

An Analysis of Sartre's Existentialism

Ming Cheng

Heilongjiang University, Harbin, Heilongjiang, 150006, China

Keywords: Sartre, existentialism, free choice

Abstract: Existentialism was formally formed in Germany in the 1920s, is one of the main schools of Western philosophy in the twentieth century, and still occupies a pivotal position in the Western capitalist ideological world, and Sartre is a rather notable presence in the history of existentialist philosophy. Sartre's existentialist philosophy is a theory that explores the human will and takes human freedom as its core, believes that human existence precedes essence, and emphasises that existentialism is a kind of humanitarianism, which is still of great practical significance today.

Jean-Paul Sartre, born in 1905 and died in 1980, was the most representative figure of the Marxian school of existentialism. Existentialism is one of the most influential philosophical schools of the 20th century, and its founder is Heidegger, while Sartre opened up a unique interpretation perspective on existentialism and carried it forward. Sartre's philosophical ideas on existentialism are centred in the book *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre is in the inheritance and development of Husserl's irrationalism, and then push the boundaries, and constantly develop and form his unique philosophical ideas of atheistic existentialism, but also to promote the development of existentialist philosophy, so that it has entered a completely new stage.

Sartre's life is full of legendary colours. He was born in the darkest era of human history, when the world experienced the impact of war, and everywhere was full of violence. Sartre was conscripted into the army at the outbreak of the Second World War, and spent ten months of his life in enemy camp. It was these ten months that brought about a great change in Sartre's thinking. Sartre's thinking shifted from individualism to concern for the state of society and the masses of people, and he began to use the pen as a gun, using literature to rescue the people in dire straits. In Sartre's doctrine of existentialism, he was more concerned with the value of man as a being, and fundamentally established the unshakeable status of the human subject. Sartre fully expressed his existentialist views early on in his famous work *Nausea*, a diary novel of an autobiographical nature. Afterwards, Sartre published his academic masterpiece *Being and Nothingness*, which created a considerable wave in the philosophical and intellectual circles at that time. Later, in his speech "Existentialism is a Humanism", Sartre elaborated the basic ideas of his existentialist philosophical conception to the public, magnificently demonstrating the "Sartrean Existentialism".

At the heart of Sartre's existentialism is the idea that human existence requires finding the true self. The central idea of existentialism is responsibility through freedom. The basic argument of existentialism is that existence precedes essence. The three basic principles of Sartre's existentialist philosophy are: "existence precedes essence", "the world is absurd, life is painful" and "free choice". These three basic principles not only perfectly interpret Sartre's existentialist philosophy, but also, to a certain extent, become Sartre's guide to action in life.

1. Existence precedes essence

"Existence precedes essence" is the basic principle of Sartre's existentialism. Sartre elaborated on this in his series of writings, asserting that there is no God who predefines the model of human nature, and that there is no so-called "universal human nature" as advocated by classical philosophy. Sartre began his 1945 lecture *Existentialism as a Humanism* by stating that the purpose of the paper was to defend himself against several existentialist charges. Sartre begins this speech with a defence against three accusations of existentialism: firstly, existentialism does not encourage a despairing attitude of inaction towards life. Secondly, existentialism does not emphasise the dark side of the human condition, depicting things that are vile, dirty and nasty, while ignoring certain things that have and are beautiful and belong to the bright side of human nature^[1]. Finally, existentialism does not seek to deny the truth and seriousness of human endeavour. In his essay "Existentialism as a Humanism", Sartre elaborated on "existence precedes essence": "If God does not exist, there is at least one being in the world that can be proved to be 'existence precedes essence'; and this one being can be proved to be 'existence precedes essence'; and this one being can be proved to be 'existence precedes essence'. If God does not exist, then there is at least one being in the world that can be shown to be 'being before essence'; a being that existed before it could be defined by any concept, and that being is man; or, in Heidegger's words, the reality of man "^[1] . "Existence precedes essence" can be broken down into three layers: 1) life is limited, everyone has to end his life one day; 2) life itself is meaningless, we have to find the meaning of existence for our own life; 3) loneliness is eternal, because your inner feelings are unique and can not be truly understood by others. "Existence precedes essence", first of all, man exists, and then he can explain himself.

