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This page was added by the journal. The article begins on the next page.

Analysing Freedom and Responsibility in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*

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Abstract

Sartre, in his many works, regards responsibility as the necessary consequence of inalienable human freedom. This fact also made him favours his notion of "either/or" between God's existence and human freedom strictly. For Sartre, "it is either God exists, or man is free and responsible." Jean-Paul Sartre took a very bold step to directly oppose the mainstream Western philosophy, which typically attempts to reconcile human responsibility with the existence of an all-powerful and all-knowing being. Moral responsibility links traditionally with God, as the ultimate guarantor of values and sanctions. Sartre repudiates the components of this traditional view and regards God as an impediment to human freedom and responsibility. The tension between human freedom and God is, therefore, deemed to be insoluble. Sartre thinks human responsibility makes sense only if there is no God; otherwise, divine foreknowledge and predestination will necessarily exclude alternative options and consequently, responsibility. The paper, therefore, did a critical analysis of the philosophical idea of freedom and responsibility in Jean-Paul Sartre. It analysed Sartre's idea that: when a man in existence defines what he is; man is both free to fashion his self and is accordingly, responsible for the outcome of his actions.

Keywords: Jean-Paul Sartre, Freedom & Responsibility, Choice, Human Condition, Bad Faith, Anguish

Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy is rooted in his book "*Being and Nothingness.*" In the book, Sartre (1966) introduces the single most significant enunciation of his existentialist philosophy as an essay in phenomenological ontology. Essentially, it is a reflection of the knowledge of being. *Ontology* means the study of being; while *phenomenological* means or relates to perceptual consciousness. In the introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1966) reveals his dismissal of Kant's concept of *noumenon*. Kant was an idealist, thinking

that we have no direct way of comprehending the external world and that all we have access to is our ideas of the world, including what our senses tell us. Kant differentiated between *phenomena*, which are our perceptions of things or how things look to us, and *noumena*, which are the things in themselves, which we do not know. Against Kant, Sartre argues that the expression of a phenomenon is pure and absolute. The noumenon is not inaccessible—it is merely not there. Appearance becomes the only reality.

From this opening point, Sartre contends that the world is as an infinite series of finite appearances. Such a perspective eliminates dualism, notably the duality that distinguishes the inside and outside of an object. What we perceive is what we get (or, what appears is what we know). After the concept of the noumenon, Sartre(1966) draws the binary distinction that controls the rest of *Being and Nothingness*: the differentiation between unconscious being (*en-soi*, being-in-itself) and conscious being (*pour-soi*, being-for-itself). Being-in-itself is concrete, cannot change and is oblivious of itself. Being-for-itself is conscious of its consciousness, but is also fragmentary. For Sartre, this undefined, undetermined nature is what defines a man. Since the for-itself (like a man) requires a predetermined essence, it is forced to create itself from nothingness. For Sartre, nothingness is the defining characteristic of the for-itself. A tree is a tree and cannot change or create its being.

Man, on the other hand, makes himself by acting in the world. Instead of merely being, as the object-in-itself does, man, as an object-for-itself, must actuate his being. For a fuller appreciation of his philosophy, it is necessary to understand his concept of "Being and Nothingness" and its relevance to man's freedom. He illuminates his approach to man's freedom by his clarification of the sophisticated features of human beings. In essence, Sartre's treatment of *Being and Nothingness* centres on the evaluation of the nature and life of real human beings. The assertion underscores the importance of *Being and Nothingness* in his concept of man's freedom. Through his approach to being and nothingness, Jean-Paul Sartre perceives freedom as an existential fact by deduction from the nature of man, as a conscious being who has a vacuum in himself; which he must be free to fill in any way conceivable by him.

