

# Sushant Singh Read Jean-Paul Sartre. Why is Sartre Still Relevant?

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French philosopher and iconoclast Jean-Paul Sartre has gained newfound interest and popularity among Indians, after some accounts presented late actor Sushant Singh Rajput as having read and appreciated his works – something that made the actor seem distinguished and intellectual – since Sartre’s work is not exactly thought of as light reading.

Incidentally it was also Sartre’s 115th birth anniversary on 21 June 2020. So, what makes his ethos, his ideas and concepts so relevant even today? He wrote in detail about his idea of ‘collective responsibility’, ‘alienation’, and of course, ‘freedom’. This is an attempt to demystify Sartre.

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## The ‘Burden of Responsibility’

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Those who believe that Sartre was someone who didn’t take into consideration the importance of collective freedom are wrong. He said that an individual will be free only when the collective is free. Yes, he did talk about individual freedom and its importance but he also did say that an individual and his acts are responsible for the collective too. “Existence precedes essence”. We create meaning in our life. We are our own creators. Nothingness is important to this being. According to Sartre, we always have the freedom to make meaning in our life. Freedom to have a ‘project’. And we attempt to understand the world through these ‘projects’. For example, the process of writing a book and the act itself can become a project giving meaning to one’s life.

In one of his works on existentialism, ‘Being and Nothingness’, Sartre discusses the ‘burden of responsibility’.

This so-called ‘burden’ exists because of a human being’s inherent desire to be free. To be free, and to act freely is essential for a human being, and thus, acts springing out of such desire for freedom brings with it the burden of responsibility. On the face of it, we might understand this concept as being a prescriptive one, the one telling us that to act with freedom (or in Sartre’s understanding of it, to just act) is to be responsible not just for the act but also for the consequences of those actions.

Human beings, Sartre posits, are responsible for their own consciousness. With that, they also thus become responsible for the actions that follow from the free consciousness. Total freedom cannot be separated from total responsibility.

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### **The Importance of 'Choice' In Freedom**

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For Sartre, consciousness, existence, nothingness and freedom are all synonymous terms. He sees existence as synonymous with freedom. He explained 'situational limitation', 'material limitation' vis-à-vis our freedom. He termed it as 'facticity'. For example, I really want to use the skate board but recently have had a leg injury. I cannot use it, otherwise I will end up hurting myself more. Being stuck in a situation like this is called 'facticity'. For him, *choice* is one of the most important factors in freedom.

In existentialism and humanism, where he argues that one's freedom depends on the freedom of the others, he writes: "In willing freedom, we discover that it depends entirely upon the freedom of others. I cannot make liberty my aim unless I make that of others equally aim."

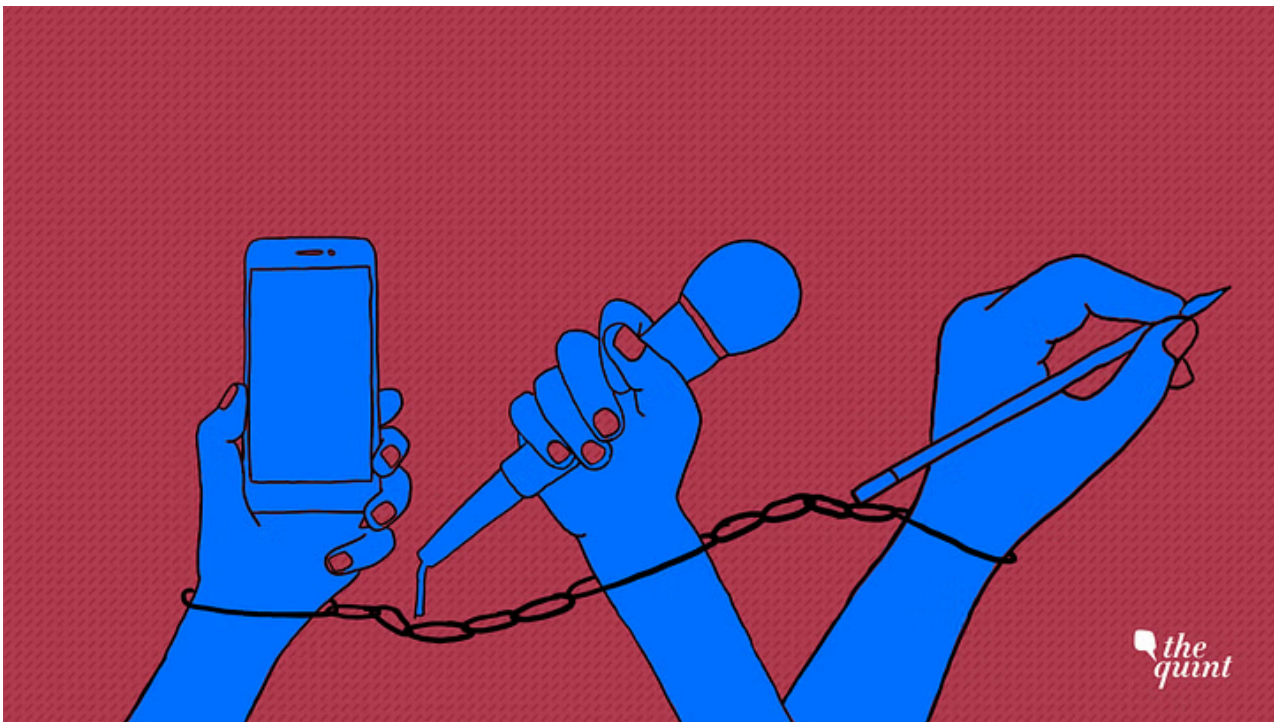
Thus, attaching the idea of freedom with a sense of responsibility, and this freedom comes with a sense of solidarity.

