

CONCERNING FREEDOM: AN EXISTENTIAL CRITIQUE OF MAN AND SOCIETY FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

MASHAKA C. P. ONIANG'O*

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism might be understood as the cradle of his conceptual analysis of not only human reality and morality, but also the individual and society. The historical base of his philosophy is not unrelated to events such as: the humiliating defeat which Paris suffered at the hands of the German Army an event which was punctuated by the German Occupation, and Sartre himself was imprisoned by the Germans and set free only because of his continually failing eyesight.

I might also add that Sartre's existential account of human reality and human reaction is vividly revealed in his play, *The Flies*,** which was published and presented in 1943. In this play, Sartre reminds us that once the Germans had taken over Paris, many of its citizens had found it easier to surrender to the Occupation rather than to fight back for their city, and their right to rule themselves. Even the moral support was lacking. The Catholic Church, for instance, had urged that the Occupation of Paris was a just consequence for the moral transgressions and religious disrespect that had overcome the Paris citizens before the war, and now they were reaping the fruits of their sins. We should also keep in mind that there were various French factions in Paris; those who supported the German Occupation, those who neither consented to the German Occupation nor rose up against it, and those who like Sartre, became members of the Resistance, holding that the German Occupation of Paris was not only an overt injustice to the citizens of Paris, but even more crucial, it was serious injustice for the citizens themselves to yield to and be intimidated by the German Occupation. In this regard, Sartre is attacking his fellow Parisians who actively supported or passively allowed the injustice of the German Occupation to continue to

* Previously: Assistant Professor of Philosophy Millsays—Tougaloo Universities U.S.A.

* Currently: Lecturer in Philosophy, Makerere University, Kampala.

**See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Flies*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1946). In this play, Sartre's main theme of freedom as meaning the freedom of man's will to act cannot be over-emphasized. For Sartre, freedom must not be confused with the total ability to act in any manner so desired. Action must be looked upon to letting something happen to you. One's freedom is going to be limited. This is part of the burden of being human, but there is a great difference between the natural limitation that life places upon us and those limitations that we place and institute upon ourselves. To be free is not to be able to do what one likes; it is to will what one can do. For Sartre, freedom is not viewed as a potentiality for infinite actions, but rather as human condition, or if you will, the human condition. It is that from which man's existence has value and places values upon the world.

exist. This is a political critique of men of his society . . . a critique by which Sartre evokes serious questions of personal values and political responsibility of not only the Parisians, but indeed, of all human beings.

Sartre's criticism against his fellow Parisians is geared toward the pursuit of human dignity that the Parisians have lost as a result of the German Occupation and their yielding to the Occupation. This is an attempt to make a plea not only to the Parisians, but also to all human beings to take note of the political conditions of their country and to act upon the right to be free and have the human dignity that all men deserve and must have if their existence is to have any value.

I will attempt to analyse Sartre's concept of freedom and show that it is a universally relevant plea to all "occupied" people throughout the world. This applies to the continued illegitimate Occupation of the new military regime of Portugal in Africa, it should strengthen the Zimbabwe majority occupied by a handful of racist Europeans, it is a worthwhile food of thought for the majority Africans in Azania whose minds have been maimed by the fascist philosophy of apartheid, and the list can go on and on to include the black-masked neo-colonialists in Africa. Hopefully, this analysis of Sartre's positive criticism on his people will serve as constructive critique of my fellow Africans who actively support or passively allow the injustice of both the European as well as black-masked neo-colonialist Occupation to continue to exist on our land. This analogy is relevant to the American Indian who now languishes on reservations, the Afro-American to whom the U.S. should be as much his land as it is the White American's, the Aborigine of Australia, the Palestinian, the Irish, the Puerto Ricans, and many African countries whose leaders are so obsessed with tribalism and nepotism that they have illegitimately occupied the rest. These people suffer the injustices of illegitimate Occupation. It is their duty not only to recognize that they are unfree, but also to liberate themselves. For Sartre, these Occupied people must *will* their freedom to be authentic and dignified.

Having shared a brief exposition of the historical setting of the Sartrean Existentialist Philosophy thus far, perhaps I should pause for a close examination of his underlying ideas.

