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An Application of Sartre's Notion of Freedom to Nigerian Situation

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Abstract

There is an ever increasing rate of hardships in Nigeria. With this in view, it becomes necessary for Nigerians to ask themselves some pertinent questions. Is it that we do not have the freedom yet to attack the political system of our time? Or is it that we are not yet ready to accept responsibility? It is in this background the researcher primarily intends to reflect on freedom and responsibility in line with Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism. This work explores the relevance of the concept of freedom and responsibility to the Nigerian situation as it has to do with the youth, security, constitution et cetera. In doing so, it discovers that a number of maladies in our contemporary society arise as a result of the conviction, that man has a determined end. This work recommends the responsible use of man's freedom. As a way of doing justice to the work, the researcher primarily uses the Philosophical method of critical reflection in the research.

Keywords: Application, Notion, Freedom, Nigerian situation, Constitution.

Introduction

Freedom and responsibility have always been of existential concern to man as conscious beings. This consciousness has always poised men into actions (deliberate actions). Hence, these deliberate actions have been sought and thought from a universal perspective. It has also proven to be a controversial issue. Freedom and responsibility have come to mean different things to different philosophers and scholars throughout the epochs. Freedom has come to mean an absolute freedom for Sartre. And taking a look into Sartre's notion of freedom which is one of an 'Absolute freedom' or 'Radical freedom', this has not been left without criticisms and opinions from contemporaries and later day readers. Thus, this chapter is aimed at reviewing some relevant views and literatures of philosophers on Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of freedom and responsibility.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a contemporary of Sartre made a critical analysis of Sartre's notion of 'radical freedom,' which holds the idea that the individual creates and chooses all meaning. He, therefore, argues that Sartre's theory puts the very idea of freedom incomprehensible. He furthers that if every action is necessarily free as Sartre conceives, then the very concept of freedom would collapse. He thus said "if indeed it is the case that our freedom is the same in all our actions, and even in our passions, if it is not to be measured in terms of our conduct, and if the slave displays freedom as much by living in fear as by breaking his chains, then, it cannot be held that there is such a thing as free action" (Merleau-Ponty; 2002). Merleau-Ponty holds that for one to conceive freedom as the foundation or necessity of all human existence as well as give freedom independent of any particular action destroys the very concept of freedom. He holds further against Sartre's idea that all our choices are characterized by total freedom. He agrees with Sartre that we are free to make choices, but our freedom is never total or radical. This he illustrates saying "insofar as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent upon my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way I do not choose"(Merleau-Ponty; 2002).

More so, some serious criticisms levelled against Sartre's concept of freedom rest on his conception of freedom as limitless or absolute. He never claims that a person can always do

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exactly as he wishes, for instance, play football, even though he has no legs. Yet there are certain things he took for granted in his assertion. Some critics maintain that responsibility and the ability to choose are less extensive as Sartre proposes. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty vehemently disagrees with Sartre that people are always responsible for what they do and the evaluations they make.

Merleau-Ponty also criticized Sartre's ontology of freedom. He posits that the intentions and motives which arise as a result of one's bodily limitations originate from a source other than man. For, since these intentions "are not simply mine, they originate from other than myself, and I am not surprised to find them in all psycho-physical subjects organized as I am" (Merleau-Ponty; 2002). Here, Merleau-Ponty holds that there exists some kind of a universal motive that in a way determines our free choices. He thus, agrees with Hegel that men are both conditioned and free at the same time. Going again with Husserl, he says "there is on the one hand a 'field of freedom' and on the other a 'conditioned freedom,' not that freedom is absolute within the limits of this field and non-existent outside it...but because I enjoy immediate and remote possibilities"(Merleau-Ponty; 2002).

In his play, 'Caligula' (1938), Albert Camus, another contemporary of Sartre, exploring the implication of radical freedom concludes that "the idea of radical freedom not only leads to anarchy and nothingness, but is also an incoherent notion"(Tulkens; 2020). This is because, Caligula (the main character) after massacring many and behaving the way he wills, could not still succeed in 'achieving the impossible.' Thus, Camus took this his fictional work to be in line with Sartre's notion of freedom in his review of Sartre. He criticizes the excess of liberty in Sartre's work and objected that such a radical freedom is of no relevance (Tulkens; 2020). Camus in his later work "*The Myth of Sisyphus*" posits:

I cannot act lost in the glorification or the mere definition of a notion which eludes me and loses its meaning as soon as it goes beyond the frame of reference of my individual experience...the only conception of freedom I can have is that of the prisoner or the individual in the midst of the state. The only one I know is freedom of thought and action (Camus; 2015).

