

A DIALECTICAL INTERPRETATION OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S WORDS

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The meaning of Jean-Paul Sartre's life is found in his words. Once deemed the "Pope" of existentialism, the story told by his words attest to his conviction that the human being is not a predetermined entity but is created by the actions in which one commits one's life. Sartre's words, "existence precedes essence," the foundation of his intellectual strivings to give meaning to existence, condemned human beings to the freedom to choose self-meaning.

Influenced by Max Scheler's nostalgic love and affection with which he approached existence, Sartre also pursued with fervor the conviction of his beliefs. Although not agreeing with Scheler's theses, he seized upon his note that so frequently the human being's blindness to what is ultimately meaningful is sacrificed to the transitory experience of autonomy.

Looking at life in retrospect offers one the opportunity to view the completed "self-project," reflectively. From an existential view, Martin Heidegger's conception of *Dasein's* finitude, that life is not-complete as long as it is ongoing, bears critical significance. The authenticity of Sartre's words, his life, rest in the intellectual seedlings that will and already have been germinated in the minds of those who follow. In terms of his impact, his refusal of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 was yet another act attesting to his commitment to values that had inspired his writing. His life, a story of refusal to accept what one does or becomes except through choice, became a living legend to the meaning of his words.

A few years prior to his death a turn in belief began, to show itself, in his spoken words. No longer were other people "hell" but as experience began to show, others were essential to one's own meaning and being. His earlier search for authentic ways of living questioned the very nature of belief:

There was a madwoman who had hallucinations; someone used to speak to her on the telephone and give her orders. Her doctor asked her, "Who is it who talks to you?" She answered, "He says it's God." What proof did she really have that it was God? If an angel comes to me, what proof is there that it's an angel? And if I hear voices, what proof is there that they come from heaven and not from hell, or from the subconscious, or a pathological condition? What proves that they are addressed to me? What proof is there that I have been appointed to impose my choice and my conception of man on humanity? I'll never

find any proof or sign to convince me of that. If a voice addresses me, it is always for me to decide that this is the angel's voice; if I consider that such an act is a good one, it is I who will choose to say that it is good rather than bad.¹

Authenticity exists, in the choice, in the human being's freedom to be. From an existential view of Heidegger, the encounter with death provides the opportunity for realization that one is not a single authority. Who are we to say whether his voice is other than one in search of another?

With experience as a teacher, the feeling in his later years that he had left people too independent of others in his formal writing, Sartre discovered the meaning of new choices. In the development of personal relationships he found not the "hell" which had permeated his earlier years but the possibility of fidelity described by Gabriel Marcel. In near blindness, unable to write the words that were for him the quintessence of things, he found new meaning, a shift-in-direction, embodied by a reversal in his commitment from a strong leftist political position toward a conservatist profession. Others were primordial to self-meaning, the value of one's actions and authentic/inauthentic meaning were seen from a different view.

Re-capitulation of his life only substantiates his original belief that one cannot be known for other than one's life-project, until its end, it is incomplete and unknowable. Surprise visits periods of time in life that reveal turns toward new meaning. Such were the final years of the existentialist whose primary goal it was to give voice to the masses, the self-responsible agent of his own actions. Sartre, when faced with the meaning of his own blindness, his own inaction, his own finitude, again made a new choice, a movement toward democracy and others, the very principles for which his life stood as a negation. Who are we to decide the authentic nature of his final choice?

From an existential approach human existence is investigated by placing primary emphasis on the self, understood as a consciousness engaged in action. Consciousness refers to perceptual experience, intuiting, thinking, believing, willing, remembering, anticipating, deciding and choosing.

To be conscious is to be conscious of something. From this approach, the meaning of sociality is an experience of the self-with-other-selves. Primary importance is placed on the word *with*. This word signifies the relationship of selves that create the social. Sociality is understood by investigating the *we* relationship. The ongoingness of the social world is centered *within* the *we* relationship. A circle, we are before I am, is the effort of philosophy to reflect upon the world which includes it.

This brings us directly to the problem of objective/subjective questions found in method. Which orientation provides the meaning of lived human experience? An existential approach is concerned not with the measurement of a phenomenon but with its meaning. The experiential findings reveal the qualitative dimensions of an experiencing person. The person is viewed from *within* a lived contextualization. In the *we-relationship* will be found the dialogal method.

In daily existence there occurs a continual interpretation of the activities of other human beings, as well as one's own. The other person's actions mean something. Consequently, one person's response to the other is guided by this interpretation of meaning. Regardless of the interpretation to its validity or appropriateness, whether the interpretation is correct or incorrect, an interpretation is given. This meaning is a shared community of knowledge, although perhaps it is unique to the person experiencing the activity, it is created in a social history.

The foundation for sociality as far as the social sciences are concerned arises from the subjective interpretation of meaning. This is the initial character of social reality, the response of one person to another. This presupposes that each interprets the other person's action as meaningful.

During the flow of interaction each person observes and is observed by the other person. Intentionality now clearly stands out: When I perceive the activity of another human being as meaningful, I observe the performance of this activity as having been intended. What is at work here is a moment in consciousness by which intention and performance are one. To understand an action by another person we attend to that which stands out. The person's reality of social life resides in the sphere of interpretations. Meaning of one's own action and the primary aspect of interpretation is the way through which one understands the other person.

The person is not concealed behind outward behavior but lives *in* it. Human personality is not hidden by the body as a veil hides a face. Outward behavior reflects and embodiment of inner self. Patterns of behavior are adopted from society in which one lives. This points to the primordial aspect of the sociality of existence in that only through being-with other human beings does one learn how to attribute meaning to the world. Possibilities for change, for altering the sociality of existence can come through the understanding of others. The dialogal nature of human existence cannot be reduced nor is it reducible. The meaning of sociality resides in the shared existence of *Inbetweenness*. The idea of truth is within the dialectical interpretation of the human being. Truth is not found independently of the works of human beings it is "the connections of each one with each other and of each with all."²

Notes

- 1) Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism", trans. Bernard Frechtman, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), pp. 23-24.
- 2) Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans., intro. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 111.