Our existence in the world, as shown by Sartre, does not just involve knowing that we exist in a combination of action with feelings and attitude. As far as we allow ourselves to be fully involved in the material substance of the world, we must have a feeling of nausea. Our position in the world makes us have a sense of futility and dispensability that is analogous to

the sense of the absurd. Similarly, Sartre asserted that whenever we can recognise our freedom, we have a sense of anguish. There is a tendency to raise questions on how free we are when we examine some of those things that we apply our freedom in doing and in choosing. Sartre does not restrict himself to inquiring into freedom for a man at the expense of the circumstances of his environment, birth and other constraints, but he goes to evaluate his responsibilities further. However, a thorough introspection into the being of man reflects the fact and role of freedom. According to Sartre, man does not exist first in order to be free'. Afterwards, there is no difference between the being of man and his being free. The essential importance of our earlier remarks is that man is condemned to be free; carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is accountable for the world and himself as a way of being. Considering the identity of the being of man and his freedom, he said, "for lack of getting out of it, I have chosen it" (Sartre, 1977) We practically, flee this knowledge and responsibility by lying to ourselves.

Freedom and responsibility

When a man conceived to be free: it means that the idea of man's freedom is not negotiable. In essence, man is born into freedom. Moreover, this freedom of men has many burdens. Since the idea of being free implies that there is no excuse for man's actions, it, therefore, suffices to say that "man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole and for himself as a way of being." Responsibility, on the other hand, implies the cultivation of consciousness by one to the effect that one is the author of all one's actions. So, in reality, the responsibility of man is natural, since he is the one through which there exists a world; and the one who makes himself to be what he is. There is a need for one to be proud and satisfied to reckon with the outcome of one's action, hence the reaction of Orestes to Zeus's accusation: "I am no criminal, and you have no power to make me atone for an act I do not regard as a crime" (Sartre, 1969). Anything capable of threatening and endangering one's life has meaning only through one's project. Being responsible for ones action is logically follow-up by ones absolute freedom. We should not regard this freedom as resignation.

To make such objections as "*I did not ask to be born*" is instead an indirect way of placing more importance on my facticity. The fact is that everyone is responsible for everything that happened to him. The only fact is that no one is the reason for his or her very being. That man was abandon in the world is not in the sense of his being passive in a hostile world; but simply that he found himself in a situation where he has to be fully responsible for his action without any aversion to escape. The situation occurs because one is responsible even for one's every desire of fleeing one's responsibilities.

On the other hand, that one makes oneself passive, and as a result, refuses to act is a choice that one has made for oneself to remain passive. There is, therefore, no escape for man in all his actions. He is entirely and singularly responsible for them. Since we can choose the world devoid of external forces, we have no excuses for our action. We cannot say–"*I could not help doing it*"– when it is evident that we can help the situation. Because whatever we do or become is not because we have to, but because we want to. This thought is quite harsh, and we become anguished in the face of it. There is a big agony in becoming aware of the fact that everything is up to us. In essence, man's freedom makes it imperative for him to choose always. So, the anguish of freedom is the anguish before the necessity of choosing, and every choice we make involves elimination. Sartre is saying that man is entirely free and responsible for all his actions.

Some concepts in Sartre's freedom and responsibility: Existence precedes essence

Though Sartre (1977) believes that existence precedes essence as an existentialist; some other existentialists like Gabriel Marcel disagreed. For instance, Gabriel Marcel, labelled by Sartre as a "Christian existentialist" is said to have refused to subordinate "essence to existence" [Gabriel Marcel, Tragic Wisdom and Beyond, tr. Stephen Jolin and Peter McCormick, intro. Stephen Jolin in Evanston: Northwestern U. Pr., 1973, p. xxxii].It is therefore contestable that this theme was prevalent among all existentialists. That is to say, that man exists first of all and then makes his essence. They believe that man is the meaning of making a subject. It is whatever a man makes of himself that he will be because they believe that man is ultimately free. There is nothing to determine his nature. Man must continually strive to choose from the limitless choices facing him.

There are other themes like freedom and responsibility, a man in the world, others, among others in existentialism. In describing existentialism and existentialists, it is necessary to note that during the heyday of existentialism, a disclaimer that was often issued conveyed that existentialism was not a doctrine whose traits could be enumerated to define a specific set of thinkers and writings. There are many different and sometimes contrary "existentialist" approaches, including: theistic and atheistic; phenomenological and metaphysical; personalist and individualist; and philosophical and literary. As such, it was rather practically impossible to arrive at any well-delineated categorisation.

