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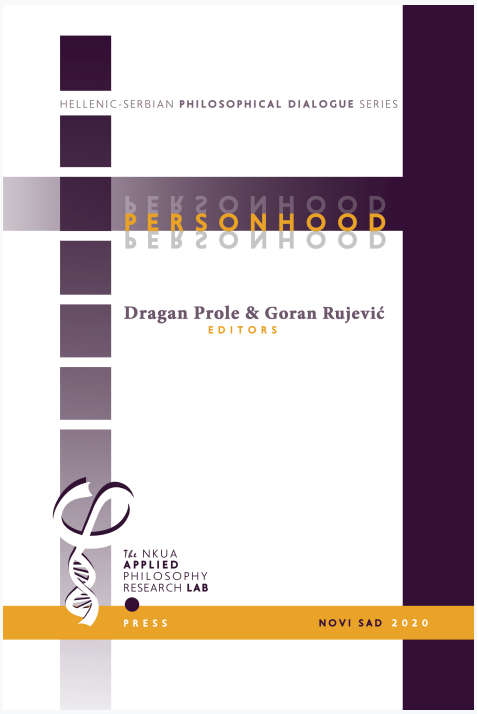

Chapter

Sartre and Personhood

Marica Rajković

Personhood

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Sartre and Personhood

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Abstract: The author's intention is to explain Sartre's concept of personhood through three important contexts within his philosophy. First one is Sartre's philosophy of existence, the second one is Sartre's idea of engagement, and the third one is Sartre's concept of humanism. Some of the most important points for understanding Sartre's concept of personhood and man in general are ideas of choice and possibility, that place human existence on a whole new ontological foundation, different to both natural and artificial necessities and objects. Human being is a being of possibility that carries constant responsibility for their actions. The idea of personhood in Sartre's philosophy is not founded on psychological or anthropological theories, but sets up as an ontological, political and practical concept.
Keywords: engagement; existentialism; Hegel; humanism; personhood; possibility; responsibility; Sartre.

Il y a toujours une possibilité pour le lâche de ne plus être lâche,
et pour le héros de cesser d'être un héros.[1]

I. Personhood and existentialism

The idea of personhood in Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy contains numerous differences to the ideas of personhood in other philosophies of existence. The main reason for these differences lies in Sartre's

[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, "L'existentialisme est un humanisme." See Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 14, http://web2.slc.qc.ca/sbeaudoin/z-Fall_19/K_S_F19/Sartre.pdf: "[...] and that there is always a possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero." Also quoted in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Meridian Books, 1989).

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mutual opposing of essence and existence, through which his understanding of personhood will be conceptualized. The idea that, when it comes to human being, existence precedes the essence – shows not only Sartre's unique approach to the idea of personhood, but also his daring to break down the fundamental structure of Western philosophical thought. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that *the dualism of being and phenomenon no longer has a legitimate status in philosophy, nor does the dualism of phenomenon and essence*.[2] This, however, does not mean that the abolition of all dualisms has been achieved, because there remains one dualism that cannot be abolished: dualism between *finite and infinite*.

The finite phenomenon requires to be transcended towards infinity,[3] but it is no more the matter of usual philosophical hiatus but requires the whole new status and relation to infinity. Finite and infinite are not divided as opposites, but different as pervaded moments of the same entirety that synthesizes them. Infinite shows itself as *the infinite in final form,* and phenomenon represents only the meaning of itself and does not refer to something "behind" or "beyond," as it was represented in Kant's philosophy, for example.

Sartre sharply opposes the idea that essence is contained in the subject itself, thus actually contradicting the entire metaphysical tradition starting with Aristotle. The essence is all that in a human being that can be labeled with words "it is," therefore, the essence is not contained in the object but rather represents its meaning and reason. Likewise, being is not merely one of the qualities of object, nor does the existence of objects in any way participate in being. The object simply *is*, and it is the only possible determinant of its existence, claims Sartre.

In Hegel's philosophy, the idea of existence represents first of three categories of phenomena, and to step into existence means *to change and remain the same*. He explains that the

[2] Ž.-P. Sartr, *Biće i ništavilo: ogled iz fenomenološke ontologije* (Beograd: Nolit, 1983), 7-9.

