



Study of the Metaphor of Blindness in Sartre's Existentialist View of *Blindness*

Xin Lin

Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University, Guangzhou 510665, Guangdong, China.

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***Corresponding author:** Xin Lin,
Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University,
Guangzhou 510665, Guangdong, China.

Abstract

The 1998 Nobel Prize winner, Portuguese writer José Saramago's most important work *Blindness* describes a sudden plague of eye disease called "white evil" spreading uncontrollably among human beings and causing the gradual collapse of the social order of human society. Through a unique narrative technique, Saramago vividly portrays the horrific and chaotic consequences that ensue as people are stripped of one of their fundamental senses. This paper examines *Blindness* using the lens of Sartre's existentialist principles, particularly his view on "existence precedes essence", "human condemned to be free to choose" and "human needs to be responsible for the world when he creates his own self". By applying these three points of view, the paper analyzes and studies the metaphorical role of blindness as a profound symbol in the work. It relates it to broader social realities, offering reflections on the trajectory of human development and the moral implications of free choice.

Keywords

Blindness; existentialist; mankind; essence

1. Introduction

José Saramago, born in 1922 into a farming family in the small village of Azinhaga, is renowned for his diverse literary contributions, including *Blindness*, which won him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1998.

In this novel, Saramago tells the story of an unknown city where a plague of blindness spreads rapidly through human beings throughout the whole world, the only exception to this disaster is the ophthalmologist's wife, who has always maintained good eyesight throughout the whole time. As the plague rages on, the government decides to use the quarantine to contain the spread of the "white evil" blindness, temporarily isolating the known blind in a mental hospital, where the ophthalmologist's wife disguised as a blind person accompanies her husband and becomes one of the first blind people admitted to the mental hospital.

As the number of blind people grows, the mental hospital becomes saturated with blind people, who step over the corpses of their peers and exchange valuables for resources, and force the women to serve in prostitution. The blind people gradually demonstrate their disregard for people.

The variation of the story is on the only one who is not blind, the ophthalmologist's wife, she killed the gunman and led people to escape from the mental hospital to see the world outside: most people have become blind, the world is in a state of disarray and squalor, the social order is collapsing and failing, and it seems to be no trouble for human beings to transform from physical "white evil" blindness to mental "white evil" blindness in human beings' heart. Even at the end of the story, human beings begin to regain their sight again and rejoice as if nothing has happened, that the "white evil" world still remains deeply in the heart of only one who can see for the whole time, and she cries out for the chaotic and dirty world that the blind human-built, the vanishing humanity, and the failing order of the society, and finally becomes a blind human who can see.

2. Sartre and Existentialism

Jean-Paul Sartre is one of the most prestigious French playwrights, novelists, philosophers, screenwriters, literary critics, and political activists of the twentieth century. He is one of the key figures of existentialist philosophy, one of the leading figures of twentieth-century French philosophy and Marxism, and one of the prime milestones in the history of twentieth-century world thought, which has had a profound impact on France and the world at large. And till this day, he has had a profound influence and relevance for future generations.

Sartre, in his seminal work 'Existentialism is a Humanism,' elucidates the core tenets of existentialism, distinguishing it from other philosophical schools with the assertion that 'existence precedes essence' (Sartre, 2007, p. 7). Meanwhile, he posits that humans are 'condemned to be free,' implying that every individual must grapple with the weight of their choices and the inherent responsibility that accompanies freedom (Sartre, 2007, p. 9).

2.1 Existence precedes essence

Existence precedes essence is the most important foundation throughout Sartre's philosophical thought. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre argues that in order to expound "Existence precedes essence", one should first understand "Essence precedes existence". Sartre uses the example of the paperknife to illustrate that, the artisan already has the use and the concept of the paperknife in mind before he makes the paperknife, and then he makes the paperknife, that is, the essence of the paperknife that makes the paperknife into the paperknife, such as the use, meaning and the quality of the paperknife, precedes its existence. Then, based on Christian existentialism, the Creator is imagined as the transcendent craftsman who created everything including human beings according to certain procedures and concepts. This then is the sequence of thinking about existence and essence from the perspective of the Creator existed. Whereas in atheistic existentialism, represented by Sartre, it is argued that God, which is the Creator, does not exist, then there is always one thing in the world where existence comes before essence and creates what follows. This thing is Human and only "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards", that is to say, man exists in the world, and in this world, he constantly experiences and discovers, develops himself, and giving meaning to the essence of his existence in this world. For example, except at the very beginning, newborn human beings come into the world by involuntary will. In the process of the gradual growth and experience of the newborn human being, no one but himself can keep on giving or removing meaning to himself and can give a different interpretation to his own essence by voluntary will in different stages of his life. The process of human life basically argues that "Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life", and that the essence of humans exists only in what they attempted to become after they exist.