Freedom

Freedom is the central and unique potentiality which compounds us as human. We are

condemned to be free. We must decide and act from within whatever situation we find ourselves. Sartre rejects determinism, saying that it is our choice how we react to determining tendencies. Sartre opines, "If I mobilise in a war, this war is my war; it is in my image, and I deserve it. I deserve it first because I could always get out of it by suicide or by desertion" (Sartre, 1969).

Choice

Here, we are inclined to assume- *I am my choices. I cannot choose. If I do not choose, that is still a choice.* If faced with predetermined conditions, we still choose how we are in those circumstances. In choice, as W. Sellas puts it, man is in a situation and has to handle it as best as he can. He must commit himself. In life, a man commits himself, draws his portrait, and there is nothing but that portrait (Sartre, 1969). Each of us is liable for everything we do. If we seek advice from others, we choose our advisor and have some idea of the plan he or she will recommend. "I am responsible for my very desire of fleeing responsibilities" (Stumpf, 1976) In essence, one cannot avoid making a choice. A refusal to choose is, in fact, a choice already made. Refusing to choose is one way of choosing. To refuse to make a decision is itself a decision. We are fully responsible for our being in the world; there is no way we can escape responsibility for the role we have chosen to play in the world.

Despair (anguish)

Despair is sometimes called anguish, anxiety, the feeling of abandonment, dread, arising as a result of the absurdity of human existence. According to Sartre, there is always an element of despair in human existence. It comes from the "realisation that we are limited to what is within the scope of our wills "(Ndubuisi, 2006). For Heidegger, this feeling comes from confronting one's finitude, the human nothingness. The feeling of anguish comes from realising the import of one's freedom- "when one realises that one is responsible for oneself as well as to others." (Priest, 2001). Accordingly, anguish sets in "when a man commits himself to anything, fully realising that he is not only choosing what he will be but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole mankind" (Priest, 2001). It was this situation that Abraham found himself when he was asked to sacrifice his only son. There is nothing to tell Abraham if indeed the voice he heard was that of an angel. At that point, whatever decision made was solely his responsibility. He has the freedom to choose either to sacrifice his son or not. The decision was his and his alone.

Bad faith

One of the significant claims in existentialism is that human beings are always free to make

choices and manage their lives towards their own chosen goal. This freedom is so unbearable and inescapable that it fills us with so much dread, which we are afraid to face. Rather than face our identities as a free conscious subject, "we pretend to ourselves that we are mechanistic, determined objects. Refusing to make ourselves what we are freely, we masquerade as fixed essence by the adoption of hypocritical social roles and inert value systems" (Ndubuisi, 2006). Moreover, in the process, we refuse to accept that we are what we make of ourselves. The attempt is to avoid facing the import of man's freedom is what the existentialist called Bad Faith. The concept of Bad Faith was developed and popularized by Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir to describe the phenomenon where a human being under pressure from societal forces adopts false values and disown their innate freedom.

According to Sartre(1966), bad faith occurs when one tries to rationalise his existence or actions by religion, science, or some other belief system which imposes import or consistency on human existence. Bad faith is an attempt to avoid despair, anxiety and anguish, which comes from the realisation that human existence has no meaning or purpose except the one we create ourselves. Thus, bad faith comes from within us and is itself a choice; a way that a person uses his freedom to avoid dealing with the consequences of freedom due to the massive responsibility that those consequences entail.

Sartre developed this concept of bad faith from his discussion on consciousness. According to Sartre, life has no meaning, no value before the conscious act of living. It is humans that breathe life into existence when they become conscious of themselves as living beings faced with a choice and the freedom to make them. This consciousness is the awareness one possesses of all things surrounding him. If the individual is unaware of an object, then he cannot know the said object. From the standpoint of consciousness, comes nothingness. Nothingness is the consciousness that we develop when we become aware of an object. When an individual becomes aware of an object, he immediately becomes aware that before this consciousness, he was conscious of nothingness, which made Sartre (1996) posits that "consciousness is a being, the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being."

In analysing how man most times behave negatively to himself in other to deny any future transcendence, Sartre tells us that "one's consciousness acts in such a way as to show some actions as being impossible which other human reality projects as possible ". For this reason, consciousness must always arise as a 'not'. Sartre uses irony to help us understand the inwardness of consciousness. In irony, a man annihilates what he posits within the same

act, he leads us to believe in order not to believe, he affirms to deny and denies to affirms; he creates a real object, but it has no being other than its nothingness (Satre, 1966). It is this show of negative attitude by man to himself that makes consciousness rather than to direct its negation outward, turn it to itself. Bad faith stems from this attitude.

