

Nausea: Liberation or Captivity

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Abstract

The conundrum of existence and essence still remains an unexplored and answered idea despite the engagements of different philosophers, writers and critics with the subject. The philosophy of existentialism rests on the idea that existence is prior to essence, i.e. things exist first and then meaning is attached to them. Sartre, in his novel *Nausea*, stresses on the same idea. In the novel, Roquentin feels that something or the other around him is constantly changing. This leads to his disturbed state of mind because of which he feels nauseated. Despite his nauseated state of mind, he is unable to turn his eyes from this change. The title is deeply symbolic as nausea comes with the realisation of meaninglessness of one's existence. It transpires that nausea is the first step towards the journey of essence, something which keeps an individual going. It seems that Sartre is implying that nausea is the very inception of creation of essence or meaning; therefore, rather than evading, one must face it as the journey from existence to essence is not as smooth as it appears to be. Roquentin, being the representative of modern man, abandons his project of reviving Maquis de Rolleston and decides to embark on the journey of essence.

Keywords: existence, essence, nausea, meaninglessness

Introduction

Existentialism, as a philosophy, caught the attention of the 19th century's French philosophers like Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche; the origin of existentialism can therefore be traced back to the 19th century even though neither of the philosophers used the term explicitly. The term only gained popularity in the mid 20th century with the renewed interests of modern French philosophers like Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The engagement of these philosophers and their fictional and scholarly approach took existential themes to great heights of popularity.

Existentialists discard the Cartesian philosophy of knowing or knowledge. Where Descartes emphasised the importance of 'a priori' category, existentialists argued that human beings are sent into a universe so concrete which can never be fathomed. Hence, the idea that being precedes essence becomes the ultimate reality. Existence cannot be done away with therefore an essence has to be created which would help in making one's existence meaningful.

Existentialists lay their emphasis on freedom of an individual. Therefore, taking the complete responsibility of one's action is imperative. Not only do they emphasise freedom, action and decision as vital; they consider freedom as the only way to rise above the essentially absurd condition of human beings. Besides its similarity with Nihilism, existentialism can be viewed as a reaction to staunch traditional philosophies like Empiricism, Rationalism and Positivism which seeks to deliver a universal meaning and an ultimate order in the structure of perceived world. It upholds that the decisions of people are guided by their perception about something rather than what is natural.

Sartre was a representative of human life and reality. He describes himself as an individualist anarchist, nausea is about existence. The title of the novel itself is symbolic as it is powerful nausea. It is important to understand that this

nausea is not a physical condition but a mental state wherein one is unable to make contact with objects and people around; they merely appear as outlines, changing colours. This changing, rules out the fixity of things in life (everything is changeable and transformative). The discovery of Roquentin's diary is full of many fragmented thoughts and does not have any sequence and chronology which is indicative of his disintegrated psyche.

The sickness of life prevails, in such a state certainty becomes impossible. Sartre signifies the human habit of contemplation and creates an idea of nothingness. The consciousness that reality life is absurd is a satire on human existence. The world is full of illusions which fail to provide solace. Therefore, in order to make life more meaningful and significant, essence has to be created. When one tries to create essence, but is unable to do so due to contingency of existence then one feels nauseated. Sartre's ideas hover around ideas and humanity; in the novel *Nausea*, he gives a good insight into the world because of which his imagery enhances the bleakness and pessimism of human life. One has to change the absurd situation by creating an essence. Every existence cannot be pleasant, it might as well be gloomy. In order to remove the layer of bleakness and gloom one has to create an essence.

The journey of essence remains pertinent and acts as the very core concern in existential philosophy. Sartrean Existentialism is positive as it is based on Humanism. An individual is put into existential trauma, the only way to evade this trauma is to undertake the journey of essence. In this novel, Roquentin gradually realises that his existence is absurd and meaningless. He had a 'task' at hand to revive, Marquis de Rolleston, an eminent politician from the past. It is this engagement with the past which becomes the reason for his nauseated state, being constantly embroiled in the past makes him forget the present which makes his project totally 'unadventurous'. Essence cannot be found or created from past, hence living in present becomes imperative.

Present acts as a bridge between past and future, one should therefore not ignore the present as it plays a vitally important role in the journey of essence. Non-engagement with present negates any ambition in one's life, this threatens an individual by highlighting the absurdity and contingency of existence.

Nausea is the perpetual uneasiness that one undergoes. It is the inevitable reality of one's existence. Roquentin feels obsessed with his past which impedes the journey of essence. In an attempt to relive the past moments, he even decides to revisit his old relationship with Anny but gives up when he learns that even she had changed. This is indicative of the hollowness and emptiness of his relationships with people as well as objects. Sartre chronicles the progression of Roquentin's uneasiness which is not his personal. He is unable to attribute any meaning to anything.

Roquentin finds the project of Rollebon boring because he was seeing his alter-ego in him. The otherwise objective research becomes boring when it is touched with subjectivity. He ultimately realises that he should research on something which is away from his personality. The lingering of nausea leads to weakening of his sensory level; he gets more disturbed when he realises that he could not even lift a pebble, which implies that he was no longer free. Fear hinders his actions and becomes passive; this passivity will continue unless one creates essence.

He finally decides to judge everything on face value rather than clinging to past and being nostalgic about it. In order to have adventures, he abandons his research on Rollebon and tries to find a subject which is beyond the transience of life. Roquentin feels burdened as he tries to discover the enigma of existence which is eternal and encompassing, overcoming the pervasiveness of existence will help him combat nausea. He learns that he should not ignore this nausea, which in actuality, was empowering him. He, therefore, accepts it and decides to give up on overthinking and resorts to a life full of action rather than that of passivity.

It can be said that Roquentin wanted to kill monotony because of which he had imposed the condition of nausea on himself. The nausea, then, can be seen as feigned where one tries to escape from the mundaneness and monotony of life. Although the state of nausea can be seen as negative in many aspects but from a closer look it appears that Sartre was trying to suggest that this state of nausea and uneasiness, which comes from the realisation that life is absurd, contingent and meaningless, is the first step towards creation of an essence; and was hence necessary.

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