2.2 Human is condemned to be free to choose

After the two world wars, there were many criticisms of existentialism at the social level, the most widespread of which was that existentialism was a philosophy of "inaction" or "pessimism", which believes that the path of human beings was already predetermined, regardless of their efforts to make choices. Sartre refuted this, according to the first idea of existentialism, "existence precedes essence", it already states that man explains his nature by his actions. Therefore, existentialism is not a philosophy of inaction, on the contrary, it emphasizes that the nature of a human being is not defined by any objective existence, but is constantly defined by his free choice. As Dostoevsky once wrote: "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted." This marks the inception of atheistic existentialism, where free choice signifies that human beings, as projects with subjective lives, are entirely free to engage in practical activities according to their own subjective will. In the process of transforming the objective world, they do so without external standards or limitations. A newborn baby comes into the world as a blank sheet of paper. In the course of its life, it continues to make choices and practices without standards, and eventually embarks on different occupational paths or becomes a different person. All these results are the result of human free choice.

2.3 Human needs to be responsible for the world when he creates himself

Does the fact that all human beings are condemned to be free to choose mean that they can do whatever they want without caring about the consequences of their free choices? Sartre believes that this is not the case, from an individual point of view, human beings are indeed absolutely free, however, individuals cannot exist in the world alone and are destined to cross different paths because of their different free choices. Individuals are destined to have an impact of conflict on their individuals which is the subjective limitation of human free choices. The Kantian ethic says, "Never

regard another as a means, but always as an end.” When one’s free choice without regard to the consequences of the negative impact on others, he faces the possibility of treating others as a means to an end, and faces the subjective constraints on the right to free choice of others; whereas, from a holistic point of view, human beings, as being whose subjective choices determine their own intrinsic significance, do not have the constraints and manipulation of any other objective being, and have their destiny entirely in their own hands. Therefore, when individuals disregard each other’s right to free choice and break through the subjective constraints given by others, the consequences of breaking through the limitations are still borne by oneself as a member of the human race. Sartre assumes that, if an individual freely chooses to participate in a war, then it is also a war that belongs to the individual, and although the individual has practiced the right of free choice, the war puts constraints on the choice of the individual who endures the war, and it is the individual who is responsible for its consequences. Therefore, under the premise of free choice, human beings are also free to assume responsibility for themselves, for others, for society, and for the future.

As Sartre’s title says, Existentialism is a humanism, a philosophy that values the human being and thinks of him as the main of the world. In his philosophical system, human beings exist in this world without support, bringing with them the right to make free choices and the obligation to freely assume responsibility. In the process of constant choice and assumption of responsibility, human beings continue to practice, and in doing so they find and give meaning and essence to themselves.

3. Blindness and Existentialism

Just as Sartre appealed to people, even in such a lonely situation as that of human beings, they should not be passive but should actively keep practicing and choosing, finding ways to realize their own value, to become what they want to be and to refrain from doing things that are harmful to other people and to the society. The human beings lost in “white evil” blindness are the most obvious embodiment and representation of the object of Sartre’s appeal.

3.1 Blindness and the nature of the blind

The first person who suffers from blindness defines himself as “a person has excellent eyesight”, but all of a sudden blindness “drowns” him into a luminous and total whiteness that it swallows up rather than absorbs not just color and everything else, making him the first person in the world to face his existence and his place in the world under the influence of blindness, and he is not alone in facing this terrible disease of the eye, as exemplified by the car thief, the girl with dark glasses and the ophthalmologist, they terrified as the blindness spreads to become a blind person, and constantly suffering the changes in his existence as if he existed only as a blind person and nothing else. This can be seen after the first blind person arrives at the mental hospital.

