

Sartre's Socialistic Ethics: Exploring Ontological Foundations

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the ontological foundations of socialistic ethics of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) discussed by him in his significant work *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960, hereafter CDR). CDR considers man not as free consciousness or totally immersed in the physical body. Rather, it conceives man as a material being with certain material needs. The concept of material needs is central to Sartre's socialistic ethics. CDR emphasizes the mutual engagement and interaction between the individual for the development of human condition and freedom. In CDR, one finds that the political, social and economic systems that are created by human beings shape themselves and have an impact on them. The chief new instrument it utilizes is Marxism. Marx's version of dialectical materialism, according to Sartre, grounded individual in the physical body and rooted him in the concrete situation that influences and constrains his freedom and shapes him accordingly. This paper, thus in context of CDR examines the key ontological themes of Sartre's socialistic ethics such as concept of human reality, relation between human beings and their world, role of conditioned matter, culture, class and family in determining identity of an individual

Keywords

Ontological; Socialistic; Sartre; material needs; Marxism

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Introduction

There is a transition in Sartre's thought reflected in the interviews that he gave during the last decade of his life. Sartre says that after giving up his early moral thinking and being more politically involved, he turned towards the amoral political realism. Amoral political realism is considered to be a practical attitude that measured the policies and actions in terms of its capacity to produce politically desired results. It is also to see its political efficacy, in terms of favoring or regarding the coming of democratic socialism and classless society.

Sartre's incitement towards socialism can be seen in the *Critique II*, where he does not condemn morally the development of socialist ideals in the Soviet Union and criticizes the dreadful actions of Joseph Stalin or the Communist Party on moral basis. He believes that these acts are necessary for the development of socialism. It can prevail only in that country which has publicly declared socialist ideals. Although Sartre never wholeheartedly accepted the socialist ideals, he somehow subscribed to it till 1960. Then he moved to working on what he calls materialistic and realistic ethics based on the ontological themes of CDR.

Sartre suggested that he wrote several notes for this ethics for over a decade. This ethics was presented in the form of published speeches, essays and interviews during that period. The recent available form of his later ethics is found in his hand written notes, which he presented in the form of lecture at the Instituto Gramsci in Rome on May 23, 1964, at a conference entitled "Ethics and Society" sponsored by the Italian Communist Party. *Rome Lectures* are significant from the perspective of later ethics because it involves a consistent, detailed and an ordered discussion of his later dialectical, and socialist ethics.

The *Rome Lectures* are radically different and more significant than the other unpublished and unfinished works of Sartre. Moreover, contrary to Sartre's significant work *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1992, hereafter NE) and the second volume of CDR, the Rome manuscript was presented publicly and a major part of it, as compared to other two manuscripts, was published during Sartre's lifetime. This suggests, from the Sartre's perspective that most of the Rome manuscript was very close to, if not, in the final form. This fact is evidenced from the assertion of Simone de Beauvoir that the Rome lectures are the completion of Sartre's morality. Thus, it shows that Rome manuscript is the defining work of his latter ethics.

Sartre's latter moral ideas are found in CDR and NE. NE transcends the abstract understanding of human condition and freedom rooted in the early ontology to a more comprehensive conception of human condition, its freedom and its mutual engagement with other individuals. Yet it repeated the ontological themes of BN by identifying human condition and freedom with consciousness. It understates the impact of circumstances by asserting that human consciousness is free, it is not constrained or limited any concrete situation. While some of Sartre works of late forties describe the power of circumstances and present concrete picture of human condition and freedom, there were some other works too which emphasize on the abstract notion of human reality and freedom. In general, one can say, there is some ambiguity in Sartre's conception of human condition, freedom and the role of circumstances.

Although by 1952, with the publication of detailed study of Jean Genet, Sartre recognizes the influence of circumstances in social system to limit the human freedom. In that work, he condemns the notion of "Social Atomism" which states that human reality is what it is in itself or it is defined in isolation. It is in the social system with the web of social relationship. He argues that one attains his goals through the help of others. Mutual engagement and relations are

necessary for the development of human reality and freedom. *Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr* explained the social conditioning of Jean Genet in the early childhood. He was adopted by his family and he considers the views of adults as its own. Although Sartre talks about self-reflective nature of consciousness, but Jean Genet was not aware of his human condition and freedom. He was unaware of his self-reflective consciousness. He gradually became aware of his freedom and situated condition in the society through the mutual engagement and interaction with other people.

CDR also emphasizes this mutual engagement and interaction between the individual for the development of human condition and freedom. In it we find that the political, social and economic systems that are created by human beings shape themselves and have an impact on them. The chief new instrument it utilizes is Marxism, which Sartre comprehended and accepted in the decade or so after *NE*. However, *NE* defines the aim of first ethics as the mutual engagement and freedom of all individual, yet it criticizes Marxist classless society and thus condemns Marxism as it was criticized in "Materialism and revolution". Earlier Sartre condemns Marxism for its reductive materialism, determinism and oversimplifying human history. But ten years later with the publication of *Search for a Method*, Sartre accepts that Marx's theory is the only creative theory and hence one cannot transcend it. However, he continues to condemn the contemporary Marxists for ignoring concrete human condition and oversimplifying human history. But he did not criticize Marx himself; he accepts Marx's conception of materialistic human reality and freedom. Marx's version of dialectical materialism, according to Sartre, grounded individual in the physical body and rooted him in the concrete situation that influences and constrains his freedom and shapes him accordingly.

Sartre affirms that Marx has provided the ontological basis for comprehending the historical relations between individuals and the world. Marx argued that the economic conditions of a society dominate the political and social conditions. Sartre quotes Marx's statement that, "the mode of production of material life in general dominates the development of social, political and intellectual life" (Sartre, 1963, p. 33-34). Marx stresses on the primacy class struggle in history and discusses the wickedness and immorality of capitalist society which manipulates common masses for their advantage by having control of means of productions and thus dominates the political, social and intellectual life of the society.

CDR thus stresses on the mutual interaction and relations, and circumstances that influence those relations. It transcends the early ontology of *BN*, where focus was only on the phenomenological investigations into the nature of individual consciousness and its objects. Similar to *NE*, that discusses some new ontological themes, *CDR* also explains some new ontological themes that transcend those of *BN*. In the following section, nature of human reality in *CDR* will be discussed. The focus will be on the ethical themes discussed in this ontology.

Understanding human reality

There is a difference of conception of an individual in *CDR* and that of *BN*. In *BN* man is identified with free consciousness, freedom, or even negation, a kind of non-being. Whereas *CDR* considers man not as free consciousness or totally immersed in the physical body. Rather it conceives man as a material being. Sartre asserts that an individual is constituted of similar physical elements and molecules like any other organisms. He is different from non-organic matter in the sense that the elements that constitutes the human being are not externally related to each other like that of non-organic matter. Rather they are intrinsically related to each other forming a unified whole which is human being. Although the human being is a synthesis of these elements but they are not unified wholly so that their distinctness can be annihilated. It is however endangered by all those things which can disintegrate him and convert him into an inorganic or inert matter.

Sartre asserts that like all other material things, man is also affected by the physical forces such as gravity, heat, pressure etc. Moreover, being a material being, the human body can be burned, crushed and destroyed whether he is aware of this fact and whether he will it or not. Sartre writes that this is the inert, inactive or inorganic domain of man which operates beyond one's wishes and conscious control. Moreover, the material needs necessary for preservation and development of one's life are also beyond one's conscious control. When their presence is felt, they cannot be simply negated by one's free choices. Rather their impulses or drives are necessary to be fulfilled for one's survival and development. It is in the context of material needs that a man acts upon his environment. This concept of material needs is central to the Sartre's second ethics.

According to Sartre, human being is different from other living creatures in the context of consciousness. But in *Critique*, he maintains that consciousness is not totally non-substantial in nature or absolute kind of non-being. It is not different from his inorganic side that is inert matter. He says that however a mental activity is not the inactive effect of inert matter but he asserts that human being is "wholly matter" (Sartre, 2004, p.180) and defines his status as "monism of materiality" (Sartre, 2004, p. 29). For Sartre human consciousness is grounded in this inner matter that is why he defines this conception of human reality in *Critique* as "realistic materialism" (Sartre, 2004, p. 29). But he also maintains that human consciousness is above everything, by its power to go outside, exceed the given circumstances. It has ability to negate, deny and twist or pull back itself from the given situation and move forward to the future goals.

This conscious act to accomplish the future goal is described by Sartre in his earlier works as human project which he defines in the *Critique* as *Praxis*. The human praxis is rooted in the material organism and needs. It is a purposeful act that emerges from one's material needs that coordinates all the things of one's environment into a unity to accomplish the future goal. Whereas the earlier conception of human project is independent of its environment and seeks to accomplish the non-substantial future goals, in the *Critique*, Sartre talks about one's self-awareness of the human project. Consciousness is grounded in the concrete human praxis, it is pre-reflectively aware of itself. The conscious act of

accepting or rejecting the given condition shows the pre-reflective character of consciousness. Sartre writes, “human praxis is transparent to itself as unity in act either of a rejection [of the given situation] or of a project [and] defines its own practical understanding as the totalizing grasp of the unified diversity” (Sartre, 2004, p.60). However, Sartre says that consciousness is not purely pre-reflectively aware of itself. Rather, there are degrees of transparency of consciousness. As compared to earlier works where consciousness is pre-reflectively aware of itself, *Critique* speaks of obscure or implicit awareness. This kind of awareness is due to the relation of man with his environment since environment not only affects him externally but also internally. Due to the internal conditioning of human beings, transparent nature of consciousness gets affected. Sartre says that human beings live their situation experientially and these situations condition their awareness of themselves and the world in addition to their actions related to both. The relation of man and his environment will be explained in detail in next section.

Relation between Human Beings and Their World

Sartre observes that a concrete human being is defined through its material needs, material conditions of existence that may include the social, economic and political conditions and the interaction and struggle with the social world. Sartre writes that concrete individual, “is defined simultaneously by his needs, by the material conditions of his existence, and by the nature of his work - that is, by his struggle against things and against men” (as cited in Anderson, 1993, p. 92). Sartre argues that the relationship between man and his social environment is dialectical. In this kind of relationship, both the individual and his social environment act and mutually condition each other. It is this mutual conditioning that constitutes the human reality. Sartre describes this mutual relationship by saying that “the individual is conditioned by the social environment and...he turns back upon it to condition it in turn; it is this---and nothing else---which makes his reality” (Sartre, 1963, p. 71). Sartre accords with Marx’s view that the relation between human beings and their social world is dialectical in nature. The intended goal of the *Critique* is to show that all the relations between man and his social environment or, in other words, all of the history, makes sense only if it is comprehended in a dialectical manner. Sartre remarks that the dialectic is not some kind of supernatural cause which made interactions between man and social environment in that manner. Rather it is the outcome of the interaction of a number of human praxes with each other and with the concrete world. Sartre believes that one can experience this dialectic in his daily life. In fact, human life goes in dialectical manner. One affects his social and material world through his acts and also gets affected by them. Hence this dialectic constitutes human reality. Sartre states that the dialectics, “is the very experience of living, since to live is to act and to be acted on, and since the dialectic is the rationality of praxis”, that acts upon the world (Sartre, 2004, p.39).

In the *Critique* the discussion of dialectical relations is carried out in over eight hundred pages. But for the present

purpose of this paper, the emphasis will be on formulating the chief characteristics of relationships between human beings and their physical and social environment.

Impact of Conditioned Matter (practico-inert)

Sartre says that the very basis that forms the human history is human beings acting on the natural world to fulfill their material needs. The act results in changing the nature, which is necessary to fulfill their needs, but humans makes something that goes out of their control, the practico-inert, that bounces back to affect their life. For instance, with the invention of machines, human has to adapt according to the machines. These machines have also limited the creative thinking of human beings.

In this manner, the inventions that are the result of free human praxes influences their future praxes by limiting the creative thinking. By limiting one’s creative thinking, they force one to choose a specified action. This adaptability to this mechanical and computerized structure requires an obligation to serve it if one needs to fulfill one’s needs. One has to serve the modern technology system, if one wants that he must be served and benefitted by it. But this responsibility to serve one’s creations may have adverse effects, as the one who lacks the skill to manage them will not be able to fulfill their needs.

Cultural Conditioning of Humans

Culture plays a very vital role in the process of human development. Sartre says that the relation of man and his culture is not external but an internal one. Culture has its origin in the social life of human beings. But it is not completely in the human control. Like *practico-inert* it has a dialectical relation with humans and conditions the human life to a great extent. Sartre says that it is through the elements of culture that the social and cultural identity of an individual is defined. The human beings are totalized by their history and culture. This process of totalization makes them cultured. In this way human being is defined by his history and culture.

The way one understands and acts on one’s natural and social world is conditioned to a great extent by one’s culture and language. Sartre writes, “Language and culture are not inside the individual like stamps registered by his nervous system. It is the individual who is inside culture and inside language” (p.93). It implies that one’s self awareness is also affected by one’s culture. But not the pure self-reflective consciousness.

Role of Class in determining the identity of an individual

In the modern world every individual belongs to a certain class. There are certain elements of the class that determine the identity of an individual. These are certain customs, norms, professions and material conditions that shape the identity of an individual. For instance, one’s social and material condition, one’s profession, and one’s social status in the society is determined by the class to which one belongs. The freedom and identity of a person is

predetermined by his or her class at the time of the birth. These elements that determine individual identity and freedom of members of a class are referred by Sartre as, “inertia which infiltrates the freedom” (Sartre, 2004, p. 237). From the perspective of *class*, it seems that every individual is born with a fixed essence and has to follow that essence throughout his life. The type of work and the status in the society assigned by his class forms the very essence of an individual. It is due to this predefined structure of a class that an individual’s material possibilities are limited and he has to live a miserable life. Sartre formulates this point by giving example of a woman who works in a *Dop Shampoo*. Her job, her working conditions and her salary puts limits on her material possibilities. For instance, she may not be able to eat properly, to purchase new garments, or to send her child in a school of good reputation. She may have the freedom to choose between different commodities of daily need. She can do her job more or less quickly. But she is not free to change her class, her working conditions, and her salary. These elements of her class are predefined and are assigned to her. She has no freedom to change either the class or the elements of it. She is coerced, according to Sartre, “to live a prefabricated destiny as her reality” (Sartre, 2004, p. 232). In a way Sartre rejects his own position which he formulates in *BN*, where he equates man with freedom and states that man is absolutely free to choose and create his own values. But later in *Critique*, he asserts that it would be wrong to understand him stating that an individual is free in every condition. Rather, he states that all human beings are slaves insofar their lives begin in *practico-inert* state. The *practico-inert* state is the state of one’s slavery. In this sphere one is dominated by natural, mechanical and anti-social elements. One has to serve them throughout his life. However, despite the restrictions imposed by *practico-inert*, human has the ability to transcend these constraints. Human freedom in the form of *praxis* has the ability to transcend the *practico-inert* to achieve its goal. But this transcendence here does not mean the possibility of different options on the part of the individual. Rather it means to live with these restrictions, to view them as demands, challenges and putting an effort to accomplish these demands. Sartre states that human *praxis* has the ability to go beyond our defined goals of life. It has always had a tendency to transcend the role one is performing and one’s *facticity*. Sartre asserts that, consciousness of human *praxis* means that one is aware of the condition that one can always transcend his *facticity* and concrete circumstances. But at the same time, Sartre also maintains that the ability of human *praxis* to transcend any given situation is mere an illusion in the case of persons who are exploited physically, socially and economically by the people of dominant and superior class in the society. In that context, their freedom is merely an appearance, which is controlled and constrained by dominant class. This entails that the so called freedom is only an abstract entity not the concrete one.

Role of Family

It is in the family that an individual is assigned his class. It is through the family that an individual is connected to his universal class. It is in the family, Sartre says, that one “discovers the point of insertion for man and his class...a

mediation between the universal class and individual” (Sartre, 1963, p. 60). Through the process of examining of the behavior of a child in the family, which is called psychoanalysis, it has been revealed that the children act upon the injunctions given by the adult members of the family without understanding them. They just simply follow the norms and values of their family without reflecting upon them. This is the early conditioning of the children in their family and it influences their behavior to a great extent. The conditioning of an individual in the family is very well described by Sartre in his early work on Genet. In this work, Sartre explains conditioning of the behavior of an illegitimate orphan named as Jean Genet by the family who adopted him. His thinking, his world view, is shaped by the norms and values of that family. He believes in the judgments of the adults and follows them without reflecting upon them. Apart from this work, his autobiography, *The Words* (1964) and his final work on the Flaubert are also the psychoanalytic work. So, from the above discussion it is clear that family plays a very vital role in the conditioning of the behavior of an individual in the childhood.

Understanding Social Relations

The social relationships described in the *Critique* are not like those of *BN*, in which there is no mutual recognition. Rather these are mutually enriching relations between material organisms who live in this natural world and accomplish their material needs by acting on this world and on each other through their conscious projects (*praxes*). Unlike *BN*, the look of others in *Critique* is not considered as alienating or objectifying ones look. On the other hand, there is subjective apprehension of both the individuals in this relation. In this sense, one can find, moral objective relativism reflected in these concrete dialectical relations because in these relations, individuals are mutually dependent upon each other to fulfill their concrete needs. Here, one person does not consider another person’s look as demolishing or hindering one’s subjectivity and freedom. Rather, one individual recognizes subjectivity of other individual because he understands the role of other person in the development of his life.

Conclusion

In this paper, the ontological foundations of Sartre’s socialistic ethics have been explored. The detailed analysis of key ontological themes such as concept of human reality, impact of family, class, culture and conditioned matter on human beings as elaborated by Sartre in *CDR* leads to a better understanding of Sartre’s socialistic ethics.

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