

Philosophical essay

Freedom has for many centuries been one of the virtues of life, which almost everyone strives to obtain. It is an important value, and one we base the foundation of our democracy, institutions and everyday life on. Although freedom is mostly perceived as a positive, necessary part of our lives, it can also create problems for the individual human being. Jean-Paul Sartre, a French philosopher, based most of his existentialist philosophy on the basis that man is free, which is emphasized further in the following quote *“Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.”* (Jean-Paul Sartre). To explore Sartre’s interesting approach to the concept of freedom, it is relevant to take a closer look at the core of his philosophy.

According to Sartre, all human beings are born free. However, a closer look at the chosen Sartre quote reveals his true belief in the concept of free will. By using the word *“condemned”*, which is a very negative charged word, he underlines that freedom is not a gift to the human race, as many people tend to believe, but a burden. According to Sartre, we are condemned to be free, because it would be so much easier if we were not free. A further explanation of this point requires the establishment of one of the most important terms in Sartre’s philosophy; the choice. Through the choices we make in life, we create our meaning and identity. To Sartre, there are two ways we can choose to live our lives; we can act, and take responsibilities for our actions, or we can live passively, where the latter of course leads to nowhere. However, this freedom of choice makes life so much more complicated. According to Sartre, our existence comes before our essence, which subsequently creates a gaping hole, when we must find out what to do with our existence. In reality, it would be a lot easier if it was the other way around. If we, before we were born, already knew what we would become, the constant confusion and confrontation with “the choice” would be eliminated. But this is not ideal, and Sartre would also argue that we would live in a kind of delusional world, where we would think it would be acceptable not to act.

To return to Sartre’s point about the condemnation to freedom regarding the liberty of choice, Sartre also emphasizes greatly that because we are free, we are entirely responsible for our

choices and actions. No other human being can be held responsible for our failures, as it is the individual, who has made the choice. This is a valid argument to a certain extent, since it in some situations can be easy to neglect one's responsibility by saying the deed was only done under the influence of others. However, one may argue that Sartre has a tendency to see the world as very black and white. A popular example of this is the case of the soldier, who is forced into war. To Sartre, the man has two options; he can choose to enter the military, and thus becoming a part of the warfare, or he can choose to commit suicide, hence he avoids going into war. If the man chooses option number one, he will be held responsible for killing people, and the argument that he only did it because he was forced to is invalid, since he in theory had a choice. While this case in particular is difficult to transfer into everyday life, it seems too simple to think that people are one hundred percent responsible for everything that happens to them. It must seem possible, too, that other people's choices have just as big an impact on our lives that our own do. If we return to the case with the man again; if another human being had not made the choice of forcing him into war, he would not be in that particular situation. It is, after all, important to be able to see a situation from different angles and nuances, rather than to boil it down to the dilemma between acting and not acting.

The dilemma of fate versus free will has been a greatly debated topic for centuries. While Sartre clearly marks his standpoint on the latter, people of various religious beliefs often view life as a path decided by God, i.e. no free will. One may argue that the belief in fate creates some sort of comfort. If we know that everything happens for a reason, it is easier to accept the world as it is, since we thus do not have to create a path for ourselves. As an atheist, Sartre comments on the world after Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God in the late 19th century. As a result of this, there is no longer a god who can decide our norms, paths etc. If there is no god, the world has no before-given meaning, and thus becomes meaningless. While Sartre believed that we must create meaning through our choices, Albert Camus, another well-known French existentialist and friend of Sartre, believed that a certain meaning of life cannot be found. This is where the two philosophers differ from each other regarding the philosophy of man. Camus was, too, a firm believer in existence as the only basic condition for man. As a result of no before-given meaning of anything, the world appears absurd. It has already been established that Sartre's belief in

existence before essence has problematized the individual's position in the world and with its identity. One may argue that Camus' further problematizes it. While Sartre believed that we must find a meaning with the world, and when we do, we will find happiness, Camus believed that although we have free will, we will not be able to find a given meaning to life, so in the end, we must accept its absurdity. Only then will we be able to enjoy life. To Camus, the big philosophical question was simply whether life was worth living or not. The idea of just accepting the meaninglessness and absurdity seems, of course, absurd. Furthermore, it also seems as a complicated task to get to this point. On the contrary, however, it can also seem easier to just accept the absurdity; in some sense, it can seem even more difficult to find a meaning to life, rather than to accept that there is none. Following either Camus' or Sartre's philosophies should, of course, not be interpreted literally as an actual guide to how to live your life, but rather as a life-philosophy and how to interpret the world.

Although the two French existentialists had their golden age in the 1960's, their view of life may seem more relevant in today's society. The condemnation to freedom creates a broad spectrum of possible options. Furthermore, while the number of options has grown increasingly bigger, so has the choices we have to make. In the postmodern society, we are able to change our identities and choose our own path in life, rather than in a more traditional society, where it was often decided what path of life you should choose, even before you were born. The natural reaction to an enormous amount of choices is confusion. Because we have so much to choose from, people today are more confused about their identities than ever. Furthermore, the hyper-globalization and social media creates a constant reminder of other people's choices, which makes us doubt whether we have made the right choice or not. If one agreed with Sartre's belief of man being responsible for our own actions, it naturally creates a pressure, since we must take full responsibility of the choice we made, even if it was wrong. This is where the word condemnation becomes relevant again; free will may seem as a positive thing on the surface, but the psychological effects of it causes several problematics. Maybe we would be better off having a before-given meaning?

To conclude, Jean-Paul Sartre was a firm believer in the fact that man is condemned to be free. The condemnation to freedom leaves the individual confused and confronted with several choices, which, according to Sartre, we must take full responsibility of, seeing that we have free will. While this on its own can lead to several points of critique, there is a sort of explanatory value to his argument. By saying that we must take responsibility of our own actions, we can be able to use Sartre's theories to explain the confusion and desperation of especially the youth of today's society. Since our world is evolving faster and faster every year, it becomes even more difficult to find our place in society. Sartre and Camus represent two different views on how to get to a point of comfort and being able to live your life. Both philosophers' ideal seems very difficult to obtain, but that may be the entire moral behind the problematics; it is naïve to believe that you can easily find 'a path in life' and thus become happy. Furthermore, the problematization of our free will may seem to lead to a discussion of whether it is a good thing or a bad thing. But it should rather be concluded, that free will is, at least for many, an undeniable fact of life. If the presence of choices caused by our free will is constantly established, it will continue to stress us and pressure us. Rather than to problematize it, we should accept that it is unchangeable, and thus be able to make choices based on our wishes and needs.