

An Existentialist Morality

Kingsley Mbamara

Abstract

The behaviour of the human being in any given society, his/her relationship with other persons, what actions s/he ought or ought not to perform, the question of whether there is free will or freedom, the issue of free choice, determinism versus indeterminism, responsibility, what constitute rightness and wrongness of an action, what is involved in assessment of a person as moral or immoral, what is a person's duty... These and many other similar questions that touch on the content and nature of morality have dominated discussions in (moral) philosophy from the earliest times. This has generated over the years many different types of ethical theories. One of such ethical theories that one might not easily ignore is an existentialist morality arising from absolute individualism and absolute human freedom. Freedom is one of our basic constitutions as humans. It also constitutes an essential component in making moral judgments or in consideration of the morality of human action. However, the ethics of absolute freedom is far remote from our concrete human experience. There is doubt about us being free. We also have a sense of responsibility accompanying our freedom. Thus, freedom is not an absolute value.

1. Introduction

Samuel E. Stumpf (1993: 481) has rightly noted that existentialism has for a long time remained very popular among philosophers and non philosophers alike. Its widespread influence can be felt in virtually every branch of philosophy and to some extent in theology, psychology, anthropology and, not least, in literature. But what is it that has allowed existentialism to endure in the life of so many people? Many factors could be seen as responsible. However, the

existentialists' reflections and emphases on such common areas of experiences as death, freedom, despair adversity, suffering and so on, and the bold conclusions they make in these areas, can excite interest as well as both disagreement and agreement, favour and disfavour.

The Existentialist understanding of freedom and value are derived from their conception of the individual. One basic condition of human existence is subjectivity which is the basis of human freedom. Since the individual is absolutely in his/her constitution, that is, has control over and above his/her internal and external nature, s/he cannot but be the source of his/her own freedom and value.

What view of morality can emerge from this view of human nature and human freedom? One such view is the view of human nature and human freedom identified with the name Existentialism which is a humanism expounded by Jean Paul Sartre. In the famous article, Sartre says that what all existentialists, both atheistic and Christian, have in common "is that they think that existence precedes essence. What Sartre means by this is that, the human being first of all exists and only afterwards defines him/herself. The human being is what s/he conceives him/herself to be and what s/he wills him/herself to be after s/he thrust him/herself toward existence. The human being is nothing else but what s/he makes of him/herself. Thus, there is no human nature which provides us with an external source of determination and value. Therefore, if existence really does precede essence, there is no explaining this away by reference to a fixed and given human nature. In other words, there is no determinism, the human being is free, the human being is freedom.

The main focus in this paper is to analyze the role of freedom in the moral philosophy of the existentialists. These include Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Karl Jasper, Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre among others. Even though as existentialists they differ in many respects, there are many features and positions that are common among them. It is my consideration that these features and positions are enough when drawn together, by a way of summary, to fairly represent their common moral view or position. This will in turn help us to critically analyze the role/place of freedom in their common thesis.

This paper, therefore, wants to appreciate the central role and the importance of freedom in moral judgment and attainment of humanhood as identified by existential philosophers. However, this

paper wishes also to point out that they have pushed the role of freedom too far from our actual experience by denying and rejecting human nature, law, religion and the existence of God. I will conclude by pointing out the inconsistency/controversy inherent in their ethical position, while recognizing the relevancy of their position in the contemporary society.

2. The Existentialist Moral Philosophy

None of the existentialists' philosophers had a coherent or complete theory of morality. Hence, when one says existentialist moral philosophy, there is the difficulty of a starting point. Questioning what existentialism is and the answer that follows could have been a near perfect starting point. However, philosophers like Jacob Needleman (1953:147), Mary Warnock (1967:1), and John Macquarrie (1972:1) have all pointed out the complexities and difficulties of having a universally accepted definition by the existentialists not to talk of non-existentialists. Sartre (1989:289) specifically said that "...the word is now so loosely applied to so many things that it no longer means anything at all". Despite the elusive nature of the term and the disagreement among philosophers as to what it really means, there is a lot in common that binds existentialists and their thoughts together.

The first common feature or theme among the existentialists is the preoccupation with describing concrete human problems of existence. According to Paul Tillich (1971:129), "Existentialism as a universal element in all thinking is the attempt of man to describe his existence and its conflicts, the origin of these conflicts and the anticipation of overcoming them....Wherever man's predicament is described either theologically or philosophically, either poetically or artistically, there we have existentialist element."

