

XIth Usha Bhattacharyya Memorial Lecture

In the second academic session of the international webinar, Dr. S.Paneerselvam, former Professor of Madras University, Chennai, India delivered XI th Usha Bhattacharyya Lecture on 8th September, 2021 at 11.00 a.m. 'Freedom and Responsibility: a Phenomenological Perspective' was the title of the address. He elaborated the existentialists' perspective of freedom especially linking it with the thoughts of Jean Paul Sartre and Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. For the existentialists that freedom is so extreme that it is part of our very being, our defining characteristic. Positive freedom is 'positive' in the sense that individuals will want to be their own masters. In Berlin's words, by virtue of positive freedom, one will "wish to be a subject, not an object" (1969, 131). Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion of 'true liberty' may be placed under this category. Individuals should pursue an ideal of 'true liberty' in which they will be able to achieve their full human potential and live virtuously. True liberty is achieved when individuals can let go of amour propre (the love of oneself) and instead become possessed by amour de soi (the desire for self-preservation and self-mastery) (Rousseau 1762). Positive freedom therefore is less about what individuals are forbidden from doing, and more about what individuals can do to reach their full human potential. Under a state of positive freedom "I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by references to my own ideas and purposes"(Berlin 1969,)

Freedom for Sartre is not the freedom to do something. He says "you are free" because you always have a choice, "therefore choose" (Sartre 2007). But because this creates anxiety and anguish, individuals flee in self-deception and continue leading inauthentic lives. Man is free when his consciousness acknowledges that something is lacking, when he makes a purpose of himself, and when he commits. In Sartre's words, this is when he "transcends" himself. This was done well under occupation because what was lacking then was evident, almost palpable. Consequently, he argues, every action became a commitment. Man was thus asserting his freedom. He does not seek to say that individuals in peacetime are under illusory freedom. In peacetime they simply do not think about the same issues, and they are much less likely to realise what to be human truly means.

In the detailed discussion that followed different scholars from different universities raised questions and expressed their opinions on different issues relating to freedom and responsibilities.