

PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATE ON HUMANISM: A POST- MODERNISM APPROACH

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Abstract:

Unlike the ancient times, 'human' became the centre of all social and scientific discourse in the modern world. Man, with his inherent potentialities became capable of establishing comprehensive systems of knowledge. Again the individual man gets utmost concern in philosophy through the works of romanticism, especially during the existentialist movement led by the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. On 29th October 1945 Sartre delivered a public lecture entitled as is 'Existentialism a Humanism', which was soon to become World War, humanism became the manifesto to everyone's life. But with the development of human sciences, there are many things that have been gradually either ignored or isolated. The paper presents 'Man' as a modern abstract construction, which is also an incomplete project and therefore it needs to be deconstructed and redefined. The paper also tries to demonstrate the argument of the anti-humanistic movement led by post-modernist thinkers. Another contradiction lies when we talk about 'human rights' and about the feminist movement. If human rights stands for the protection of all human being's natural and legal rights then what is the need of feminist ideology as it is primarily associated with women empowerment.

Keywords: Humanism, Existentialism, Human rights, Modernism, Post-modernism.

Before the 18th century, 'Man' did not exist. It is not so long ago when the world, its order, and human beings existed, but man did not. (Foucault, 1971, p.322)

Of course, human beings existed before that, and may even have looked themselves as the centre of the universe. But they were central because God had made them that way. God was necessarily more central, and was the source of all knowledge. Human knowledge was limited, God was omniscient. But in the 18th and 19th centuries, God lost his place as the firm centre of all, who made all knowledge possible. Man was left with only himself

at the centre, as the source of knowing, and thus turned to intense examination of what this knowing being was. (Fillingham, 2000, p.83) Followed by this de-centralized notion of God, 'Humanism' a new thought emerged in the French pinnacle, which localized human being in its centre. It is widely used as it is indeterminate, a progressive philosophy of life with a belief that without theistic account or other supernatural power, which affirms man's ability and responsibility which leads then to be the master of all moral principles. After the post war period the humanistic philosophy was strengthened through the works of French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre. Sartre's attacks on essentialism and freed human beings from deterministic account catapulted him into the highly visible forefront of French thought.

But with the emergence of structuralism and Foucault's rigid statement 'death of man', humanism was seen by many as a dirty word, partly because of its implied anthropocentrism and partly due to some dubious political associations; the term was used by totalitarian regimes in justify their practices. After the post war enthusiasm for existentialism a wave of anti-humanism arose, led in Germany by Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism', which denounced the understanding of the essence of man presupposed by humanism as metaphysical. In France, the controversy about humanism was closely associated with the debates surrounding structuralism and with four main figures; such as Levi Strauss, Lacan, Althusser and Foucault himself. Correlatively, they emphasized the part of played by unconscious structures in the determination of thought and behaviour; the 'author' was redefined by Foucault as a 'function' of the texts rather than their source; Althusser re-described human agents as 'bearers' of historical determination, not as the actors of history. Braudel introduced the idea of multiple durations at work in history, of which 'eventful', human history was only the most superficial'. (O Leary', P.1-2)

Foucault's rejection of humanism has two faces. First, 'The Humanist Movement', he tells us, 'dates from the end of the 19th century by contrast to the cultures of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, where man literally has no place in them and the culture is primarily preoccupied with God. Secondly, Sartre's notion of Existential Humanism provides an indeterminate account of human being, belief in absolute freedom of human being. Let us elaborate the first notion of rejecting humanism, which is followed from his chief statements- 'Death of Man'. Foucault's anti humanist notion comes with his most

favoured work 'The Order of Things' (1996), in this book Foucault offers startling evidence that 'man' as a subject of scientific knowledge is at best recent invention, the result of a fundamental mutation in our culture. This particular book and Foucault's consistency in making intolerable statements established him as the most significant French thinker since Sartre. There are two more chief exponents come before, viz. Martin Heidegger and Nietzsche, who deeply influenced philosophy, especially Foucault at great length. While Nietzsche attacks the traditional moral values and principles by showing a genealogical analysis of 'slave-morality' and denounced Christianity by claiming 'Death of God', Foucault predicts a new notion the 'Death of Man', which presents an anti-humanist favour in his work 'The Order of Things'.