He finally sums his critique of Sartre with his work "*L'Homme Revolte*" (The Rebel), in which he maintains the impossibility of absolute human freedom and posits that freedom can only be acceptably conceptualized as having limits. As such, "freedom exists only in a world where what is possible is defined at the same time as what is not possible. Without law there is no freedom. If fate is not guided by superior values, if chance is king, then there is nothing but the step in the dark and the appalling freedom of the blind" (Camus; 2013).

In his essay, 'What is Human Agency?' (1985), Charles Taylor objects to Sartre's idea of total or radical freedom in relation to responsibility. He posits that the realization of radical freedom is impossible. In his idea, "we think of persons as responsible as well, in a way that animals are not, and this too seems bound up with the capacity to evaluate desires" (Taylor; 2020). Taylor clearly analyses his position with an example from Sartre's *Existentialism is A Humanism*, of a man who is trapped between the decision of going to fight for his dear nation or staying back to look

after his seriously ailing mother (Taylor; 2020). He placed it side by side with his own example of another man to choose between going for a summer break or to stay back to look after his seriously ailing mother (Taylor; 2020). For him, the first situation involves a more serious situation of 'moral dilemma' than the later. As such, in certain situations, moral dilemma affects human freedom, but in Sartre's philosophy, "moral dilemmas become inconceivable" (Taylor; 2020). If one should thus blindly throw oneself into one decision or the other, without any foundation or evaluation, the consequences would be chaotic. From the foregoing, Taylor is of the opinion that radical freedom, as geared towards the authentic realization of an individual in Sartre's philosophy would rather end up destroying an individual. He thus, in analyzing and referring to the adverse effects of radical freedom says:

I would no longer be a subject capable of knowing where I stood and what the meanings of things were for me, I would suffer a terrifying breakdown of precisely those capacities which define a human agent...because I would be repudiating an essential part of that out of which I evaluate and determine the meanings of things for me. Such repudiation would both be itself inauthentic and would make me incapable of other authentic evaluations (Taylor; 2020).

Sartre's freedom neglects the realities of proper evaluation, moral dilemma and other factors in the exercise of freedom, and responsibility. Sartre's freedom would evidently result to chaos. Therefore, for Taylor, the basis of radical freedom is intrinsically incoherent.

In his article, 'Sartre's Absolute Freedom,' Gerard T. Campbell criticized Sartre's idea of freedom, holding that it originates from an unfounded analysis of human nature. For him, "if we wish to examine human freedom, we should begin our analysis with our experience of ourselves as choosing subjects. Instead, Sartre's point of departure is one which does violence to experience and it is this fact which seems to provoke resistance on the part of the reader"(Campbell; 1977). Therefore, Sartre's philosophy for Campbell cuts man off from his roots, his experience, as such his fundamental relation to the physical world. And by this means, he makes freedom 'absolute.' Thus, he said: "Sartre takes us out of the world in which we live, to which we are related, in which we make choices, and he sets us in opposition to it. We are uprooted and cut off from nourishment. Our roots in the natural opposition to nature (such that man has no nature), Sartre can make freedom (lack of nature) absolute since it can no longer be a quality of a natural being" (Campbell; 1977).

Campbell as such holds that this foundation on which absolute human freedom is built is inconsistent, and as such unacceptable. This is because for one to deny the existence of an essence or nature, one inadvertently denies the existence of oneself, for "if we ignore the world we will also distort our perspective of ourselves in it" (Campbell; 1977). The conception of an 'absolute freedom' in Sartre is unrealistic. In Taylor's idea, Sartre's failure to begin with what is truly human reality leads him inevitably into contradictory conclusions (Campbell; 1977).