Sartre sees freedom and consciousness as ultimately two indistinguishable aspects of human reality and existential being. Man is free due to his consciousness, and in turn, it is man's consciousness that separates him from the other creatures in the world in the sense that unlike the other creatures, man is his freedom. But Sartre argues that although man is free, his freedom is not a gift. It is a curse which is also the only source of human greatness.¹

For Sartre, freedom is the burden of human being in the sense that because man is free, he is also responsible for his freedom, and hence responsible for not only what he is but also what he is not. But how does man become free? Sartre's answer to this question would be that man is

born free, and without any excuses; from the moment of his birth to the moment of his death he is condemned to be free.² I might infer, therefore, that man does not become free, but rather freedom is the burden of his being born. Freedom is an inescapable sentence from which neither man himself nor anybody else is capable of pardoning him.

Now I shall turn to the fundamental duality of being in which Sartre claims that freedom is rooted; namely: *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*. The former refers to the self-contained being of things, herein the being as well as essence of such "things" are one and the same. This means that being-in-itself simply *is* that which it must be; a spear *is* a spear, a shield *is* a shield, a mountain *is* a mountain. On the other hand, being-for-itself is not self-contained and can never be self-contained; rather, it is co-extensive with human consciousness. Rather than simply being what it must be, being for itself is continuously characterized by Sartre as being that which it is not, namely a thing. In the Sartrean view, being-for-itself differs from being-in-itself by the fact that the former is contingent upon the latter for its being. Furthermore, Sartre holds that the for-itself is synonymous with human being or consciousness, and that it is precisely because human being is distinct from the being of things (being-in-themselves) that man as being-for-itself is free.

To being of other things in the world such as: a spear, a shield, a mountain and so forth must be distinguished from human being which by virtue of its freedom and ability, it is capable of becoming something other than what it is. In other words, human being inherently has the constant potentiality within itself to become something greater than it presently is, and thereby further develop towards the Essence which lacks total Being. I might clarify this view by adding that human being is then not distinguished from other beings in the world merely by virtue of its potentiality for change,³ but rather by the fact that it has the ability to change itself, and this ability is inherent within the very nature (essence) of human existence. Furthermore, whereas other beings in the world have a pre-established Essence, human being lacks it.

What does Sartre really mean when he asserts that human beings can be distinguished from other beings in the world by their lack of a pre-established Essence? In what sense can one legitimately make the claim that man is *essentially* free and at the same time lacks an Essence without one contradicting himself? The Sartrean *modus videndi* to this apparent puzzle lies in the difference between nature as an existing human being (essence) and man's ability to create from his freedom (essence) the Being (essence) that he is constantly choosing to become. In other words, man as a human being, has an essence which distinguishes him from the other beings (things) in the world, namely his freedom to become that which he intends himself to become. Furthermore, man has the freedom to become what he chooses to become because he lacks a pre-established Essence. In this regard, the

Sartrean view seems to make sense because if we suppose for one moment that man's Essence were already established, then he would not be free to create his Essence, and would, most probably, simply be another thing (in itself) in the world. This seems to be the basis for Sartre's conclusion that there is a fundamental distinction between the essence of man as a human being and the Essence that each man lacks and is continually creating until his death.

By its very nature, consciousness is always beyond itself intending and directing man towards his Essence. Through his consciousness man intends what he is to be. Each intentional act adds to what he will Essentially become; each intentional act further defines that Being that he is to become. Because he is essentially free, each man has the responsibility of developing his Essence, which he does by the constant intentional projection of himself upon the world and others. In this way each individual is continually creating the Essence that he is to become. Hence, while man *is*, in the sense that he exists in the world as a human being, his Essence is continually characterized by the fact that he is not. This is what Sartre means when he asserts that man's existence precedes his Essence.⁴ "It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, (this is his essence), and only afterwards, defines (intends) himself (his Essence.)"⁵ Consciousness is not only a necessary condition of human being, but it is also that which gives man his freedom (Essence) to be and the ability to become (Essence). Because man lacks a pre-established Essence, he can and must create his Essence. "Man is nothing but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of Existentialism."⁶

Sartre makes the assertion that man's freedom is meaningful only if it is practical. In his view, existentialism and indeed human existence itself can only be looked upon as a metaphysical joke if freedom is not practical. Freedom and consciousness together create an ability for action, and unless one can intentionally *act* upon his freedom in a self-directed and meaningful way, he cannot be said to *have* freedom. "There is no reality, except in action."⁷

Let me quickly define authentic and inauthentic actions. For Sartre, only those acts which are self-directed and intentional are to be considered authentic; but those acts which are not self-directed and self-originated, but instead, arise from the wants and demands of another are to be considered inauthentic. Sartre calls those acts originating from an individual's freedom and values "acts of good faith"; while those originating solely from the desires and values of another he calls "acts of bad faith".