In 'The Order of Things' Foucault broadly argues that the contemporary notion of 'man' or 'human' is a historical construction or creation of modern 19th century human sciences. He argued,

Human sciences did not inherit a certain domain.... No philosophy, no political or moral option, no empirical sciences of any kind, no observation of the human body, no analysis of sensation, imagination and the passions, had ever encountered in the 17th or 18th centuries anything like man: for man did not exist; and the human sciences did not appear when, as a result of some pressing rationalism, some unresolved scientific problem, some practical concern, it was decided to include man. (Foucault, 1971, p.344)

It must be noted that Foucault was concerned with the philosophical notion of 'man' is construction, and not that the biological or animal species is a construction. What he tries to point out is that 'man' or the 'individual subject' is found in their position as self composed, independent agent, who give reference to the world through their intentional act, the foundations of all possible knowledge, an almost self-evident ground of our thought, all the definitions were served by 19th century emergence of human sciences, before that, individual subjects was no more as an empirical entity. The epistemological field of human being was traversed by the human sciences for the first time and thus became an object of sciences.

The notion of 'man' is a function of developments in fields such as philosophy, anthropology, psychology, biology, economics, etc. In short, Foucault argued what an individual is, is primarily based on the doctrines of these 'scientific' disciplines. Most of his book, however, is about how developments in these fields have been largely accidental and arbitrary with only tenuous connection to actual physical facts. The notion of 'man', in other words, is also kind of institutionally elaborated fiction. Based on historical precedent, Foucault states that just like the notion 'man' being a creation of the European culture, he also predicts that there will once again be an abrupt change in the conception of humanity, when that happens, what we today mean by 'man', i.e., our contemporary notion of humanity becomes obsolete and die out. Since it is a fictional notion, a recent invention, which predicts it might die and hence the dictum 'Death of Man'. In the conclusion of 'The Order of Things', Foucault says,

It is certain; man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge... European culture since the sixteenth century- one can be certain that man is a recent event within it. It is not around him and his secrets knowledge prowled for so long in the darkness. In fact, among all the mutations that has affected the knowledge of things and their order, the knowledge of identities, differences, characters, equivalences, words- was the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge. As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. Foucault argued, if those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do not more than sense the possibility- without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises – were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of classical thought did, at the end of the eighteen century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea. (Foucault, 1971, pp.386-387)

In the passage by 'man' 'Foucault never means human kind, rather a particular human view of cognitive process which takes them to be open to a kind of empirical investigation which can both provide a ground for knowledge and explain behaviour. This view, which Foucault refers to as 'humanism', is he claims, of recent origin, a product of the particular 'arrangement of knowledge', which he refers to as a 'the modern episteme'.

According to Foucault, this humanistic episteme is coming to end. So, the entire notion of Foucault is one of anti-humanistic, by virtue of his archaeological findings that human being as never a free entity or freed himself from historical conditions. A definition of human being was always served by the prevailing power forces over the time which can be traced both in his archaeological and genealogical investigations. Let us turn our attention to Foucault's second face of rejecting humanism, which is prominently followed from the French 'existential humanism' of Jean-Paul Sartre.

Sartre, one of the prominent French existentialist philosophers plays a significant role and deeply influenced French humanist literature that flourished in the post war period. It was like a golden age, where individual subject found back its utmost concerned with their existential life, meaning, and relationship with other, freedom, care and authenticity. Man, in the humanist literature, is much more likely to connote the dignity of the human person as an end in itself, the primacy of the subject or human freedom. It is not the case that, this existential thought was confined only to philosophical contexts, much rather its importance lies in considerably influencing contemporary life and thought. In every walk of life and in every discipline its impact was clearly visible. Celebrated literary figures too, could not remain immune to it capturing existentialist themes in abundance in their literary works. Albert Camus, Simon de Beauvoir, Franz Kafka, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Rilke and many more became its exponents producing not only traditional philosophical essays, but also, plays, novels, short stories and poems that reflected existential themes which were a rendition of the human condition and its myriad situations. Sartre and Camus in particular dramatically emerged from the French underground resistance and attracted a large international following with its brilliant and provocative essays, novels and dramas focusing on modern man's metaphysical predicaments and moral anguish.

In the fine arts, the haunting images of loneliness and bewilderment were created by painters and sculptors like Roul, Chirico, Giacometti. Franz Kafke's great piece of art 'The Great Wall of China' has visually embodied the consciousness of modern reality. All these thoughts that are lured to the European culture rendered from Sartre's declaration of an 'existentialist humanism, since claimed,

Since man is thus self-surpassing and can grasp objects only in relation to his self-surpassing, he is himself the heart and centre of his transcendence. There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity. This relation of transcendence as constitutive of man with subjectivity-it is that we call existential humanism. This is humanism, because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realisation, that man can realise himself as truly human. (Sartre, 1948, p.55)