[3] Ibid., 9.

phenomenon (as phenomenon)[4] does not represent *something else* but shows its own reality and meaning.[5] Sartre stands at a similar viewpoint, adding that every conscious existence exists as a *consciousness of existence*,[6] i.e., that the object cannot be separated from the consciousness of the object. Consciousness does not appear *before* its susceptibility to a given object, nor does the object *precede* the consciousness: there is only a being that is one and undivided *as an existence*. Existence comprises the essence because consciousness is not possible *before being* but represents the unity of phenomenon and existence. The only way to make the phenomenon dependent on consciousness is to place the object as *opposed* to consciousness – not by its presence but by its absence, therefore by nothingness.

Sartre claims that the *consciousness is a being* whose *existence sets the essence*, but it is also the consciousness of a being whose *essence implies the existence*. In addition to the aforementioned closeness to Hegel's understanding of existence, Sartre demonstrates a willingness to affirm another thesis made by the philosophy of German idealism – that a human being does not belong to the *domain of being,* but to the *domain of "ought to,"* i.e. to the *domain of possibility*. The subject is not yet a personality. Personality is created through the realization of possibilities of the subject, and this realization is made by making choices. Personhood is, therefore, a purposeful realization of possibilities conducted through concrete actions made by human being.

Being-for-itself is a being of possibility, while *being-in-itself* already is all that it is and can be. Human being is, therefore, a being of possibility, of "not yet achieved," of "pursued" and insufficient. "Man is condemned to be free,"[7] because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does, claims Sartre, adding that those possibilities are nothing else than freedom – the meaning and reason of human existence.

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[4] G. V. F. Hegel, *Fenomenologija duha* (Beograd: BIGZ, 1986), 88.

[5] H.-G. Gadamer, *Hegelova dijalektika* (Beograd: Plato, 2003), 45.

[6] Sartr, *Biće i ništavilo,* 14.

[7] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, ed. John Kulka, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 29.

Although Sartre disagrees with Hegel's "logical and ontological equation"[8] of being and nothingness, he agrees with Hegel that freedom must have concrete and historical content. He believes that Hegel is closer to existentialism than it firstly appears,[9] because of his claim that the existences are associated with each other in the history that are creating and which, as a concrete universality, is what judges and what transcends them.

The subject of existentialism is a human individual in the social field, among other individuals, a personality that is created by division of labor and exploitation, but who fights against alienation and patiently conquers this field piece by piece.[10] Sartre does not claim that all manifestations of personality are equally important: hierarchy should exist, personality needs to be viewed from different angles – however, always as a whole. Man continually streams beyond his own position – transcending his own situation, in order to objectify himself. This transcendence is a project – not in the form of a will, because will is abstract, but it *can* have a willing *character*. In Sartre's opinion, existence is a perpetual disturbance of equilibrium, which separates from itself and is thrown through the field of possibility, determining its choices and freedom. Existence is not an existent substance, but it is not irrational either. It can be explained by a dialectical method, which is transcending but containing at the same time, and is explained as a form of choice, because personality is conditioned precisely by its process or act. Such existentialism is completely opposed by positivism, which apparently rejects the a priori, but actually decides in advance following its own scheme.

II. Personhood and engagement

In the wake of Hegel's thought, Sartre explains that the idea of freedom must be historically and socially contextualized, because otherwise it is merely an empty concept. Being condemned to

[8] Sartr, *Biće i ništavilo,* 39.
[9] Ž.-P. Sartr, *Egzistencijalizam i marksizam* (Beograd: Nolit, 1970), 14.
[10] Ž.-P. Sartr, *Kritika dijalektičkog uma* (Beograd: Nolit, 1983), 80.

be free, human being is actually being responsible for each and every action and choice. If freedom had no concrete realization, being-for-itself would be reduced to being-in-itself, and Sartre notes that this is exactly what happened to Heidegger's concept of existence, since it didn't get its historical content. Heidegger does confront with the notion of possibility through the idea of *a project*, but that idea has not been historically fulfilled through concrete actions and therefore remains incomplete.

