

A Study of Jean-Paul Sartre's Idea of "Condemned to be Free"

Khin Myat Mar¹, Moe Moe Myint² and Mar Mar Soe³

Abstract

The word freedom is the most interesting idea to everyone. And the two concepts "freedom" and "responsibility" are very closely related to Jean-Paul Sartre philosophy. This paper is an attempt to show the important role of freedom and responsibility in society by examining Sartre's idea of "condemned to be free" from the Buddhist perspective. To achieve the aim of the research, descriptive method and evaluative method are used. This paper contributes to the realization of how the two concepts, freedom and responsibility. It should be founded as moral rules in any society to construct a moral, peaceful and harmonious society in the world.

Key words: freedom, responsibility, society, moral, condemn

INTRODUCTION

In philosophy, the word "freedom" is an important and most interesting concept. It is a relative concept which deals with all thoughts and philosophies. It may not often exist as a reality but it always exists as a desire. The idea of freedom is a characteristic of the sensible individuality. And the concept of freedom is related to responsibility.

The word "responsibility" means duty, obligation, accountability, liability when a person is requested to do as part of a job or a role or a legal obligation. So, the concept of responsibility plays a very important role in the social philosophy of the specific particular society. Moreover, the structure of the society shows what are inside of the society in the midst of nations. The impacts of freedom and responsibility are reversed on a society.

In the history of philosophical and social thought, freedom is a specific use as a moral and social concept which refers to circumstances that arise in the relations of man to man. It is to specific condition of social life. According to the notion of freedom, humans freely determine their own behavior and no external causal factors can adequately account for their actions. Indeed, the word freedom is closely connected with responsibility in society. And these two concepts, freedom and responsibility, are essential basic foundations for the society. Society is ultimately based on human action alone. Therefore, man is responsible for the social reality of the society in his conception.

Moreover, there are many different views of various philosophers on the concepts of freedom and responsibility. The concept of freedom and responsibility is always a conflicting problem in the society and has immediate impact on both constructing and destructing of the society. The structure of society is constructed with different kinds of human behaviors. So, the different ideas of human behaviors create different problems of human society.

Social philosophy is one of the important branches of philosophy. It concerns with social relation among people, societies, and nations. The social philosophy is concerned with the idea of social arrangements. Moreover, ethics is regarded as social reality and as a phenomenon shaped by social determinants and itself shaping other social realities. In ethical point of view, the concept of freedom and responsibility should not harm to other societies.

¹ Professor, Dr, Department of Philosophy, Hinthada University

² Associate Professor, Dr, Department of Philosophy, Hinthada University

³ Associate Professor, Dr, Department of Philosophy, Hinthada University

Freedom and responsibility deal with the concepts of social ethics in society. The development of the ideas of freedom and responsibility is the progress of social ethics in society.

There are many philosophers who have discussed on freedom and responsibility in the society such as John Dewey, Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, etc. Among them, Jean Paul-Sartre's view on freedom and responsibility will be discussed in this paper.

Jean-Paul Sartre's View on Freedom and Responsibility (Condemned to be Free)

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was a French philosopher, and one of the key figures in the philosophy of existentialism and phenomenology, and one of the leading figures in twentieth century French philosophy and Marxism. Sartre uses the main idea of Existentialism "existence precedes essence", in his argument to show that we have the choice in everything we do. According to the idea of "existence precedes essence", there is no pre-existing concept of man. This means our essence is not something that is fixed in advance, but rather than each man creates himself and exists in a different way. Plants and animals also have life, but they do not have to think about what their life means, or how they are going to act.

Sartre has tried to signify that man exists first, and then has freedom to choose what kind of person he is. Man is determined by his essence. Man makes choices by looking at the future which is determined. So, it cannot be said that man has an essence first, because man is always "ahead of oneself". Existentialists' belief is that "existence precedes essence" attaches into the statement that the existentialist doesn't believe in existence of God. They regard that if a human is created by God, then the human's essence has been determined, just like everything else in this universe. However, how do we know that God created and determined for us. We do not know. So, in the existentialists' view, man is what he makes of himself. There are no set plans on how one must live. We have "the experience of choice making" regardless of determinism. People must look into themselves and make the choices based on their own interpretations and experiences.