Sartre makes a distinction between 'en-soi' and 'pour-soi' in his book 'Being and Nothingness' which leads us to the notion of freedom- the most seminal issue of his philosophy that gives a turn to humanism. Action implies freedom and there can be few themes, if any nearer to the heart of existentialism than 'freedom'. These themes find expressions in the work of all the existentialists, we note that Sartre's entire philosophical trajectory was guided by its unrelenting concern freedom. All the notions of Sartre's philosophy are divided from his chief argument 'existence precedes essence', which presents an anti-essentialist account and more emphasizes on human existence as prior to any other entity. Sartre states,

Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least, one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world-and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills.... (Sartre, 1948, p.28)

Followed by the statement, Sartre argues that if it is man's existence that is prior to any other essence, then there cannot be a fixed nature, which we call a human nature. Sartre writes,

Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn. For, he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is without excuse. For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's action by reference to a given and specific human nature. (Sartre, 1948, p.34)

With great precision Sartre rejects any kind of determinism or any fixed authority which governs human being rather he advocates and believes on man's absolute freedom thereby he outlined,

There is no determinism- man is free, man is freedom. We have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does. The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never regard a grand passion as destructive torrent upon which a man is swept into certain actions as by fate, and which, therefore, is an excuse for them. He thinks that man is responsible for his passion. Neither will an existentialist think that a man can find help through some sign being vouchsafed upon earth for his orientation: for he thinks that the man himself interprets the sign as he chooses. He thinks that every man. (Sartre, 1948, p.34)

Followed by this passage Sartre claims human being are neither predetermined nor they have any fixed destiny. The destiny of man is placed within himself. The very precedence of man existence entails his freedom to create his own destiny. He says,

Man is the maker of his own destiny, man makes himself. He is not found ready-made; he makes himself by his free choice. (Sartre, 1948, p.50)

Having said that man is free to choose his own choices thereby makes his own essences, Sartre states that is the point which gives a humanistic turn to existentialism and this is why Sartre says 'I have entitled 'existentialism and humanism'. He begins by saying that, existentialism, in our sense of the word, is a doctrine that does render human life possible; a doctrine, also, which affirms every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity. (Sartre, 1948, p.24)

Existentialism is Sartre concludes, in his book 'Existentialism and Humanism', by saying,

What is very heart and centre of existentialism is the absolute character of the free commitment, by which every man realizes himself in realizing a type of humanity- a commitment always understandable, to no matter whom in no matter what epoch- and its being upon the relativity of the cultural pattern which may result from such absolute commitment. One must observe equally the relativity of Cartesianism and the absolute character of the Cartesian commitment. (Sartre, 1948, p.42)

Sartre further explains,

Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself; he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is. (Sartre, 1948, p.47)

This is humanism, because we remind man that there is no legislator, but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular, that man can realize himself as truly human. (Sartre, 1948, p.56)

The humanistic wave in France flourished by Sartre came under the gaze of Foucault; however, both the thinkers, Sartre and Foucault, had encountered several meetings together even they demonstrated together in many protests on the roads of France. But at this point Foucault rejects Sartre's existentialism humanism, Foucault was the professor of history observations did not allow him to accept human being as mere self-sufficient, self-encompassing and self- transcendence being; and he is absolutely free to choose any

thing he want, as his archaeological and genealogical investigations find human being is implicitly tied up by social, cultural, political and economical conditions from the time human being existed. Foucault never denies these historical facts that shaped human being in different modes in each and every epistemic period.

In his book ‘The Order of Things’, Foucault precisely describes that human being finds his positions as finitude and to understand this paradox Foucault argued,

One has to locate an analyses at the appropriate level: ‘at the archaeological level, which reveals the general, historical a priori of each of these branches of knowledge [the human sciences], modern man- that man assignable in his corporeal, labouring and speaking existence – is only possible as a configuration of finitude. (Foucault, 1971, p.318)

In the boom ‘Existentialism and Humanism’ while Sartre left one with free to choose one’s own meaning, Foucault says, “no one is free” all are imprisoned by society’s language, and there is no meaning. Foucault argues that, it is not man that he makes himself, his essence or meaning, but it is the social structure in which he lives, gives the meaning to his essence. Foucault’s objection against Sartre can be draw from the statement of Sartre that, ‘Man first of all exists and defines himself afterwards’. The statement has two significant imports, first man’s act of existence and secondly the notion of free self; that he defines himself according to his free choices. What Foucault points out that perhaps Sartre was not concerned with the fact that ‘where do man exists’, when he said ‘man first of all exists’. He must exist in a particular ‘episteme’. And if it is, man immediately bound up by the environment or social structure in which he exists. The structure is logically followed from man’s very act of existence.