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## ‘Escape from Nothingness’

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On the contrary, ‘alienation’, according to Sartre, happens when human beings don’t accept or take responsibility for themselves, and towards their freedom. Shame and ‘the look’ both act as ‘confession’ to Sartre. In his words:

“My original fall,” says Sartre, “is the existence of the other, shame like pride is the apprehension of myself as a nature.” (*Being and Nothingness*, page no. 350)

His idea of ‘existential crisis’ which, many use as a litmus test, holds an altogether different meaning.

It stands for self-awareness: our relationship with the world, our own circumstances and our existence.

Think about these people who are addicted to social networking sites, browsing it, soaking all the pseudo information about pretence here and there. These sites, they tell us it’s not alright to have emptiness in us. They claim that life is about moments, escape, travel and what not. In Sartre’s view, this would have been escapism from our nothingness.

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## ‘Denying the Truth’

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Sartre says that essentially free beings have a tendency to deceive themselves into believing that they are not *actually* free. To escape the burden of responsibility, they choose to deny the fact that they are free agents. This phenomenon, Sartre calls, ‘*Bad Faith*’.

This means deceiving ourselves from the truth. His concept of 'bad faith' is equivalent to the concept of self-deception. He gives the example of a lady sitting in a café with a man. The man likes her, so he decides to show his affection by putting his hand on her hand; the lady being is in a dilemma over what she needs. Instead of either protesting or accepting that touch, she chooses to be reticent in this situation. Hence, doing 'bad faith', as she doesn't want to accept what she truly wants.

In our opinion, social networking sites could pave the way for this. In the name of autonomy/ freedom, we are also denying the truth: truth to be someone else, truth to possess the right to pretend.

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## The Real & The Fake

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To illustrate 'bad faith' further, he gives the example of a waiter in a cafe who is 'only pretending to be a waiter' when compared to a waiter who has maybe a more natural disposition of a waiter. So, the waiter who is apparently 'bad' at being a waiter, and is only playing at being one, is aware at some conscious level that he is in fact *not* a good waiter. He is only deceiving himself.

At one time or another, we have all stepped into the shoes of that proverbial waiter.

| We end up believing that we are what our social functions make us.

It can be perhaps some external source of identity that is given to us, and we go on playing that part, no matter how bad we are at it. We do it simply because we think that we are not free to do so otherwise, and the situation is beyond our control. We deceive ourselves as not being free and not being in control of our actions, as it is easier than carrying the burden of responsibility.

To understand how relevant it is for us even today, let us look at a simple issue.

| In today's era of rapid creation and consumption of information, it becomes difficult for people to differentiate between the real and the fake.

The differentiation is mostly important when it comes to news. Various cases of serious brutality trace their beginnings in such pieces of fake information.

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## Cheers to Freedom & An Authentic Life

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Various social media platforms are used to create, circulate and consume these kinds of information, which seldom get verified. People who receive such information and pass it on, further deceive themselves by, firstly, not questioning what they are sharing, and

secondly, by assuming a comfortable position of denying any responsibility that their acts of sharing this fake news further might carry.

These common people avoid the burden of responsibility by avoiding cross-checking data, and also thinking that they are mere units in the huge chain of social media where information is circulated.

Therefore, they are seen as putting themselves in 'bad faith'. Sartre's references to 'bad faith' can be well identified in the everyday life of human beings who more often than not, are all waiters, only pretending to be so, deceiving their own selves.

There are numerous concepts of Sartre which teach us how to live an authentic life. Once his partner said, "Oh shut up, Sartre!" But all we can say is, "Cheers to Freedom!"

*(Dr Richa Shukla is Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Jindal Global Business School, OP Jindal Global University.*

*Inputs by Dalorina Nath, who is a researcher.*

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