The second feature would be an emphasis on subjective experience. The existentialists concentrate their attention on the internal experience and the immediate subjective awareness of the self, so much so that a person's inner life with its moods, anxieties, boredom, nausea and decision becomes the subject of attention. Macquarrie (1972: 5) notes that:

Where philosophy has been dominated by the narrower kinds of rationalism, the changing feelings, moods or affects that appear in the human mind have been considered irrelevant to

philosophy's tasks, or even a hindrance in the way of the ideal of objective knowledge. But the existentialists claim that it is precisely through these that we are involved in our world and can learn some things about it that are inaccessible to a merely objective beholding.

Thirdly, and perhaps the most important feature of existentialism, is the belief in the primacy of existence. For the existentialists, existence means more than simply being there. It connotes active, full, vital self-consciousness, responsible and growing life, as distinguished from the passive life of any being/object; like a stone. This idea received a special prominence with Sartre, when he says that "existence precedes essence." He explains the saying with the famous example of a paper knife. According to Sartre (1989:289-290), when you pick a paper knife, you know that it was made by someone who had in his or her mind a conception of it. Hence, even before it was made, the paper knife is already conceived as having a definite purpose and as being the product of a definite process. Therefore, the paper knife's essence can be said to come before its existence. But human being exists first and later actualizes his/her essence. Hence, the human being is a becoming, a project yet to be realized. Unfortunately what sounds like a note of hope or optimism in the search for an authentic personhood ends in tragedy. Macquarrie (1972:4) says;

One cannot speak in any facile way of pessimism or optimism. Some existentialists do acknowledge themselves to be pessimists, while others speak of optimism or at least of hope. Yet all of them seem aware of the tragic elements in human existence. Man's freedom and his quest for authentic personal being meet with resistance and sometimes with frustration. In any case, as far as the individual is concerned, existence ends in death.

The last but certainly not least feature to be considered is existentialists' emphasis on freedom and responsibility. Freedom, responsibility, choice and decision are dominant themes among existentialists. Their concentration and emphasis on personal existence and subjectivity means a renewed emphasis on the above mentioned themes, which forms an essential element in the ethics of existentialism and, in the words of Macquarrie (1972:4): "These matters constitute the core of personal being. It is the exercise of freedom and the ability to shape the future that distinguishes man from all the other beings that we know on earth. It is through free and

responsible decisions that man becomes authentically himself....” This freedom is a natural fact beyond doubt and does not need to be proved or argued about. Freedom is not given. We simply experience our freedom as part of nature and existence. Freedom is working out the demands of one's inner nature and expressing one's genuine or authentic self. It is facing choices, making decisions and accepting responsibility for them. Above all, humans must accept responsibility for decisions that have contributed to making them who they are.

On the other hand, the term freedom is conceived and defined quite differently even by the existentialists. Yet, as a concept, it dominates the entire philosophy of existentialism, and its moral stance. This freedom is understood in the positive sense to mean the ability to choose from a range of options. That is, the human being is a free being. And being free means being able to choose or decide what to do at any given time and place, freely and determining by oneself or without any external precondition or influence. Thus, freedom and choice could be said to be what constitute the core of the existentialists' moral philosophy. Hence they maintained that without such freedom, there is no attainment of moral judgment and authentic personhood. The inevitable conclusion is that freedom is the most important and only factor that constitutes the core of the existentialists moral philosophy. Sartre (1989:291) pushes the matter further by maintaining that neither reason nor social convention, law nor God, can take away the burden of freedom and the responsibility of having to make a choice in life.

Thus, existentialism rejects any form of legalism and formalism. Rules, customs and laws are seen as impositions on the moral agent preventing and predetermining him/her from realizing his/her unique authentic personhood. This means the individual, standing free, unaided but armed with knowledge and will in every circumstance whatsoever, will do, choose, decide and act as the situation reveals itself to him/her, its meaning and demand. This is because, reference to anything or an attempt to shift responsibility or burden of our decision to external factors will retard human progress in society and for Sartre (1956:67-68), this is tantamount to what he calls “bad faith”. Such emphasis on freedom of choice, personal decision-making, explains the subjective stand of the existentialists. According to Mary Warnock (1967: 54);

Choice must be made by each man for himself. So they must be described as what each individual plans as he looks out at the

world from his own personal angle. He cannot be told by anyone else what is to be valued highly and what is not, nor therefore, what is to be done and what is not. We ascribe values to things ourselves, whether we mean to or not. If I choose to pursue a certain course of action, then in so doing I am evaluating. Systems of rules are of their nature impersonal. To live according to such a system is to fail to face the facts of individual freedom and responsibility.