Bad faith can also liken to falsehood. Sartre explains that lying, in general, implies that the liar is in complete possession of the actual truth. The liar intends to deceive and does not seek to hide this from himself. For a lie to qualify as a lie, the liar must be aware of the correct position of what he is misinterpreting. He must be fully aware of the situation; for one cannot be accused of lying when he acts in error or when he is mistaken. To Sartre (1966) bad faith does not originate from outside humanity. No person undergoes bad faith. No person infects with bad faith. Bad faith grows from within, stemming from a discomfort with the truth and absolute freedom.

The past and the exercise of freedom

We transform past tendencies through our choices. Explanations in terms of family, socioeconomic status among others do not tell us why an interested person makes the crucial choices. Hence it can be said that man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfils himself. He is, therefore, nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life. It is our future that decides if our past is living or dead. The only force of the past will come from the future. One can only evaluate his past in the light of one's project toward the future. Sartre completely rejects the overhead views that our past determines us as a factor that could hinder the project of man. Sartre's ideal man is that man who does not allow his past to hinder response to the situation of the moment.

As Fell (1965) puts it, man is capable of a psychological negation of his past. One can, for example, decide to try not to be in the future what he was in the past. Our past does not hinder the exercise of our freedom. Human reality recognises and defines itself by the ends, which it pursues rather than by alleged causes in the past. A brave person is simply someone who habitually acts bravely. Each action contributes to defining who we are, and at any moment, we can begin to act differently and draw a different portrait of ourselves. There is always a probability of changing, of starting to make a different kind of choice. To be free is regarded as to be free to change. Under this dispensation, we have the power of transforming ourselves indefinitely.

Analysis of Freedom and Responsibility

In an apparent attempt to solidly defend his stance on human freedom, Jean-Paul Sartre refuses to give enough attention to some critical issues that affect it. It is either that he denies outrightly that such issues exist or maintains that it is within the prerogative of man to surmount such resistance to the achievement of his goal. He contends that it is in the world that man realises himself, for it is inconceivable to talk of a world without man or man that does not exist in the world. Of course, no one is responsible for what has preceded this "thrust toward existence" simply because we do not come to the world based on our consent- but are, so to speak, "thrown" into it. However, we are responsible for everything that follows(Stumpf, 1976). Now that the excellent source and foundation of responsibility is gone, the question arises to whom man could be responsible in the first place? Sartre's answer is simple: only to himself. Not even to some absolute moral standards.

From the previously established priority of existence Sartre(1966) now derives two intellectual tasks with a clear practical import: (1) To make sure every man is aware of "what he is" (this sounds like an enlightenment project of ever-increasing awareness) and (2) To "make the full responsibility of his existence" rest on man (this comes down to a kind of "total responsibility" which does not allow for excuses). Full responsibility for one existence bases on self-awareness and personal freedom to enable us to make choices. By exercising the freedom to choose, man becomes responsible for himself. However, his responsibility does not stop there; it extends to other people so that in the end, it assumes the form of universal responsibility. There are at least three circles in the extension of our responsibility:

a. Individual responsibility: If existence precedes essence, man is responsible for his actions (and his individuality). Here we have to understand that the individual responsibility corresponds to the common-sense notion of responsibility.
b. Total responsibility: If a man is free to choose what he is going to make of himself, he is entirely responsible for what he is becoming. Total responsibility is intended to reduce typical excuses for our choices and actions: human nature, heredity, subconscious drives, emotions, circumstances, external forces.
c. Universal responsibility: If a man is fully responsible for what he is presenting as the image of man, he is responsible for all men. Universal responsibility rigidly based on individual responsibility: a man is responsible for all men not in the sense that one is responsible for what every idiot might be doing, but in the sense that in his actions he involves humanity one way or another. It means both those choices made for

other men (they involve, implicate others) and on behalf of humankind as implicit but universally binding norms.