The nature of human freedom from all dimensions is a complex reality. This is why Gary Cox writes that "The theory of human freedom offered by the existentialist phenomenology on the other hand attempts to demystify

free will by showing that it is even intrinsic and necessary feature of human condition: a feature that is directly implied by the very nature of consciousness as being-for-itself" (Cox; 2009). Sartre thus insists that man cannot at one time be slave and at the other time be free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all" (Sartre; 1989). To this effect Gary Cox argues that; what is required to elucidate properly in the nature of human freedom is the ontology that accounts for free will, not the one that simply allows room for it to be. Such ontology must be able to embrace the strongest argument for both free will and determinism by reconciling these arguments (Cox; 2009). From the above reviews from the various scholars, we find that Sartre's notion of radical freedom appears to be founded on an insufficient ontology of human existence. Nevertheless, it remains fully coherent from an analytical point of view, as regard its practical relevance in positively affecting human life. His notion of choice, action, responsibility as regards human freedom provides an effective positive ideological solution to many contemporary issues for it charges man to primarily live above deterministic inclinations.

Application of Freedom to Nigerian Situation

In order to make a good use of this work, it would be necessary to make certain observations as to the relevance to the society especially the Nigerian society. The fulfillment of the above requirements is found in the following subjects under which we treat it.

The Nigerian Situation

As far back as 1983, Achebe observed in a booklet entitled *The Trouble with Nigeria*, that the most basic "problem of Nigeria is that of leadership" (Achebe; 1983). Could this be the only problem with the country? No, says Ewelu for "both the leaders and the led are the cause of the problem" (Ewelu; 2008). As Achebe posited, we still experience executive lawlessness, legislative anarchy and reckless judiciary within the halls of government. Such are our problems. Hence, Ray Ekpo held that the "only ingredients standing between Nigeria and greatness is leadership" (Onuigbo; 2006). In other words, the source of Nigeria problems lies in her leadership.

Nigeria gained her independence in 1960 which implies her rights to freely determine her political status. This right to self-governance as well as to determine her political leadership is not underrated when described as not to have produced any laudable effect. Just as a groom welcomes the bride, so was the joy of her independence. This joy is no longer seen due to the fact that no positive effect has been produced and the reverse of what was expected is now the case.

Freedom and the Constitution

The constitution, in any civil society is the fundamental norm from which all other norms proceed. It is the *norma normans non normata*. That is to say, "it is the reference upon which the validity or legitimacy of acts or omissions are tested within the group" (Oraegbunam; 2008). Constitution contains mainly laws which are enforceable by the law court. No one talks of any constitution in isolation of law, hence, a unite. Constitutions just like law cannot be made without the consent of the people through their representatives (in a representative democracy). It should

be made in certain ways by a specific body that is authorized for it. The body charged with this task in Nigeria is the legislative arm. The legislators sometimes pass some decrees neither with the consent of the people nor aiming at the common good. Emphasizing on the functions as well as the need to ensure that any constitution produces the common good, Plato submits that "The aim of the legislators in making laws should be to create all the wisdom possible and eradicate all the unwisdom or folly from the community. For there can be no greater unwisdom in a people to hate what they know to be good or noble, while they love and enjoy what they judge to be vile and wicked"(Appadorai; 1986).

However, Nigeria could be said to have a good constitution. The dominant problem with her is the implementation of this constitution and this is where freedom comes in. This means that her constitution is neither given a practical effect, nor enforced and stiller, no effort is made to see that its demand is carried out. Hence, the constitution of Nigeria can be said to be enforceable but are not all enforced. In other words, one can simply submit here that whereas all enforced laws are enforceable, not all enforceable laws are enforced. And when such is the case, the law is no more than *flatus vocis*, they become nothing but mere word. When these constitutions are not implemented, they give birth to lawlessness in the society. Experiences have shown that some factors are responsible for the unjust or in-appropriate implementation of the constitution. Such factors as: firstly, restriction based on individual status. Here, some of the highly-placed are not concerned with the dictate of the constitution. They are neither prosecuted nor penalized on violating the constitution. For instance, when the spraying of Naira was banned, most of the so called 'political lords' did not adhere to it with no one punishing them but once one that is not a member of the clique does the same, the law becomes operable. Again, the agencies charged with the obligation of implementing the constitution held it as only their responsibility to implement the laws while it obliges the rest of the citizenry to obey and drag it as far as impeding on their right when they try to look up to them. They presume that the laws are not meant for them. In speaking against similar cases, Plato held that "laws are Any constitution made without any place for human rights is inhuman. As such, any effort made to implement such yields a futile result. It is only the constitution that gives a prominent place to human rights and social justice that produces a desirable result for it promotes the common good. Human rights implies those conditions of social life without which no man can seek in general to be himself at his best. It is prior to the state; hence, whether or not the state recognizes it, it subsists. They are granted to man by nature and that is human freedom. The duty of the state here is to grant those conditions for their attainment as well as to ensure that these rights are properly shaped and maintained.