Interestingly, according to Denise C. Theodore (1999:307), Sartre concedes that our personal decisions may have great influence on others. Notwithstanding, we are still confronted with the realization that there are no universal principles to guide or sanctify our conduct. This responsibility is not restricted only to the individual subjective commitment, for the individual is responsible not only for himself or herself but for all people, because they too are conditioned by their commitments. For the human being is not a being for him/herself but a being for others.

In rejecting any form of external influence on the free moral agent, they rejected not only the idea that the human being has a fixed nature and fixed essence. This further meant that the human is a becoming, a project yet not accomplished. Therefore, according to Sartre, the existentialists hold that existence precedes essence (Cf. Sartre 1989:290). This means that, if existence does come before essence, there is no need to explain things by reference to a fixed and give human nature. Obviously there is nothing like determinism, the human being is free and by making decisions we create ourselves and determine what we shall become. Our choices, therefore, bestow values on things and we are absolutely free to choose anything.

3. Critical Evaluation

There is no doubt that there is much in the existentialists' moral philosophy that is appealing. And the existentialists' contributions to moral philosophy cannot be disputed without difficulties. Hence, the contemporary relevance of existentialism cannot also be over emphasized.

In placing emphasis on the situation rather than on law, the existentialists encourage creativity in meeting the ever changing moral situations of the society and thereby reduce or eliminate the danger of stagnation. According to Macquarrie (1972:214), "An ethic

that stresses the situation is, on the contrary, future oriented; it looks to the new, and action is determined with regard to the new... Hence, within limits, the existentialist stresses in the situation and the future can be helpful and constructive on the contemporary world."

The existentialists' renewed emphasis and interpretation of concepts such as freedom, responsibility, choice, decision and so on, have brought to the fore or consciousness of everyone what s/he is and to take fuller responsibility of his/her existence and how squarely that responsibility rests on him/her. Such personal responsibility, the existentialists say, does not mean his/her individual person alone, but for others as well. However, to be held responsible for one's life or actions necessarily entails that the human being is free to choose and free from deterministic factors or external influences. There is no doubt about that. For if we accept extreme determinism, then all claims to freedom must be abandoned and nobody could possibly be blamed or praised for his/her actions. In such situations, the existentialists are right when they say that life or living will amount to inauthentic living or bad faith. This will not be far from absurdity, chaos and anarchy in the society.

On the other hand, existentialist moral philosophy is not without loopholes or grave weaknesses. Macquarrie (1972:214) points out that "it is only easy to criticize an extreme situation in ethics, and certainly such a position has many weaknesses. It suffers from individualism and subjectivism and prizes the intensity of choice above the building up of moral wisdom and virtue."

We have seen the existentialists' arguments in rejecting any a priori moral guidelines or external factors to give direction or influence to our lives. The implications are far reaching. First, it means that nothing is really good, bad or evil. Secondly, if the human being does not exist there will be nothing. Thirdly, it is a person's free decisions and choices that bestow values on things/actions and whose choices decides or creates his/her essence. Therefore, no action could be judged a priori to be good or bad. Actions must be performed first to be evaluated good or bad. We can go on and on. Even though, there is sense in what the existentialists are saying, experience alone without going further, tells us that there are some things and acts that are intrinsically good or bad. A person must not act first to determine the rightness or wrongness of that act. The working of reason complemented by will is

able to help us to know the difference or the possible consequence of our choice or action before it is carried out; even though we may not know all the possible consequences of such action or choice.