For Sartre, man's freedom is practical. Because man's freedom is practical he can either use it to assert his being upon the world or conversely prostitute his being by becoming the servant of the other. Man's freedom can either make him the master of his potentiality for being that which he is not, or it can make him a slave to the will and wants of the other by denying his freedom and in turn becoming what the other would have him be. But in

either case he is responsible for the act of choosing, though he may choose to let the other choose his actions for him. Freedom then becomes meaningful and defined not in one's words or thoughts, but in one's actions and deeds.

To be free then, is to have the ability to intend one's actions and at the same to have the ability to act upon one's intentions. Man becomes that which he is not (his Essence) by acting upon that which he is (his freedom and essence). But to act without a plan, that is, to act without intention is as meaningless as acting purely from the desires and wants of another. In other words, freedom to act is empty and meaningless unless at the same time one is consciously considering and intending his being through his actions *and* accepting the responsibility for those actions as a genuine reflection of his being-to-become, that is, as the Essence he is intending to become. Man only becomes his freedom when he becomes totally responsible for the instigation of his acts, for then and only then can he be said to be totally responsible and totally committed to his being. Anything less than such a total commitment must be considered hypocritical. Only when one becomes absolutely committed to his acts, can he be said to be absolutely free, that is, absolutely his essence to become.

Although man is ontologically absolutely free to develop and create his Essence, in the sense that no other can choose it for him, for even if he has the other makes his choices for him, he has nevertheless chosen to have him choose for him. I might point out at this juncture, however, that man is not absolutely free in the sense that his real choices are limited by not only the world, but also his previous choices and present situation. Although one is "absolutely" free to choose, one might argue that his choices are limited. Just as the world imposes real limitations on man's freedom and choices, so does the presence of other human beings. Man is "absolutely" free in that he must choose what he is to become, but what he can choose and, therefore, become is restricted by the real limitations on man's freedom and choices, so does the presence of other human beings. Man is "absolutely" free in that he must choose what he is to become, but what he can choose and, therefore because, is restricted by the real limitations that are imposed upon him by the world, other human beings, his past history, and himself. All these influence man's real ability to choose.

An individual who freely and intentionally acts upon his being does so not only for himself, but for all men. In choosing his freedom and actions, he is responsible to himself for creating his being and responsible to all others for their freedom to become; for "in choosing myself, I choose man",⁸ that is, in choosing myself, I choose the right for all men to choose and create their values and act upon their freedom. If my freedom and commitment is to be absolute, then my choice will necessarily be a choice for all men. Man lives in a world which is comprised of other men and as such the other becomes a condition of his being and freedom. Man does not exist in the world by himself, but exists in a situation, which among

other things is comprised of other human beings. Part of man's "facticity" is that he exists in the world with others. Therefore, any appraisal that he makes of his situation is necessarily going to involve at least two considerations of the other beings present: that the others exist and view me as another to help them; and second, that in acting upon the others, I am presenting them with my values, as they presented me with theirs, in the original appraisal of the situation. The others constitute a condition of my freedom in that they are the ones that I act upon, express my values to, and at the same time (they) recognize my actions and give them (actions) significance. It is because the others exist that I can and must be responsible for my actions, for without the others there could be no responsibility for one's actions because there would be nobody to be responsible to.

Freedom has meaning precisely because there are others to give its meaning. "... he perceives them (others) as a condition of his own existence. He recognizes that he cannot be anything, unless the other recognizes him as such."⁹ Man's nature is to be free, but others provide a condition for his freedom; this "condition" is the responsibility and commitment that makes freedom meaningful and gives it a personal value.

The existence of the other people creates a condition and possibility for man's freedom and being to be meaningful. It will be remembered that for Sartre freedom is only meaningful when and only when it becomes practical, that is, when acted upon. In other words, only through one's deeds can one be said to be truly creating his Being. Human being is possible because man's Essence is not yet all that it has potentiality to become. Freedom and consciousness are then intimately connected with a third condition of human being, the negation of man's being or if you will, the nothingness or lack of "thingness" in a world of things. Freedom occurs because man is not a being-in-itself, but rather a being-for-itself. This is for Sartre the very essence of man's possibility to create his Being. Man is free because he is nothing and nothing because he is free. He exists as a free being because he lacks a pre-established Essence. One might say that man *is* because he is not.