Objective idealism holds that man is the product of God, and how man's essence depends on God's stipulation; whereas atheists deny the existence of God, and in their thinking, essence precedes existence, i.e., man completes the stipulation of his own essence before he exists in the world. Sartre's atheistic existentialism argues that "there is no human nature in the world because there is no God in the world who set human nature" ^[1]. In the beginning, man is empty, but as he seeks and obtains certain things, he makes himself according to his own will. In other words, according to Sartre, man first "exists" as a being, and at the beginning of his life he is empty, without any innate characteristics, without any essential provisions, and then he creates his own essence according to his own will. The human being, as a special being, must first exist, and then clear his essence. Man is thrown into the world, and when there is no existence of himself, the world is nothingness to him; and when he exists himself, this self is empty, and the essence is empty of all, so that he is still confronted with nothingness.

2. The World is Absurd, Life is Misery

Sartre once said, "The world is absurd, life is painful, life is meaningless," the pessimism between the lines is overflowing. "The world is absurd", this absurdity is not an ironic denial of all the rules and regulations of society, but refers to the existence of human beings. Is the absurdity a pejorative irony of the rules of society, the absurdity is simply a description of this existence of man. Sartre argues that existence precedes essence, and that for man, a special being, man exists simply because man is what already exists, for no reason whatsoever. There is no natural essence of man, not because any philosopher, God defined man's essence and then created him. Man exists just as he already exists, so man's existence is absurd, so the world is absurd. And the reason why life is painful is because man exists in a meaningless world, and man is in a state of enmity with the world. Sartre believes that subjectivity occupies the vast majority of social ideology, i.e., man is free to choose, free to act, and to take control of his own life through subjective initiative. Man is therefore

subjective and dominant, so others are objects in relation to the "I", but how can objects exist when everyone is a subject? According to Sartre, it is because of the subjectivity of man's own existence, and because he struggles with others in order to preserve his subjectivity. Therefore, it is inevitable that there is a conflict between human beings, and the conflict is the primordial meaning of existence for him. Man, as a being prior to his essence, slowly creates all kinds of conflicts, brutal wars, hideous crimes, are caused by such conflicts, and the Other is the source of the conflict. This is another important point made by Sartre: "The other is hell", which means that we must live in the gaze of the other. The self and the other are opposites, subject and object, and both, through the gaze, make the other the object of their consciousness, or even virtualise the other as a being. In order to let the readers feel the horror of "gaze" more intuitively, Sartre quoted the Greek myth: Medusa in Greek mythology would turn others into stone whenever she was gazed at by them. "The other is hell" is from Sartre's play "The Confinement", which is about three ghosts who are waiting to go to hell and keep on deceiving and torturing each other, and finally realise that they don't have to wait to go to hell, because they are already in hell. In other words, the present world is undoubtedly "hell", and it is painful for people to live in such an environment, which can only bring sadness and despair to people, both the poor and the rich.

3. Freedom of Choice

When we talk about "free choice", we have to mention the example of Sartre, who put "free choice" into his own body and put it into action. When we mention Sartre, another name often accompanies him-Beauvoir. Beauvoir was not only Sartre's companion, but also a famous thinker and the founder of feminism, whose book "The Second Sex" is regarded as the foundation of modern feminism. What makes the names of Sartre and Beauvoir so inextricably linked is their unique love relationship. Their unanimous adherence to an open love relationship was due to the fact that they believed that human beings are absolutely free, and that human beings are absolutely free when faced with choices, and therefore love should be free to be chosen rather than a form of bondage, and so they entered into a kind of open relationship contract that was not quite acceptable to the general public, either at the time or now, and which had to be reaffirmed every two years as to whether or not it was still to be continue. Although not well understood, the relationship lasted 51 years until Sartre's death at the age of 75. In hindsight, however, this relationship was perhaps the best way for Sartre to live out his existentialist philosophy.