All the existentialists have difficulties understanding the place of law and institution in the life of a person and the relationship between law and society and person; how law came about and the functions of law in moral assessment. So, laws, traditions and institutions are rejected as predetermining behaviour and restricting self-realization. Again Macquarrie (1972: 214) notes that;

In point of fact, all ethics have combined a rule element and a situation element. Even legalistic ethics have had some built in mechanism to allow for the exceptional cases and in many cases such systems of laws and rules have been in practice remarkably flexible. However, existentialist ethics exalt the situational element over the rule element. The latter may be reduced almost to vanishing point, so that one comes close to a kind of antinomianism just as I suggested that probably the existentialist ideal in politics would be anarchy, strictly understood. Furthermore, it fails to understand how law itself can become internalized and appropriated...

However, my point here is that the existentialists contradict themselves here, if not all, at least Sartre. In his discourse on 'facticity of freedom' under the subtitled, 'my fellowmen' or 'the other' in 'Being and Nothingness', Sartre (1956:354) says that, the world has been standardized, everything seems to have been made ready. It looks as if I am only to conform, to obey or to adopt them, instead of giving sense or meaning by my projects. We are thrown into the world, which is not only our own but has been made. So, one is born an African or a European and so on. In fact, Sartre admits that I am not a person if I do not belong to one form of categorization or the other. However, these are only categorizations. There is nothing substantial about them. For despite the givens it is still my responsibility not just to assume these givens but to internalize them and make them my own so that they suit my project. Sartre use language as an example to stress and explain his point. My contention is that laws, traditions and customs, and even institutions that one is born into, are not to be exceptional but are to be interiorized and made one's own.

We have pointed out that the existentialist ethics stresses the situational element over the rule element in moral assessment and

how this encourages creativity and the advantage therein. However, it is worth noting that creativity is far from arbitrary disregarding conventional rules of acting in a particular instance. Creative acts must adhere to certain rules or conditions. There is no aspect of human endeavour that we can think of that this is an exception. Besides, creativity entails some level of familiarity and good understanding of the object or subject in question. Hence, creativity does not happen in a vacuum. If not it will be a matter of gambling or mere guessing. Again, we can use Sartre's own example of language and communication to make our point clearer. Effective communication hinges on the mastery of the skills and the rules of the language used in communication, be it either writing or speaking. Therefore, it is impossible to write and speak creatively in a language one does not understand, irrespective of the skills and talents one has in another language. Even in the language which is our own, creatively using it means mastery of its skills and rules. Creativity in morality cannot be an exception. More often than not, our actions, choices and decisions are guided or influenced by many factors, including law. We cannot possibly, therefore, doubt or exaggerate the influence of reason over free will when it comes to choice. We often, if not always, think before we act or make a choice. We consider carefully the consequences, the implications of our choices and acts before we venture them. There is also no doubt to the fact that our past experiences also determine what we do or choose when necessary. The arbitrary creativity and purely subjective/individualistic moral assessment of the existentialists has place in our real world of experience. We have seen also how the existentialists' emphasis on freedom leads to subjective/individualist and personal moral autonomy. There are many difficulties with this position.

First, the existentialists do not tell us how such autonomy is possible and reconcilable in a community of persons with different and sometimes the same ambitions or aspirations with limited or even enough resources to meet such interests and ends. Though the existentialist will say that in choosing ourselves, we choose others in such a way that all our actions are directed to the good of all and in committing ourselves to our needs, the objective commitment to others is implied. The inconsistency is obvious. Warnock (1967:54) succinctly puts it right when she writes:

That a man is free means that he is free to choose what to do.
Choice consists in his looking at his situation, and seeing how

he personally is going to intervene in it. I cannot choose for you, because if you act on my decision, then thereby it becomes your decision. Just as it is impossible, logically, that I should walk your steps, or feel your pain, or, in the same way as you do, raise your eyebrows, so it is impossible that I should make your decision. If you say you were acting in accordance with my will, this is an evasion....

Besides this obvious inconsistency, my point is who will the existentialist trust that in choosing him/herself will choose him/her inclusively. Not even his/her fellow existentialist will s/he trust and I doubt if any will even accept to.

The existentialist position rules out any possibility of help to others, voluntary service, not to talk of big issues like sacrifices. It is even contradictory when we now realize that the existentialist demand from others what s/he is not prepared to accept from or do for others, moral example inclusive.