Freedom and Security

In defining government as "an intermediary body between the subject and the sovereign for their mutual communication" (Rousseau; 1947), it entails that government is not an end in itself but a means. The end sought in a society is self-preservation. From this then; Rousseau posits that the supreme end of the government is

the perfection and preservation of its members. It goes without saying that spat of deliberate killing of innocent citizens in Nigeria is most abominable. Apart from those who had their lives extinguished through dastardly acts of armed robbery, ritual murder and police brutality and also through hunger, there exists also very many cases of political assassinations in Nigeria (Oraegbunam; 2008). The citizens are exposed to constant danger through insecurity, armed robbery, hunger, danger on the road, ecological factors etc. All these are threats and no doubt violate the fundamental right to life. One may therefore interpret this 'governmental insensitivity to human freedom' as an act of accomplice. More still, we often witness the cases of wastage of lives by those who ought to protect it. Some innocent citizens are being tortured to death in an effort to get information from them. The lock down because of the COVID-19 Pandemic Virus has seen to the death of many innocent Nigerians, some who died at the hands of Nigerian law enforcement agencies while some others died of hunger. Suspects are shot death at any slightest provocation and many motorists sent to untimely grave on refusal to offer N20 as bribe. In this regard, Nigeria thus becomes that kingdom that fights against itself, since the rule of law as encompassed in the fundamental human rights is violated. The frequent occurrence of religious violence that claims the lives of man is direct affront to the fundamental right of religious freedom. The arsenic destructions of Christian churches especially in the North at any slightest crisis, even for reasons otherwise than religious, speak volume of the extent of this violation. The governmental silence that often accompanies this spate of religious-political crisis is a clear indication of the betrayal of the nation's constitution which holds at section 10 that no religion shall be regarded as state religion either by the nation as a whole or by any part thereof. This is very imperious to the security and freedom of those involved.

Freedom and the Nigerian Youth's Morality

It seems that Sartre is of the notion that the usual human inclination is to deny responsibility for our situation, that is, therefore, bad faith. This is a situation in countries where corruption, exploitation and oppression have become the order of the day. Take for instance our country, Nigeria. Ours is a country rampaged by corruption. This corruption, arguably, stems from our leaders. They loot public funds and impoverish the people, and the poor get poorer. This as such leads our youths to engage in all sorts of criminal activities that will require that I write another long essay to be able to enumerate them. Many a time, when a criminal is caught, he begins to enumerate a thousand and one ways the government is responsible for his action. Hence, you hear such things as, "there is no job", "our schools have been closed down", "I am not sufficiently paid", and so on. This is bad faith manifesting itself. Such youths are in bad faith as long as they fail to take responsibility for their actions. Just as choice is free, one is responsible for one's actions if one could have acted otherwise.

In a quick assessment of the above situation, apart from the obvious lack on the part of the government and education sector, the culprits all point accusing fingers to one person or another, to one group or the other, and even to one historical occurrence or another. On the above Sartre would say, "*Those who either in the spirit of seriousness or by*

deterministic excuse hide from themselves their total freedom I shall call cowards"(Sartre; 1990). At another place, he adds, "*Here am I as thou hast made me, a coward, irredeemable. Thou lookest at me, and all hope depart: I am weary of my efforts to escape myself...well, thou hast made me, now sustain me. Mathieu, I am a paederast. I am, I am a paederast. God help me* (Sartre; 1990). What Sartre does here is an invitation to self-evaluation and recognition so as to accept ones being and thus, work towards a better being. The youths would surely be great beneficiaries if they take proper recourse to taking responsibility of what happens to them in life. That is authentic life.

In order to understand better, it is good to make instances with taking responsibility and having recourse to facticity, for instance, inability to pay their tuition, does not allow them to create themselves effectively as they would wish, and those who, out of their own laziness, make no effort only to attribute their predicament to facticity. Just as Sartre told his student, you have a choice to make. This choice is a free choice. You might want to seek advice from others with regard to what choice you would make, but even so, the choice you would make is still free. What this means is that the responsibility for this choice is still yours. You will not go about blaming others for the choice you would eventually make simply because they advised you as such. You would be living an authentic life, at least in the existentialist sense, if you follow the dictates of your free choice. Remember this also, even when you decide to be inauthentic — by following the voice of the anonymous "they" or the dictates of your superiors or colleagues — you still are responsible. You would not be doing yourself any good going about blaming people for your own choices. However, you should choices of what will make of you a better person, for it is by means of your choices that you create yourself and realize your essence.

In summary, the existentialists did enough to assert man's individuality. No man consulted a fellow man before he came into existence. Every individual has their life to live as well as their death to die. Why then would some individuals hide in the crowd and always listen to the voice of the anonymous 'they' or *das Man* as Heidegger would call it. This is inauthentic life; and the sole aim of inauthentic life is to evade responsibility. But on the contrary every individual has freedom of choice in dubitably every situation. This serves as a big call and lesson to the young citizens of Nigeria who in one way or the other feel determined because of their upbringing and as such evade responsibility. The earlier one realizes what one wants in life and makes effort to achieve it, the better, and if there happens to be a setback on the way, it should not be a reason to relax and look for who to put the blame on. The youth should know that he/she is what he makes of him/herself.

Evaluation

Obviously, the researcher observed contradiction in Sartre's notion of universal responsibility — where the individual, apart from being responsible to himself, is also responsible to the entire human race for his actions since he projects an image of the entire humanity? If this is the case, man is certainly determined to act in a certain manner. Since this is the case, is man not limited to acting according to what humanity demands or expects of him? We can

understand responsibility to mean answerability. Being answerable to me presupposes that I wield some control over you, and that you have flaunted my rules or so. For man to be responsible to humanity because he presents an image of humanity by means of his actions, then he must receive orders from humanity. It is in the same way I am responsible to myself when I act according to my self-chosen principles that I am responsible to humanity when I act according to humanity's principles. Thus, it is either man's freedom is limited by the demands of the entire humanity or he is not responsible. Sartre is correct, but only to some extent, in saying that man is what he makes of himself. "*Man cannot totally, or rather absolutely, make himself*" (Ewelu; 2011). There are aspects of man that are for him to change and bring to perfection. Therefore, a man is to an extent determined and to an extent free. Sartre distinction of two modes of being – conscious and unconscious being, which is applicable to human person, is itself an acknowledgement of the determined and the free aspects of the human person.

Sartre's philosophy helps to the discovery of new knowledge and changes interpretations of historical events and belief. It equally serves as an indication that man is capable of creating new meanings and at the same time unveiled the secret of self-actualization which begins with self-acceptance and self-consciousness. Man is therefore saved from the rigid form of dogmatism that stifled freedom. For Sartre, bad faith makes one a perpetual liar to himself and sincerity on the other hand would not allow one to repent because as a sinner he is a sinner, as a table is a table. Thus, he is permanent and cannot change or be transformed. Sartre uses the example of being in a war to illustrate his point. He says that in times of war, it may seem that many of the conscripted soldiers have no freedom as they are forced to fight but the truth is that they do have choices. They could run away from their country or commit suicide, for instance. The reason they end up fighting in the war is because they considered the consequences of each of their options and decide that fighting is the best choice. As such, they have freely chosen and are responsible for their being in the war. Sartre would further support that the notion that 'there are no innocent victims in war' by stating the idea of responsibility which is an incredible burden that everyone bears. It is by their choices that their futures are decided. Sartre claims that each and every person in a country has the choice to either stay or flee.

Conclusion

It is quite pertinent to conclude that an objective conception of freedom recognizes others and encourages human tolerance, which implies that where my own freedom ends, there yours begins. Human freedom therefore, entails an actual self-realization and not just an absolute self-aggrandizement which could eventually result to a chaotic and disordered society.

Man's freedom elevates him above the past, the environment, and the rules of language and the dialectics of history. Man's freedom transcends all these, and they derive their existence and meaning from man's freedom which is always their point of departure.

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