At first, this might appear to be a paradox, but in actual fact it is a paradox of words only. We might say that since man exists, he is, of course, not absolutely nothing. Man as he exists does have being and essence, but since the nature of his essence is that it has not-yet-become all that it can be, man is in this sense nothing, because part of being a "thing" is having a pre-established Essence, that is, not having any potentiality to become anything other than it is. Man is (has essence and being), but is not, in the sense that lacks Essence and still has the potentiality to become more than he presently is. Hence Sartre asserts that man has the potentiality to become something because he is nothing. The distinction then is between things which lack the possibility to be other than they are, and therefore, have their Essence identical to their existence, and human beings who lack

such an identity, and therefore, are to be considered nothing. But as I have mentioned above, it is because they lack Essence that it is possible for man to create his Being from his being and essence.

To say that man *is* because he is nothing is not to say that his existence lacks meaning and purpose. Indeed man's nothingness is the very condition of his essence, which is to create his Essence. It is exactly for that reason that man is nothing that he has the possibility to create his Being, to intend his Essence and to approach his potentiality for Being. Ultimately, however, he can never fully transcend his being to become a thing-in-itself. I might, therefore, add that another constituent of man's being is his finitude. Though man is constantly free to become that which he is not, the actual possibility of him becoming all his possibilities is forever beyond his nature; for if it were possible that he could reach a unity of his potentiality and actuality, so that he become one with his Essence, he would no longer be a man but a thing.¹⁰ Even those who try to become a thing in the world by letting the other choose for them fail, for only at death is this unity actualized. Man is forever condemned to the fact that he can never fully become all his possibilities. Only upon death is man's complete potentiality realized and finalized. In his own words, Sartre tells us "I am my possibility only through the nihilization (negation) of being-in-itself which I have to be, death as the inhilation of the nihilization is the positing of my being as in-itself".¹¹

Death establishes man's Being in that it ends his further possibility to be. Freedom originates with birth,¹² and ends with death. The absurd climax to being, makes imperative that man choose those projects which will maximize his possibilities.

Freedom then is for Sartre not to be viewed as an abstract concept, but rather is to be viewed as a concrete definitive characteristic of human being and human reality. Man *is* only because he is free to become that which he is not. Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom. What we call freedom is impossible to be distinguished from what we call human reality; ... there is no difference between the being of man and his being free.¹³ How interesting that for Shakespeare's Hamlet, existence and essence were a matter of "to be *or* not to be," but for Sartre man's essence and his freedom exist in the fact that man's being is "to be *and* not-to-be". For while man *is* in the sense that he exists, that is, has being and essence, he is not in the sense that he has not yet become his Essence. Man is free only because his being is such that it has not yet Become. Each man is responsible for his being is such that it has not yet Become. Each man is responsible for and author their true intentions and goals. But at the same time he is responsible for the freedom of others in the same way that they are responsible for the meaning of his freedom and its value as a means of expressing himself in the world.

Human existence as presented in *The Flies* is then for Sartre not

absolutely with value; rather being a human being has its own value and this value partially transcends the gap between the individual and the other. The answer to how can I act in good faith upon my values and freedom if I take the values of the other into consideration as a criterion for my action upon the other, is that the other's human dignity is part of my human dignity, and that to act "with human dignity" is to act in good faith upon the other, not as merely another object in the world but as another human being who has the same "right" to human dignity as do I.

Although we must remember that Sartre's play *The Flies* was written for the citizens of Paris (Sartre is telling the Parisians that they have lost their human dignity), indeed the message is universally applicable today in its own right as a plea to any people who have been overrun, enslaved, humiliated, and occupied by a tyrannical government, to fight for their right to human dignity and to rid themselves of the oppression of the illegitimate Occupation. For the Parisians, it is a plea to rid themselves of the inhumane oppression of the German Occupation. For us Africans, it is a serious plea to rid ourselves of first the Colonialist Occupation of the racist and tyrannical regimes in Namibia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. In other words, we should not rest until every African can walk the streets in the Southern Africa a free man. Second, it is a plea that we Africans should take seriously to rid ourselves of the Neo-Colonialist Occupation which is both symptomatic of and concomitant with the Foreign Economic Occupation in our so-called Independent Africa. In Sartrean view, all human beings have the right to live and act with human dignity, and that anyone who would rob another of this right is acting in bad faith in that they are denying themselves and the other of the basic value of human existence. For Sartre, to enslave the other is to enslave one's self to the other; to rob the other of his freedom is to rob one's self of one's own freedom; and to believe that one can rule over the other and yet not be acting in bad faith is to deceive one's self by the very fact of bad faith. The authentic man (man of good faith) acts upon the other as a human being, not as an object which either can be enslaved or be the source of one's values or the master of one's freedom and responsibilities.