The next question that might worry us with the existentialist position is, if everyone is capable of choosing and deciding for him/herself what is valuable and not valuable, good and not good, evil and not evil, and has the autonomy to ascribe values where s/he deems fit, then nobody is bound to accept another's values or moral assessment, because everything, including morality will be relative (1964:579). So satisfying only one's personal interest will be an overriding principle that is justified. It will follow that Thomas Hobbes (1996:216)' psychology of human nature, which he described as an egoistic drive, will be correct. We can see how the state of affairs here will not be different also from his description of the human being in the state of nature. Therefore, morality goes beyond individuality/subjectivity and it is not true that most of us act individually in choosing our moral codes all the time.

We may further ask the question, is it true and realistic that everybody without distinction is capable of making the right choice or capable of acting rightly at all times? The existentialists do not tell us who can make a choice or decision and it will be respected and accepted by others. This is the general consequence of overstressing the situation over the law and of emphasizing freedom over what is choosing. The claim by the existentialists, according to W. Jones, that a moral agent will choose good instead of choosing evil, and that the good chosen by the moral agent will in turn be seen and accepted to be good by others,

is inconsistent with the existentialist stands on moral autonomy, subjectivism and defies every common human experience. I suppose, therefore, that it is the duty of a competent state or institution to determine the types of moral actions or laws that can help safeguard individuals' choices in view of the common good of the state or society/institution, so that an individual freedom to choose or act when necessary does not cause harm to others and falls within the overall objectives of the society/institution.

There is little doubt that the existentialists exaggerate human freedom. Freedom, which is rightly seen as one of the important factors in moral judgment, has become itself not the only factor but a moral code in its own right. The exaggeration is such that the human being or human nature is totally identified with freedom. S/he is nothing other than freedom. The human being, being free, is capable of creating not just values by his/her preferences or choices, but creates everything s/he wants including his/her essence. However, the questions that we may ask again are: does it mean that every action performed with freedom is a good moral act? Does the person that chooses freely to commit suicide act rightly? Can anybody at anytime intervene to stop anybody from performing an act? Many more questions like this could be asked. They show the inconsistencies and the contradictions involved if we accept the existentialists' unrestricted freedom. Freedom then cannot be the only requirement for judging a moral act.

Notwithstanding that, there may arise occasions whereby one must decide what to do in view of the options and his/her capabilities. However, to suppose that we are capable of choosing absolutely anything whatsoever is an exaggeration not only of our freedom but also of our capabilities. We do not need to think too far to see how this can degenerate into anarchy and absurdity, if only there is such possibility and capacity to choose and act. Therefore, we are not in fact free to choose absolutely anything.

4. Conclusion

The challenge posed by existentialists in terms of who we are as independent, isolated and free individuals, and the morality that arises from this supposition, cannot be easily ignored. We have seen the strength and the weakness of theory. Theoretically, it might be possible to conjure up an ethics or moral theory based on free choice or

absolute freedom but human interdependence on each other for survival contradicts such venture. Above all, humanity being absolutely free can hardly translate to moral uprightness. Hence, a free choice or act might not necessarily mean a morally right act. Neither would a compulsory act in itself necessarily mean a bad act. This means that in considering the morality of any human act, there are other important components that cannot be ignored, such as the intention of the act, the means to the end and the end also. Thus we affirm human freedom and the responsibility that accompanies it. Therefore, no one can choose just anything simply because s/he has the freedom to choose. In keeping with his/her dignity as a rational and free being and the responsibility that issues from this, and in relation to his/her fundamental choice of being, the human person is not absolutely free to choose just anything whatsoever. Human freedom in keeping with the kind of being s/he is, is not absolute. Moreover, his/her freedom of choice is limited to the options and the actual existential variables before him/her.

REFERENCES

- Macquarrie, J. (1972). *Existentialism*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Needleman, J. (1953). *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards (ed.), vol. 3 & 4. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc..
- Nietzsche, F. (1967). *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. Helen Zimmern. In *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*. New York: Randon House Inc..
- Ryan, A. (1996). 'Hobbes' Political Philosophy. In *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Sartre, J. P. (1956). *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* Trans., Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Sartre, J. P. (1989). Existentialism is a Humanism. In *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed., Walter Kaufman: Meridian Publishing Co.
- Theodore, C. D. (1999). *Great Traditions in Ethics*. New York: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Tillich, P. (1976). Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art. In Carl Michaelson, ed. *Christianity and the Existentialists*. New York: Scribner.
- Warnock, M. (1967). *Existentialist Ethics*. London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd.