which is the source of a life on the edge of society, often waiting for opportunities for adventure and new decisions to be made" (See Niel A. *Jean-Paul Sartre hero and victim of "wretched consciousness"*, 1968:136). Likewise, Sartre's life is a mirror reflecting that liberty view. Therefore, do not impose forced views on his unlikely events such as rejection of the Legion of Honor¹⁹, the Nobel Prize in literature, and living life to the fullest with Simone de Beauvoir without any legal constraints. If you consider Sartre a great creator of existentialism, your conclusions about these facts seem to warrant the credibility of his liberty thoughts.

Sartre's liberty views do not contradict his life, but he is a victim of that notion. He staggered on that point of view all his life. Therefore, he constantly changed his choices. In the face of that phenomenon, it is advisable not to rush to conclude that he is an *inconsistent predecessor* because those are merely manifestations of existential liberty. Sartre strived to change the content and appearance of liberty, but then he himself got stuck in it.

To a certain extent, Sartre's liberty thoughts expressed man's legitimate aspiration. From ancient times to the present, liberty has always been a matter of not residing in philosophy. Every social revolution in human history is the liberation of the productive forces from the stranglehold of obsolete relations of production. Is it not, after all, to give *liberty to the development* of the productive forces?

3. Conclusions

Jean-Paul Sartre and his conception of liberty are unity. Thus, for all his incidents or enthusiasm, his whole life can be explained by his attitude to liberty. His liberty is personal liberty. There, individuals must choose to preserve their pristine values.

Life is a chain of choices. Therefore, each choice must be viewed as the value of liberty. Liberty is a battle of the unique against the universal. It is unique because liberty is the only value of the individual. To maintain and develop that value, we must overcome our own

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre is not the only person to refuse the Legion of Honour or the Nobel Prize in literature.

limitations and traditional relationships. Despite its limitations, Sartre's liberty proves that the *human value* is not a constant. That value moves and changes according to the person's level of mastery.

Today, people live in a flat world and a digital society full of new paradoxes. People have to face this situation because it is the product of their development so as not to be confused. The more effectively they "conquer" the outside world, the more they lose themselves and become corrupt in their own halo.

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