It is important to note that one can accept both (a) and (b) as self-evident. Every human action reveals an underlying rule of conduct. However, (c) poses many problems. Of course, taken literally, "choosing for others" does not make much sense; I cannot choose for others, nor can they choose for me. Sartre (1996) obviously means "representatively", and the question is then, how can he justify this transition from individual choosing for himself to choosing for humanity. The answer is not clear, let alone convincing. It is important to remark that the idea of the universal bearing of our acts is essentially Kantian.

In his Categorical Imperative, Kant demands that moral agents act so that the individual keeps humanity in his mind or another phrasing that the maxim of his conduct could become a rule for others. By taking over an old Stoic view, Kant has formulated a principle of legislation for humankind which allows that we fully exercise our freedom. Man is free as long as he is subject to his legislation. Sartre is now incorporating this principle of universalisation into his ethics in an attempt to defuse the allegations of propounding moral anarchy and relativism.

Norms and values in our actions

Actions derive not from some antecedent values and norms. Norms and values reside in our actions; they are not something transcendent. They are immanent to our actions which themselves are implicit statements of values. By choosing something, we pronounce it valuable. Now Sartre makes another bold move and claims: (i) that "we always choose good" and (ii) that "we can never choose evil". However, he also asserts (iii) that "nothing can be good for us without being good for all". These are surely surprising statements for an existentialist who should be very careful not to claim something that imposes counterfactual norms over reality. Moreover, these claims appear to be as counterfactual as they could be. Those claims are outright false or even absurd statements for this reason.

Sadly enough (but undeniably) one can choose something harmful to themselves and even more. People can also choose to do something terrible and harmful to others. It could happen that what we have chosen turns into something that is not good either for us or others. Before one makes a final judgment on Sartre's theory of "good choosing" it is advisable first to gauge the proper meaning of his statements. In doing so, one needs to distinguish carefully different layers in this admittedly strange doctrine. Let us examine all

three claims step by step- Do people always choose good? The majority of people do not think so. However, for Sartre, it is contradictory to choose something and not to affirm it as useful. In other words, he claims that we always choose what we view as good at least to us. Unless I am a masochist, it would be strange to say that I am deliberately choosing something wrong or harmful for me.

It is an old Socratic idea developed in the Gorgias. Socrates assumes that a man who acts should know the goodness of his action. If the man does not know that, he runs a risk of incurring a misfortune to himself. If we choose something which is not right, as sometimes happens (at least in the eyes of bystanders), it is so because we do not recognise it as bad. We believed it was good for us. Once we realise its true nature, we cannot choose it because what is terrible ultimately turns harmful to us. However, no one wants to do any harm to `himself. Bad things could not be a desire for the sake of themselves. Therefore they could not be our ends, and no one wants them. We cannot desire what is bad, at worst, only what we see fit.

Can I be wrong, and can I sometimes choose evil? According to Sartre(1966), this is not possible because to choose and to choose something good are synonymous expressions. One is, of course, tempted to immediately retort by pointing to those who choose to do bad things knowingly. Sartre answers that these people treat evil as good. Even if one said: "Evil, you be my good" (Milton) he would think it was good for him to choose that way. It is not perhaps useful "in itself", but "in itself" is meaningless and irrelevant in concrete situations. What we have chosen shows what we deemed right for us and what we knowingly or not proclaimed as good for man. Nietzsche on his part affirms Sartre's adoption of Socrates. For Sartre as well as for Nietzsche, it is possible not to regard "bad" as bad simply because there is no pre-given (objective) standards of morality. What one deems an expression of freedom or feeling of liberation in terms of our potentials is right no matter what.

Can we choose something suitable for us, but objectively not good for others? It seems to happen now and then. However, here again, Sartre goes against conventional notions and asserts that when I choose something, I affirm it not only for myself but for everybody, including my generation and my age. So there is no such thing as an objectively wrong choice. How come? The answer is that, for Sartre(1996), every act is an act of universalisation in a twofold sense. Every particular choice exemplifies both an "image of man" and "involves all mankind". If my acts involve all men, they involve myself, and then (i) and (ii) will apply ("we always choose good", "we can never choose evil").