At the same time, Saramago does not give the blind people names and backgrounds, but only code names like the man who stole the car, a girl with dark glasses, the ophthalmologist and etc., leaving the readers with an impression of only their most prominent features, their existence gradually replaced by a symbol, and what about their essence as human beings? Before blindness appeared, the moral and legal order of social conventions and the public gaze prescribed human behavior and choices, causing people to mistakenly believe that these are the essence of human existence in the process. Blindness not only blinded their physical eyes but their psychological eyes had long been blinded by the process of human beings’ constant reliance on tools; after the outbreak of blindness, the tools that human beings themselves created to help them survive gradually lost their effectiveness in the blindness. Human beings were forced to face self-existence that did not depend on predetermined social rules. In this situation of extreme freedom, only human beings themselves defined their own essence, and the only thing that could help human beings define their own essence was their practical actions. Therefore, we see that humans who have gradually lost their eyesight no longer need toilets to solve their physical problems, because there is only luminous and total whiteness that they cannot see any filth, and everywhere can be the place to defecate. We see that humans who have lost their eyesight are no longer bound by social morality and instinctively push others into the abyss while protecting themselves from danger, and can also engage with anyone to solve their physical needs anywhere, anytime, without even knowing each other in the right way. At the same time, there are some people who organize crowds of people to resist, protecting the weak, choosing cooperation and mutual aid...

As Sartre said, man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. Under such extreme conditions, everyone’s behavior, whether interpreted as good or evil from the perspective of someone with eyesight, has demonstrated how they define the nature of the self. Blindness in this process is not only an ailment to the external world but also a metaphor for the exposure and exploration of the inner world of human beings by breaking free from the shackles of the world.

3.2 Blindness and free choice

As mentioned above, blindness forces people to lose their ability to perceive the outside world, bringing them face to face with a world without social order and moral standards. When all subjectively formed human constraints disappear, extreme freedom creeps in. This situation of extreme freedom is not the result of passive choice by human beings, on the contrary, blindness in this case is a return to the original state of human beings, the condition that they are born with, freedom. In the text, when there are only a few blind people in the city, it is difficult for the blind people to realize that they have returned to the initial state of freedom that is still restricted by the rules and regulations of modern civilization. The most obvious change is the change of the places for blind people to solve their physiological problems in the early and late periods of the text. From the fact that the people have to look for a bathroom to solve their needs even though they cannot see anything, to the fact that “the excrement of someone who had missed the hole of the latrine or who had decided to relieve himself without any consideration for others”, there was a realization of freedom without constraints, the freedom that spread through the crowd just as blindness did, “we’re all going to stink to high heaven.” That view of good and evil, rational cognition, and moral evaluation fade away in people’s minds just like the blind persons’ perception of the environment and of themselves. The condition of freedom naturally emerges, as free as the blind people and indeed the whole of mankind.

So far, freedom has emerged as the norm for human beings, and killing, looting, raping, and filth have become the norm for the world. Is this the result of passive human choice as the subject of the world? Going back to the time before blindness, in modern society, human beings create their own rules and regulations, the concept of good and evil exists in the education system, and human beings are constantly subjected to moral judgments by their own kind from a young age, which is a complete and human-led constraint. It does, to some extent, allow the continuation and development of human societies to a certain extent, and it can be called “civilized societies” in the literal sense. This is the result of some human beings actively choosing to create and some actively choosing to follow. Thus, the construction of civilization is the result of autonomous human choice, and the failure of civilization is also the result of autonomous human choice. The condition of absolute freedom caused by blindness actually puts human beings in a state of purity. From the author’s description, blindness is not the darkness in front of the eyes in our common sense, but the result of blindness is a large milky white ocean, which is also the purest color and state in the common sense of human beings general cognition, and some people make impure and even evil choice in this pure state, the result of human free choice under the failure of social constraints just like adding dark ink to this milky ocean. The concept of good and evil is not something that is engraved in a document and distributed to all mankind, but rather a self-regulating rule that exists in people’s hearts. “But who says that this white blindness is not some spiritual malaise, and if we assume this to be the case, then the spirits of those blind casualties have never been as free as they are now, released from their bodies, and therefore free to do whatever they like, above all, to do evil, which, as everyone knows, has always been the easiest thing to do.”