Sartre wonders: if a man is *zoon politikon*, how is it possible that his fate is not resolved once and for all by gaining political freedom?[11] By answering this question we can also answer the question of the meaning of human existence and purpose of personhood. The answer is close to Kant's practical ideas: our goal is not something that is given, but rather something that is assigned! Our roles are always in the future,[12] each of us is assigned the tasks to accomplish and the possibilities to actualize. By reaching it, our aim is not achieved once and for all, on the contrary, reaching it and pursuing it is a process that doesn't terminate as long as we live. And if we thought there were areas where we could avoid that pursuit – e.g. culture or art, Sartre will show us that it is not so: art (above all literature) also involves constant practical and political choices.

In "engaged literature" Sartre explains that responsibility cannot be avoided by ignoring it. Ignoring the choice is also a choice, and not acting expresses the action and attitude as strongly as any other act. During the challenging political and historical times, silence can be very loud, claims Sartre, and abstract freedom can never compensate for lack of concrete acts. The most responsible among the artists are prose writers: engaged writer know *that words and acts are equal*.[13] The writer must plead the times and circumstances in which he lives and creates – if he does not do so, Sartre claims that he did express his attitude anyway.

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[11] Ž.-P. Sartr, "Angažovana književnost," in Ž.-P. Sartr, *Šta je književnost* (Beograd: Nolit, 1984), 13.

[12] Sartr, *Kritika dijalektičkog uma*, 67.

[13] Sartr, *Šta je književnost*, 28.

Concrete action is a necessary part of the realization of freedom, just as the relation with others is a necessary segment of each subject. Subject cannot be accomplished without *the other*, without intersubjectivity. With this argument, Sartre approaches both Hegel's and Husserl's philosophy, pointing out that only through *difference* can one see the real state of one phenomenon. Personhood could not be achieved without *others*, literature is empty without engagement and freedom is nothing without *action*. Although famous for his sentence "hell is other people,"[14] Sartre clearly demonstrates that without others, man cannot exist.

Others are the condition of my existence, claims Sartre, in relation to them the whole world is being established, and that world is called intersubjectivity.

Sartre understands praxis as an inwardness of objectivity, because subjectivity is actually also the part of the objective process. Marxism overlooked the idea that there is no history without actual, individual and living people, and by its progressive method, it predetermined what was yet to happen. Unlike Marxist (progressive) – existentialistic method is heuristic: both progressive and regressive. Existentialism does not regard deviations as coincidences but sees them as concrete realities. The result of an existentialistic pursuit will not be a general personality trait but a personhood in its full objectification.

Marxism ignores the concrete determinants of human life and through historical totalization it retains only an abstract framework and "universal patterns." Sartre cites the example of Napoleon Bonaparte, to point out the absurdity of such abstractions and generalizations: Bonaparte was not some kind of "a man in general," determined by his role in the historical moment, but on the contrary – a concrete personality that made a certain historical situation possible! Sartre points out the paradox that Marxism actually stops the dialectic stream, totalizes human activities within a homogeneous flow, and does

[14] Ž.-P. Sartr, "Iza zatvorenih vrata," in Ž.-P. Sartr, *Drame*: *Izabrana dela*, vol. 5 (Nolit: Beograd, 1981).

not really move beyond the Cartesian understanding of time. And dialectics cannot be sustained unless the time is understood as dialectical. This means that neither man nor his actions are *in time,* but that the time is *provided by man's action*.

Atheist-based existentialism is further exacerbated by the fact that man no longer shares responsibility with any other being or force, but becomes abandoned and all responsibility falls on him. This is the point of Sartre's thesis that man is *condemned to be free*: since there is no general morality, man is free and obliged to choose according to his own conscience.

If a man has made himself something he does not want to be, e.g. a coward, it is not only that he cannot claim responsibility *anywhere outside himself,* but with every future failure to correct it, his responsibility increases. Man's obligations and responsibilities never stop, and his fate is in his hands, concludes Sartre.

III. Personhood and humanism

Existentialism should affirm the uniqueness of historical events, refusing to understand them as a mere sequence of a priori moments. Consequently, there is a need for a dialectic that will be able to follow the historical flow in its truthfulness, without insisting that the contradictions should be rationally resolved and neutralized. Sartre points out that the contradictions are the real source and basis that make ideas. The contradiction is what brings tension to every process, but also what gives the frame to the idea and event that is being clarified. Also, contradictions in ideas allow ambiguity, which determine the historical event itself and make it possible and concrete. What rationalism dismisses as coincidence – is in fact what makes all human life, concludes Sartre.