On the other hand, "in choosing myself, I choose a man" so that it is impossible to choose exclusively for oneself. Moreover, since I choose good for myself, I cannot choose the bad for man, even if what I have chosen turns out bad in its "objective" consequences. One last correction to the seemingly subjectivist statement that 'I always choose good' (for me) is that my choice must pass the universalisation test in order to be viable for me as well. Sartre is now incorporating this principle of universalisation into his ethics in an attempt to resolve the allegations of propounding moral anarchy and relativism.

Evaluation and conclusion

There is an apparent exaggeration in Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of human freedom. He has much love for the word- freedom. He also has an unparalleled faith in man's will and ability to chart a course of life for himself, despite prevailing circumstances. As an Atheistic Existentialist, he was unprepared to accept anything other than the fact that existence precedes essence, and that it is the man that creates the latter. In an apparent attempt to solidly defend his stance on human freedom, he refuses to give enough attention to some crucial issues that affect it. It is either that he denies outrightly that such issues exist or maintains that it is within the prerogative of man to surmount such resistance to the achievement of his goal. More so, due to Sartre's sketchy and ambiguous way of exposition, his ethical view is very apt of severe misinterpretations. It is therefore essential not to confuse his propositions with some seemingly logical but ultimately inappropriate conclusions.

The fundamental misunderstanding is that Sartre espouses a kind of wild ethical relativism. This accusation needs to be qualified. The existentialism of Sartre is relativistic in the sense of denying moral absolutes, not in the sense that our moral choices do not matter or that no moral disputes make sense. The second misunderstanding is that Sartre is a sheer subjectivist (emotivist) who denies the possibility of rational choice-making. Here again, one needs to be very precise, if we want to do justice to Sartre's position. Sartre does not dismiss reason as a relevant instance, in our practical decisions and even subscribes to some aspects of Socratic intellectualism.

Indeed Sartre(1966) does not derive the necessity of choosing the good from the necessity of possessing the right understanding of our actions - he knows that our actions do not always follow reasons and standards. He means rather this: since there is no absolute good or bad, there is nothing to be mistaken about in our choices. When we choose, there is nothing terrible in choosing since there are no virtues before choosing. Once I choose, I create

something as good precisely by choosing it. Therefore, I set up my values in the process of choosing, and I set them up that my choice becomes the right one.

Having established the priority of existence and the fundamental freedom of man, Sartre now draws practical implications from these two premises. The first is the universal validity of our projects while the second is our universal responsibility springing from the fact that we involve others. There are other commendable efforts he made to defend this pet concept of his. He seemed to have had over-arching confidence in man to chart the course of his action for himself. In this regard, obstacles are not enough to stop man's projects because, according to Sartre, there is freedom only in the resisting world- freedom is therefore portrayed as the freedom to change our environment to surmount obstacles. His inflated belief in man's capabilities blinded him to the realities of human limitations in the exercise of his freedom. Hence, he fails to see some crucial factors that determine our action- which enslave our freedom.

The positive aspects of this concept, too, abound. It shows how deceptive man could be most times. It is a fact that man resorts to cheap excuses, even in the face of an action he carried out willingly. In such a situation, he tries to blame his misdemeanour on one force or another. However, he is fully responsible for such will to refuse to take blames for his shortcomings. Sartre's idea of self-deception is most useful here. The philosophy also emphasises that man has to pattern his life the way he pleases, for according to Sartre(1966), each man has a virgin future which he is expected to fill by his actions. So our failures and successes can only be traced to us, not to any force, seen or unseen. The realisation of this fact obviously will push a man to actions, for it is only our actions that constitute our personality.

The philosophy's emphasis on the independence of value creation can create in man a sense of responsibility. It has the potential of informing us that we are not just figures in the scheme of things; each man has as much opportunity to contribute to ideas and values like his counterparts. Such a realisation will undoubtedly give a man a sense of importance, sensitising him to his debt to himself and his society. Sartre's dislike of orthodoxy, rigidity and absolutism shows in this view. He believes that things are subject to change, and there are no absolute values or universal morality. Such belief is, no doubt, a pragmatic approach to life. It demonstrates that it is only situations that determine standards or value. Such a view will bring about a dynamic society. Hence, despite the apparent exaggeration of Sartre's concept of human freedom, the philosophy is no doubt that of action, hope, courage

and optimism. It shows that it is a man alone that gives meaning to his life.

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