

Sartre's criticisms on human essence in the light of aristotle's philosophy

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Our ability to engage in abstraction is, indubitably, a unique gift endowed to our human cognition. And the reason for such a telling contention is near to being self-evident: i. e. , only human persons have the ability to see through otherwise distinct and separate entities, a unifying concept that reveals these things' common nature, if not their defining essence. To this end, it is necessary to point that our human intellect's preponderance to abstracting the essences is another facet of human cognition.

This is because knowing, akin to seeing, affords us an immediate grasp of reality's nature and purpose; for by the mere experience of something, say a table, we almost instantly furnish ourselves with a working concept about the thing's essence – i. e. , we ' know' what a table is, what is it for. Thus, it makes sense to say that abstracting essences form part and parcel of both the intuitive and inductive process of a person's ability to know reality. Our understanding of the concept of essence draws chiefly from the scheme provided by the Greek metaphysics.

And herein it would insightful to take cue from Aristotle's ' hylemorphic' framework. According to Aristotle, anything that exists – say, a tree or a dog – is constituted of both an existence and an essence; i. e. , all things both have material and formal constitutions. On the one hand, existence pertains to the act of being, or the facticity of a thing. For example, that table is being actual right when one sees it. On the other hand, essence pertains to the nature of a certain thing.

It is that which makes a thing to be what it is; an abstracted concept which makes us see the connection between the entities that we are perceiving

(say, a table) and the other things (say, a classroom filled with tables) belonging to the same genre or species (Lavine 71). Essence thus defines the nature of a certain thing or describes the aspect proper to the same. If we proceed with this line of argumentation, we can go on to claim that one can apply the concept of essence to pertain to reality of human persons.

From here, we can move to identify conspicuous aspects which may be deemed 'proper to human persons', so as to glean what we may call "human essence" – i. e. , that a person is an existing being, that he shows characteristic elements proper to animals, but that he possess a faculty of intellect and freewill proper to him and him alone. In the ultimate analysis, one can say that the essence defining a human person lies in framing him as a living creature that shares certain characteristic traits of animals, but is endowed nevertheless with the unique faculty of intellect and freewill.

Key to this process, it must be argued, is describing the determinate aspects of his very existence. To be sure, we may still identify a good number of characteristic elements that could equally describe what it means to be human person. And surely, we cannot stop at construing fundamental animality and rationality as aspects that sufficiently capture the "whatness" of humanity; for the reasoned construction of human essences does not entail that we have completely circumscribed the total reality of human persons.

That having said, Jean Paul Sartre believes that humanity has no fixed essence. In other words, he believes that humanity cannot be framed within

the parameters of determinateness or the limits we impose by construing human essences. At the very least, Sartre contends that we cannot define the contours of what it means to be a person because our freedom determines the unique manner of our very existence. J. Sartre's contention fundamentally draws from his concept of absolute human freedom.

A thinker who belongs to the erstwhile group of philosophers known as Existentialists, Sartre's philosophy puts higher premium than most on appreciating human existence as a concrete and perpetual striving for one's own becoming (Marias 436). This means that, for Sartre, we as human persons must constantly appreciate the fact we exist, more than the fact that we have an essence to frame our subsequent courses of actions. Sartre believes that "we are necessarily free", and that the burden of "making" our own human essence lies in the choices that we make (Marias 440).

Put in layman's terms, Sartre believes that our freedom is absolute, and that, even more importantly, the choices we make determine the kind of person that we are. In a way, Sartre reverses the logic of human essence – i. e. , human actions does not flow from one's own essence; instead, human essence is molded by the actions that we as persons commit to doing. For such reason, and as mentioned earlier, Sartre believes that humanity has no fixed essence.

And insofar as the concrete form of our human essence takes cue only from the activities which human persons do, Sartre rests his case on the plain assumption that one's life cannot be placed within any restricting concepts

of essence, for any reason whatsoever (Marias 440-441). There are reasons to think, however, that Sartre may have framed human freedom quite radically and that his wholesale denial of an identifiable human essence may have been taken quite drastically.