As described in the text, blindness is not only a physical disorder of the human body, but its outbreak is a reflection of the neglect of the human being’s ability to make his or her own free choices. The reliance on worldly constraints without thinking about why the constraints exist. It is rather a metaphor for the blindness of the human soul, the blindness of the individual’s heart.

3.3 Blindness and responsibility

The physical blindness of mankind puts mankind into a situation of extreme freedom, where the choices that each human being actively makes define the essence of this human being. From that existence precedes essence, and humans are condemned to be free to choose, each human being is responsible for not only his own essence as a single individual but also for mankind as a whole.

Take the doctor’s wife in *Blindness*, the most completely stable, and resonant character in the text for most readers in modern civilized society as an example. Viewing her as a human representative of modern civilized society, when her husband and the girl with dark glasses act against morality and betray the doctor’s wife, it is she who feels the emotion and takes on the responsibility that the doctor and the girl do not. When she wipes the body of the woman who has been brutally violated to death, asks the guard soldiers to bring shovels to bury the dead, and buries the old woman who lives alone in the house of the girl with the dark glasses, she assumes and guards the responsibility for dignity of the dead. When she leads a roomful of blind people out of the mental hospital to find a place to live and food to eat in a city piled up with human excrement and without a trace of civilization, she bears without a hint of

complaint and taking the immense pressure and responsibility. Her situation can be interpreted as what we would do if we had a world full of blind people who could not see the streets. The doctor's wife could be the queen in the world of the blind, enslaving them with her good functional eyes, using force and innate superiority to make the constraints effective once again; however, she allowed civilization to exist in her heart, trying to help all those she deemed worthy of being helped. The freedom of choice of the human beings around her stabbed the doctor's wife like a knife after the knife. Eventually, when the human began to regain their sight again, she bitterly wished she had never seen, for all the uncivilized and unconstrained consequences had already been borne by her.

Blindness is a private matter between the human being and the eyes with which he is born, but the failure of the system caused by white evil is the responsibility of every human being. If the system fails in only one person's mind, the moral judgment of the kind and the legal system invented for this purpose judge the individual. However, when there is no system in the mind of everyone, no concept of good or evil, no rationality, no eye of the kind and no systemic norms, the resulting hell of the others, which is also the hell of the whole world is the obligation and the responsibility of every individual. As Ponge has written, "Man is the future of man." In the process of freely choosing and defining the essence of the self, man is responsible not only for himself but also for the whole of humanity and the future.

The boy's transformation from a figure in need of protection to one indistinguishable from the rest symbolizes the loss of innocence and the collective responsibility to safeguard humanity's future amidst the chaos of absolute freedom. When he first entered the mental hospital, the boy would cry for his mother and ask when he would come. The people around him would naturally protect him and take care of him because he was a child, normally seen as the weak one who should be protected by common sense. And then later on, the boy would no longer talk about finding his mother, and very few people chose to give him preferential treatment because he was a child. It is mankind itself that forgets and neglects its own future, and the future forgets the past. The blindness of the human soul gradually chooses to destroy itself on its own as the white evil spreads. In the extreme freedom caused by blindness, the human mind is fragile and ignorant, and the construction of the social system and the significance of moral concepts are nowhere to be found. Blindness here in the text is also a metaphor for the human's neglect of social responsibility, evasion, and moral numbness.

4. Existentialism in *Blindness*

Satre's existentialism is a kind of optimism that emphasizes initiative, and he advocates that people should practice to decide what their essences are in consideration of their social responsibilities. The human beings suffering from white evil in *Blindness*, are a kind of pessimism that emphasizes blindness, which is the opposite of Satre's existentialism. The blindness in the novel is not only a kind of physiological disease but is also a metaphor for the present-day world where human beings are blind and dependent on social regulations while neglecting and avoiding their social responsibilities and moral numbness in the face of an exposed empty spiritual world after two world wars. Saramago's *Blindness* embodies the worst that mankind can create in a situation of extreme freedom. However, leaves the doctor's wife, the only one who can see, the last flame of human civilization, to warn mankind that physical blindness is not scary, but rather spiritual blindness, just like the human beings who suffer from the white evil.

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