Sartre accepted that man is a being of absolute freedom and man is also being with responsibility in the society. Man and freedom are one and the same. It is impossible to distinguish man from freedom. Freedom is not a quality added on to man. It is not his accidental character. There is no difference between men and being-free. Freedom constitutes the very being of man. Sartre said that if there is no determinism, man is free and has freedom.

For Sartre, there is no fixed design for how a human being should be and no God to give us a purpose. Man is not determined by his essence. He is free to choose his essence. For instance, no man is born a coward. A coward is a coward, not because of his inhibited physical organism or abnormal psychological temperament or unfavorable environment. It is because he chooses himself to be so consciously or unconsciously. For Sartre, so-called unconscious does not exist. Sartre believed in the essential freedom of individuals, and so also people are responsible for all elements of themselves, their consciousness, and their actions. It will be as the value of existential freedom and responsibilities of the society in the philosophical thought.

Therefore, Sartre held that man defines himself by his own actions for which he is responsible. It means that "man is condemned to be free". He maintains that human responsibility in a world without God is overwhelming, since everything comes into "being" through man. That is, man is free and responsible without help and excuse. He is without help, for there is neither God nor any non-human guiding principles to help him in choosing with all responsibility. He is without excuse, for there is nobody or nothing upon which he can throw his responsibility and thereby lessen the burden of his absolute freedom.

Man's freedom and responsibility are so undeniable and can never be free from being responsible. Since Sartre doesn't believe in God and therefore cannot limit what we do or how we act. A person cannot reason for his actions because there is no God to respond to, and he has chosen them on his own. So, Sartre's existentialism regards that man in possession of himself entire responsibility for his existence exactly upon his shoulder. Sartre believed that throughout each of our existence, we must create meaning in each of our lives. We are responsible for our destiny and the way we live is formed from what we make of ourselves.

However, there are consequences for this side of the argument as well. If God does not exist, everything is permitted because there is no God to stop one from doing whatever one wants, whenever one wanted. Man would have to be accountable for their actions since there is no God to judge them. Thus, Sartre said that being human means taking responsibility for the choices that one makes.

But if there is no God, then what should man makes of him? Who is man to decide what is moral and immoral? How can one possibly choose to do well when there is no predefined standard on what is good and what is bad? Sartre says it is dependent upon to decide the goodness of any choices. Humanity is choosing actions that have value to man, and those choices continue to define man. When man thinks about a decision he has to make, Sartre said that man really has already made up the decision of what he is going to do. Although there is the burden of freedom, man must take result of his condemned freedom, because giving up freedom would be giving up humanness as well. It is better "condemned to be freedom", than "condemned to be God's doll".

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The concept of freedom and responsibility plays a very important and useful role in the social ethics, economy, and political issues. So, every person in any society should be free to think and take responsibility for the idea of which is involved in the actions in the focus of society. As responsibility is the reflection of the society, the activities of society are models into social life of humans called social philosophy.

According to Sartre on freedom and responsibility, total freedom comes from total responsibility. This means that man and freedom are one and man is condemned to be free. He is responsible for everything else. Man can never be free from being responsible in the society. Thus, from the philosophical point of view, each and every person should take freedom and responsibility as a moral duty. One of the purposes of this research is to remind that everyone should know the impact of freedom and responsibility to form a moral life and to avoid troubles which we face today.

In Buddhism, especially in Myanmar society, the concept of "*kamma*", is not the same as that of fate and destiny accepted by other thinkers of the East and the West. *Kamma* is accepted as action or deed, and thus it is inevitably related to morality. In Myanmar literature, *Kamma* is of three kinds: physical action, verbal action, and mental action. In fact, it is the source of morality for it is regarded as a moral rule for human beings to distinguish the good from the bad. In other words, all good and bad actions are involved in the law of *Kamma*. It is not only the moral foundation of human society but also the way to the goal of liberation.