Because "existence precedes essence," then we must accept the fact that life is meaningless. This may seem very pessimistic, as many people spend their entire lives searching for meaning in life, but now conclude that life is meaningless. But this does not mean that existentialism is a pessimistic philosophy. On the contrary, existentialism is optimistic. Existentialism does not stop at the stage of "life is meaningless", but after accepting this fact we can think further: it is precisely because life is meaningless that each person does not need to fulfil a specific task, and therefore is free. "Man is judged to be free, and freedom is man's destiny. The only reason man is not free is that he cannot get rid of his freedom is because he exists in the world and makes his own meaning through constant choices, which in turn are often dictated by an unnamed and alienating force and are unable to change the situation in which he finds himself, with the consequent crises and pessimism that are prevalent. No matter how small you are, no matter how many external constraints you are subjected to, you are fundamentally free"^[2]. Sartre's theory of free choice is the theory that human beings choose their own destiny. Sartre's theory of man's free choice rejects all determinism. Sartre asserts that freedom is not a certain nature of man, but something that is linked to the structure of man and inseparable from his existence. Freedom here refers to the autonomy of man's free choice. According to Sartre, free choice is an instinct of man, and free choice is in fact a legitimate choice

that man makes about what has been defined. Man is destined to be free, and freedom is a social burden that he cannot get rid of and must bear. In Sartre's view, the nature in which man will ultimately exist is determined by the various choices he makes under his characteristic subjectivity. Freedom is man's unique way of being, and the fundamental difference between man and other beings is that man is absolutely free to decide his own nature and choose his own existence. The human being exists first of all, he starts with nothing, he is empty, it is not too much to say that there is only a shell, and then he slowly shapes his essence according to his own choices, his own will.

According to Sartre, "Man forms himself in the process of action; he is the result of his own action and nothing else"^[1]. Cowards make themselves cowards, heroes make themselves heroes, and the reason you are what you are today is entirely determined by your past actions. Mr Zhou Xiliang also writes, "Sartre says that first there are people, and then through their freely chosen actions, people become good or evil in that way. Heroes or cowards are not born, but are made heroes or cowards by man's active choices, man's choices make him, there is no a priori criterion for choices, choices are not constrained by necessity, choices are autonomy of thought, which is the basic argument that existence precedes essence"^[1]. Every human being is destined to be free from the very beginning, and a being such as man has subjective agency, so that man's own destiny is acquired through his own initiative, by himself. But then Sartre added, "Man must take responsibility for his own existence and for all his actions." I think that in Sartre's existentialism, existence prior to essence must be closely linked to responsibility afterwards. Sartre said, "I cannot base my confidence on the goodness of human beings or their interest in the improvement of society, because human beings are free and there is no human nature that can be considered as fundamental"^[1], which means that there is no given and ready-made human nature, and that the so-called human nature is actually formed in history and is the result of the free choices of human beings. The so-called essence of human nature is in fact formed in history and is the result of human free choice.

4. Conclusion

When we look at Sartre's existentialist thought, it is indisputable that it is itself a kind of humanitarianism, for existentialism puts the fate of mankind in the hands of people themselves. Humanitarianism originated in the European Renaissance, which stresses the value of human beings, upholds human dignity, advocates caring for human beings, loving and respecting human beings, is human-centred, and calls for "liberty, equality and fraternity", which can be seen in the works of a number of Renaissance artists and writers, for example, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Dante and so on. This shows that people are paying more and more attention to themselves. This shows that human beings are paying more and more attention to themselves, everything starts from human beings themselves, and discard unnecessary illusions, which is undoubtedly in line with Sartre's existentialism. Sartre's existentialism fundamentally reveals that man is free and unfettered, and that anyone can become what he wants to be through different choices, giving the greatest respect to the individual to the greatest extent. As a matter of fact, the world is a forest of humanity, and every tree can find room for its own growth. What matters is not what each tree has to grow into, but that each tree has to grow. Sartre has passed away more than forty years ago, but we should still read Sartre. Because no matter how time changes, life is still life, today's life and the life at that time, in addition to changes in the way, the essence is still the same, the world is still "absurd", life is still "painful". But Sartre tells us that what will become of us in the future all depends on what we do today, because we are not born this way, it is our past behaviour that drives us to become what we are today, and our behaviour today determines what we will be tomorrow.

Sartre's existentialism is to a great extent more concerned with the value of the individual, and

encourages people to take themselves as the basis for the construction of their own pursuit of a unique value of life. Sartre's existentialism is of great significance to the cause of emancipation of all human beings. His infinite concern for human emancipation, and the impetus he gave to the cause of emancipation of all human beings, still shines in the history of philosophy even today after many years. Life will disappear with time, but the words immortal, eternal, and ancient tell us one by one that those who have left a colourful mark in the scroll of history, a living individual life, gives eternal meaning to the short life. This is Sartre left us a valuable spiritual wealth: do not stagnate, do not be passive and lazy, before the thought of exhaustion, go to the life of each day to fill the whole.

References

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