Again, Sartre holds the position that man makes himself according to his free choices. The notion of freedom generally implies one’s ability to determine the course of daily schedule and overall life direction. Foucault argues, that if human being is governed by his social structure then man’s making of free choices is also governed by that structure; that what man chooses, thinks and acts is determined by the linear structures. Foucault states,

In one sense, man is governed by labour, life and language: his concrete existence finds its determinations in them. It is possible to have access to him only through his words, his organism, the objects he makes- as though it is they who possess the truth in the first place and he, as he thinks, merely unveils himself to his own eyes in the form of a being who is already, in a necessarily subjacent destiny, in an irreducible anteriority, a living being, an instrument of production, a vehicle for words which exists before him. All these contents that his knowledge reveals him to him as exterior to himself, and older than his own birth, anticipate him, overhang him with all their solidity, and traverse him as though he were merely an object of nature, a face doomed to be erased in the course of history. Yet all those contents, with what they conceal and what they also leave pointing towards the frontiers of time, have positivity within the space of knowledge and approach the task of a possible acquisition of knowledge only because they are thoroughly imbued with finitude. For they would not be there, in the light that partly illumines them, if man who discovers himself through them, was trapped in the mute, nocturnal, immediate and happy opening of animal life; but nor would they posit themselves in the acute angle that hides them from their own direction if man could traverse them without residuum in the lighting flash of an infinite understanding. That is to say that each of these forms in which man can learn that he is finite is given to him only against the background of his own finitude. Moreover, the latter is not the most completely purified essences of positivity, but that upon the basis of which it is possible for positivity to arise. At the foundation of all the empirical positivities, and of everything that can indicate itself as a concrete limitation of man's existence, we discover a finitude – which is in a sense the same: it is marked by the spatiality of the body, the yawning of desire, and the time of language; and yet it is radically other: in the sense, the limitation is expressed not as a determination imposed upon man from outside, but as a fundamental finitude which rests on nothing but its own existence as fact, and opens upon the positivity of all concrete limitation. (Foucault, 1971, pp.313-314)

The key to this difficult excerpt lies in distinguishing between two different senses of finitude and to determination. The 'governance' of life, labour and language over our 'concrete existence' gives us a hint about the nature of what Foucault has called

elsewhere empirical finitude. It refers to causal determinations and resides in the fact that various processes in which they find themselves enmeshed from the day of their birth and over which they have little control determine human beings. Each in their own way, such processes disclose various aspects of our empirical finitude: we cannot alter our biochemistry so as to become immune to illness or aging, nor can we use a private language. Thus labour, life and language are the ‘forms in which man can learn that he is empirically finite’. Foucault also argues that ‘modern culture can conceive of man because it conceives of the finite on the basis of itself’. (Foucault, 1971, p.317)

Foucault’s critique of humanism, along with his proclamation of the ‘Death of Man’ and development of new perspectives on society, knowledge, discourse, and power, has made him a major source of post-modern thought. Foucault draws upon an anti-enlightenment tradition that rejects the equation of reason, emancipation and progress, arguing that an interface between modern forms of power and knowledge has served to create new forms of domination. In a series of historic-philosophical studies, he has attempted to develop and substantiate this theme from various perspectives: psychiatry, medicine, punishment and criminology, the emergence of the human sciences, the formation of various disciplinary apparatuses, and the constitution of the subject. Foucault’s project has been to write a ‘critique of our historical era’, which problematizes modern forms of knowledge, rationality, social institutions, and subjectivity that seem given and natural but in fact are contingent socio-historical constructs of power and domination.

What is core at the heart of Foucault’s rejection of humanism, that the notion ‘man’ by which he never meant the ‘human person’, nor to any ‘substantial I’, nor to free consciousness, rather the surprising historical reconstruction of its birth, which is referred to by the enlightenment again, the genealogical analysis shows different modes of human subject emerged from the play of power/knowledge relationship. Foucault’s this approach to humanism is often treated him as a structuralist as his both archaeological and genealogical analysis seeks to reveal the unconscious structures that form each episteme. But Foucault never accepted the structuralist label to his philosophical analysis. Regarding this structuralist position, Foucault in his book ‘The Order of Things’ writes,

I request to the English-speaking reader and in France, certain half-witted ‘commentators’ persist in labelling me a ‘structuralist’. I have been unable to get

it into their tiny minds that I have used none of the methods, concept, or key terms that characterize structural analysis. I should be grateful if a more serious public would free me from a connection that certainly does me honour, but that I have not deserved. There may well be certain similarities between the works of the structuralist and my own work. It would hardly behove me, of all people, to claim that my discourse is independent of conditions and rules of which I am very largely unaware, and which determine other work that is being done today. But it is only too easy to avoid the trouble of analyzing such work by giving it an admittedly impressive-sounding, but inaccurate, label. (Foucault, 1971, p.xiv)

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