The doctrine of *Kamma* is neither identical with that of fatalism nor pre-determinism. In Buddhism, there is nothing in this world that happens by blind chance or accident. Good *kamma* begets good results and bad *kamma* begets also bad results. Man is responsible for his or her freedom of deeds, happiness and misery. Traditionally, most Myanmar accept the doctrine of *Kamma* and that whatever happiness or pain or neutral feeling a person

experiences, all are due to the *kamma* of the past or present life in which that person has committed a certain action with a certain intention.

In Buddhism, the distinction between what is good and what is bad is very simple. All actions have their roots in greed, hatred, and delusion that spring from selfishness which fosters the harmful delusion of selfhood. Actions themselves are considered as neither good nor bad but only what the intentions for his or her thought makes. Everyone has freedom to choose, think, and act. He or she is responsible for his or her actions. Anagarika B. Govina, a German scholar, stated that

Buddhist morality is based on freedom, i.e. on individual development. It is therefore relative. In fact there cannot be any morality or any ethical principle if there is compulsion or determination from an agent outside ourselves.¹

According to the law of *Kamma* or law of causation, we all are responsible for our action, mental, verbal or physical and will inevitably suffer from the results whether in this life or in the cycles of existence. In Buddhist philosophy, the law of causation plays a vital role of human life. Good and evil deeds of human beings can be controlled by the law of *Kamma*. If someone understands the law of *Kamma*, someone may determine right or wrong conducts of our fate better. So, the law of *Kamma* can be supplied not only to avoid evil morality in daily life but also liberate from all miseries and to realize *Nibbana*. In short, Buddhism believes that “man creates himself by his own *kamma*” whereas Sartre believes that “man is condemned to be free”. So, it may be said that their philosophy concerning freedom and responsibility is very similar in basis.

Therefore, it is only when understanding and practicing the impact of freedom and responsibility in also today Myanmar social, political, and economics issues, one can understand directly or indirectly the real conditions of these issues. And then, it will solve and construct the pure and moral ideal of social, political, and economic environments. The societies of any country which are trying to construct a moral, peaceful, and harmonious society in the world and trying to transform to a democratic country should hold the impact of freedom and responsibility as moral rules.

In the above descriptions, the importance of the impact of freedom and responsibility can be seen obviously. Without knowing and practicing the deep sense of freedom and responsibility, we will create challenges and undesirable issues in today’s society. If people have the proper sense of freedom and responsibility, a good family will be organized, a moral society will be formed and then a peaceful nation will be built. Therefore, the role of the impact of freedom and responsibility on today’s society is very important.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our thanks to Dr Theingi Shwe (Rector, Hinthada University), Dr Yee Yee Than (Pro-Rector, Hinthada University) and Dr Cho Kyi Than (Pro-Rector, Hinthada University), for giving us the permission to do this research. We would also like to extend our gratitude to Dr. Thinn Thinn Lei, Professor (Head), Department of Philosophy, Hinthada University, for her helpful suggestions.

¹ Buddhist Ethics and Duties (1999), Min Ti Za Mun-Ya Ta Na Min Literature, Yangon, Myanmar, p.128.

References

- Blacburn, Simon. (2006). Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy. Indian Edition. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kapitan, Tomis. (TK). (1995). Free Will Problem, in the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, Second Edition, ed. Robert Audi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shiner, Roger A. (R.A. Sh.). (1995). Responsibility, in the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, Second Edition, ed. Robert Audi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Woetzel, K. Robert. (1966). The Philosophy of Freedom. New York: Popular Library Inc.
- Silananda, Sayadaw U. (1999). Volition; An Introduction to the Law of Kamma. United States of America: Dhammacakkha Meditation Center.
- Cumming, Robert Denoon. (1965). The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. New York: Randan House.
- Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda. (1999). Buddhist Ethics and Duties. Yangon, Myanmar: Min Ti Za Muni-Ya Ta Na Min Literature.