This aspect of Sartre's Existentialism has often gone unnoticed or if noticed has been ignored. The other has value in the same manner that my existence has value, namely, as a human being. Man exists, free and independent of any other, and yet part of the facticity of his existence is that he exists in the world with others. In acting upon the other I can either act with human dignity, that is, act in good faith, or I can act without human dignity, that is, act in bad faith. In either case my acting upon the other expresses my values to the other in the same way that his acting upon my presence expresses "his" values and denying the human dignity of both myself and the other. In view of the Sartrean Existentialism, our fascist "friends" who still engage in human story and will not go unnoticed. For them

to deny our rights and freedom to choose our Essence, is to deny us the human dignity that they desire for themselves and, therefore, to deny *themselves* the dignity that accompanies human being.

The full content of what "human dignity" is might be grasped through analysis of President Mobutu's philosophical defence upon reclaiming his authentic name:

*What does it mean? I no longer have a borrowed soul. I no longer speak in a borrowed language. My manner of speaking is authentically Zaireois. A Zeireois soul inhabits my body. I am first of all Zaireois before anything else.*¹⁴

Human dignity never denies the right of the other to act upon his freedom or to create his Essence, nor does it deny the individual's responsibility for his Being.

Human dignity also entails positive Political Philosophy. The Chief of State of Ghana, Ignatius K. Acheampong whose policy embraces the former type of philosophy had this to say before foreign diplomats in Accra:

Total emancipation of Africa from colonial domination will continue to be the cardinal principle of Ghana's foreign policy. Accordingly, we will give support, both moral and material, to independence movements in Africa.¹⁵

As such, human dignity is the value of human being, of being able to choose one's Essence and act upon the other as an authentic, value-creating being. It is the sense of pride that one can take in the creating of his Being and in acting in good faith; it is the sense of pride that one gets from standing in an authentic relationship with the other and treating the other not merely as an object in the world, but as another human being. As Sartre puts it, "nothing can be good for us, without being good for all".¹⁶

1. Maxwell Aldereth, *Commitment in Modern French Literature*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 159.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: The Wisdom Library, 1957), p. 23.
3. For Sartre, "potentiality" for change that every human being possesses is not supposed to be thought of in the Aristotelian sense of "potentiality". Sartre holds that it is because human being is nothing that it is free to develop an Essence and strive to become what it is not. He would, therefore, argue that human being, as such, is nothing, and hence lacks any potentiality of the Aristotelian sense. But does it really make any sense to say that there is human being, which is nothing, and yet it is at the same time capable to making choices and striving to become something without using the Aristotelian notion of "potentiality?" What a big confusion the Sartrean view of "potentiality" seems to hold!
4. Sartre, *Existentialism*, p. 13
5. *Ibid*, p. 15.
6. *Ibid*.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
10. This clearly shows that Sartre's use of man's potentiality differs from that of Aristotle's as follows: whereas for Aristotle man developed his potentialities because of an inherent ability found within the nature of man itself, for Sartre, man has the potentiality or rather the possibility to create an Essence, because he is inherently nothing, and therefore, free to develop or create his potentialities. One might even go so far as to say that man does not have any potentiality, in that he is forever creating his potentiality; in this sense man is mere act, and is always in quest of his potentiality. But still, Sartre has failed to enlighten us as to what it is that strives to become those potentialities. Secondly, his view by which he asserts that man is nothing without any potentialities and yet is a being who is continually striving to become that which he is not and lacks any inherent potentiality to do so, does not seem to make sense at all.
11. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1953), p. 691.
12. It is questionable whether Sartre means that man is literally *born* with his freedom or whether he means that man is born with the potentiality to be free. I shall expatriate on this criticism later in my paper.
13. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 60.
14. San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle, 25th June, 1972.
15. The Washington Post, January 18th, 1972.
16. Sartre, *Existentialism*, p. 17.