To this end, strains of Aristotle's philosophy may be helpful in shedding light into some of the oversights Sartre may have committed in denying the tenability of human essence on account of absolute freedom. Firstly, it may be insightful to be reminded of the fact that Aristotle understands human essence as an aspect of life that does not effectively restrict human capacity to determine one's path according to the sets of actions a person may willingly opt for. Human essence merely speaks of the kind or quality of existence which is construable from and identifiable in a certain thing (Lavine 71).

It merely serves to help man appreciate what kind of creature he is by way of categories and definitions. Conversely, the concept of human essence does not, in any whatsoever, imply an absolute determination of human reality according to these set of classification or categorization. An example may help further situate the conundrum: when someone thinks of man as essentially a spiritual being – i. e. , the capacity for spiritual relations with God belongs properly to the characteristic trait of humanity – one does not rule out the possibility of not believing in God all together.

Instead, one merely makes a statement about the humanity's general preponderance to worshipping a deity, notwithstanding personal choice to

dissent. The same goes true for human essence. Sartre thinks that humanity has not a fixed essence on account of a human freedom that determines a resulting human nature. Unfortunately for Sartre, human essence and human freedom are not mutually exclusive. In fact, a person's freedom is only affirmed, if not accentuated by the fact that the human essence is defined by a tacit acknowledgement of man's of basic rationality and capacity for freewill.

Secondly, Sartre's contention that human persons have no fixed essence is certainly difficult to argue precisely because human freedom is really not absolute and that humanity's basic essence does not depend on human choice but on what nature has fundamentally given. Two aspects come into play with in this particular rebuttal. In the first place, Sartre may have taken human freedom quite radically in arguing that it our capacity to determine ourselves must be taken in absolute terms – i. e. , we can do whatever we wish; besides, we are the ones determining our resulting essence in the process.

This, unfortunately, is untenable. For instance, if I, born as a human person, were to choose living like a dog, I would probably find certain dog-like activities incongruent with my natural bodily processes. I would find it difficult to bark, let alone walk in a four-legged manner; as these are not consistent with how was I born and raised. The point in contention here lies in arguing that human freedom, contrary to Sartre's arguments, cannot be taken as an absolute determinant of human nature.

On the contrary one may find it difficult to deliberately deviate from the demands of our basic human essence. Such difficulty should bring us more into an appreciation of our human nature not really as an aspect dependent on human choice, but an aspect that is made perfect by the choices that we make. Herein Aristotle's teleological philosophy appears to take shape. According to Aristotle, essence precedes actions, or essence precedes existence; and that the perfection of all actions comes when they fulfill the essence in question (Marias 74).

For instance, when a person uses critical thinking before making a judgment, such an act can be considered as a perfection of the man's nature as a rational entity. The point in contention here lies in arguing that we cannot really do away with human nature. On the contrary, our actions must run consistent with it; for only when we act according to our nature can our actions be perfected according to our essence. By way of conclusion, I wish to end with a thought that dismisses Sartre's contention – i. e., that humanity cannot find a common essence proper to himself and himself alone – on account of its patent inability to take into account the true state of human affairs. In the discussions that were developed, it was learned that Sartre's refutation of human essence stems from his belief that human freedom is absolute, and that human persons are the ones molding their respective essences. However, there are surely good reasons to think that this philosophical stance does not hold water.

First, it has been argued that the concept of human essence does not in any way defeat the reality of human freedom. Human nature and human

freedom, it was argued, are not mutually exclusive. Second, Sartre appears to have neglected the fact that human freedom cannot be equated with the capacity to do what one wishes, regardless of what nature has already given. There is no such thing as an absolute freedom. And in the final analysis, we have to admit that we are bound by a certain essence, no matter how hard try to deviate from it.