What is most frightening about existentialism, explains Sartre, is the fact that it leaves one not only with the *possibility* but also with *the necessity* of *choice*. Also, existentialism provides us with clarification of the idea of man – a being in which *existence* precedes *essence* and which exists before it can be defined by any term. At first, man *exists*, then he meets himself in the world and

finally, he defines himself: if man in existential terms cannot be defined, it is because he is *nothing at first*. Only later he will start *to become*, and he will *be* what he is willing *to do* of himself. This means that there is no human nature: man is not only what he *sees* in himself, but also what he *wants* from himself. This is why man is nothing but *what he does of himself*.

This is the first principle of existentialism and is called subjectivity, explains Sartre. This allows man to have dignity that is not given to inanimate objects, since man primarily exists, ie. he throws/projects himself towards the future. Man is a *project* that lives in a subjective way. The project is not a mere volition, but a human responsibility for what he is. The first step of existentialism is to put every person in the possession of what he is and to place full responsibility on his existence. By being responsible for oneself means that one is responsible for humankind in general. Every act by which an individual creates the person he wants to be, at the same time creates an image of what man in general should be, because with every choice, man establishes values that apply not only to him but to all people.

Man is at all times forced to perform acts of choice, because there is no one else who could do it for him. Certainly, this must result in the feeling that all humanity has directed its gaze to every act that a single man makes, because all humanity is treated by that act. Any assumption of responsibility necessarily carries with it the anxiety of that act, Sartre points out. In doing so, however, each act is confirmed as a possibility that has gained its value by making a choice.

Existentialism must return to the essence of humanism, whose traditional values it rejected, claims Sartre: wanting your freedom also means wanting the freedom of others, so this basis even provides the possibility of reconciliation of conscience. It should be acknowledged, however, that earlier humanism was absurd, because it attributed the merits of extraordinary individuals to *people in general*, and the point is on the contrary: to present *responsibility* as something that can transcend from an individual to such a generality.

Humanism has two very different meanings: in one sense it is a conception that sets man as its goal and highest value, while in another sense it means that man makes himself by continually transcending and finding himself. Sartre understands this second sense as the essence of *existentialist humanism,* which represents not only philosophical discourse but also an activism to live by.

IV. Concluding remarks

Sartre explains that the idea of freedom must be historically and socially contextualized, because otherwise it is merely an empty concept.

Our roles are always in the future, each of us is assigned the tasks to accomplish and the possibilities to actualize. By reaching it, our aim is not achieved once and for all, on the contrary, reaching it and pursuing it is a process that doesn't terminate as long as we live. Concrete action is a necessary part of the realization of freedom, just as the relation with others is a necessary segment of each subject. Subject cannot be accomplished without the other, without intersubjectivity.

Not only that – authentic philosophy should never avoid those contradictions and coincidences, on the contrary: it is the duty and the main purpose of philosophy to clarify the areas that other disciplines avoid or consider unexplainable.

Personhood could not be achieved without others, philosophy should embrace contradictions, literature is empty without engagement and freedom is nothing without action. Sartre demonstrates that the most feared path is usually the one we should choose, because by confronting the most unpleasant ideas often opens the doors to wider picture and the solutions of the most difficult tasks. Although famous for his sentence "hell is other people," Sartre clearly demonstrates that without those other people, man cannot exist. It is not the first time that this verse from Friedrich Hölderlin's poem is being quoted in the context of existential philosophy: "But where the danger is, also grows the saving power."

Being condemned to be free, human being is actually being responsible for each and every act. Every act of a man is the result of his choice, based on a freedom that cannot be rejected. This is the ultimate commandment of freedom, out of which all obligations derive.

In doing so, however, each act is confirmed as a possibility that has gained its value by making a choice. This further means that neither man nor his actions are *in time,* but that the time is *provided by man's action*. By making unpleasant choices man is condemned to be responsible, but that also means that his fate is in his hands and that entire world and its history are nothing but his creations.

The idea of personhood in Sartre's philosophy is not founded on psychological or anthropological theories, but sets up as an ontological, political and practical concept.

The others, the difference, the contradictions are what brings tension to every process, but also what gives the frame to the idea and event that is being clarified. Also, contradictions in ideas allow ambiguity, which determine the historical event itself and make it possible and concrete. What rationalism dismisses as a coincidence – is in fact what makes all human life, concludes Sartre.

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