AN ETHICAL INQUIRY ON SARTRE'S CONCEPT OF FREEDOM

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Abstract
This paper makes an effort to critically explain Jean-Paul Sartre's view of freedom. It also attempts to clarify the moral implications of Sartre's notion of freedom. The essential idea of human freedom serves as the foundation of Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism, which he renders distinctive. Sartre starts his discussion of existentialism by describing reality from a phenomenological perspective. This type of study emphasizes the importance of human consciousness in terms of decision-making and freedom. In Sartre's existentialism, a feeling of consciousness also precedes freedom and self-determination in terms of a person's ability to make moral decisions. This essay investigates the significance of Sartre's conception of freedom and its implications for the field of moral judgment. To do this, the paper uses the analytical technique to assess some of the contentious points made in Sartre's proposal about the ideas of responsibility, freedom, and choice.
Keywords: Ethics, Freedom, Existentialism.

Introduction

Unquestionably, one of the most important concepts that have shaped ethical judgment over the past few centuries is the concept of human freedom. The lack of freedom is used as an excuse to meddle in other people's problems. Something as fundamental as freedom rarely becomes a difficult topic in modern life, and it even happens less frequently when it is reinterpreted. But in Being and Nothingness, the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who lived in the 20th century, challenges the accepted understanding of freedom and presents the problem in a fresh, existential context. Sartre's existential philosophy is based on his novel conception of consciousness as that which is always conscious of something. Also, by offering a fresh response to the question of being, he offers a new interpretation of our existence in the world. Sartre's split of being into the for-itself and the in-itself categories form the basis of his new philosophical outlook.

The for-itself is an empty negation of the non-conscious being, which he calls the in-itself. In simpler terms, we can look at the consciousness of human beings as the for-itself and the non-conscious beings as the in-itself. Freedom plays a key role in the determination of consciousness. For Sartre, freedom is the being of humans and is inexorably linked to the for-itself. Sartre maintains that human beings are necessarily free, always, and it is impossible for a human to fail to be free. Sartre believed that because of our inherent freedom and the fact that our existence comes before our essence, we are not born with a fixed nature or purpose. Sartre argues that humans are not constrained by any external forces, such as God or the natural world, that direct our

actions or influence our choices. Instead, it is entirely up to us to define the meaning and purpose of our lives. According to Sartre, freedom is the basic foundation of human existence and involves more than simply having the ability to select among several possibilities. Not only are we free to choose what we do, but we are also free to create our own moral standards and sense of purpose in life. This essay will look at Sartre's idea of freedom and consider its moral implications.

Sartre and Freedom
In order to comprehend Sartre's idea of freedom and its function, we must first grasp the duality of the Being-for-itself and the Being-in-itself, which forms the basis of his existentialism. Simply said, Sartre's key definition of consciousness is that it is always the consciousness of something but that it is nothing on its own. Consciousness is impossible without a subject of consciousness. As a result, he claims that consciousness is nothing. The only thing consciousness is, is an empty container that defines itself in reference to the things it is aware of. This is the first stage in his reversal of the conventional view of the nature of being; he holds that consciousness is nothingness and that which consciousness is conscious of is endowed with being.

However, consciousness is aware of itself as consciousness. At first glance, this seems unlikely. How can consciousness, which in and of itself is nothing, be aware of itself? In order to clarify this paradox, Sartre starts his investigation via the *cogito* of Descartes but coined a new name to characterise what he discovered to be even more fundamental: the *pre-reflective cogito*. The idea of a *pre-reflective cogito* seems to be in conflict with itself; after all, how can one be conscious of a self before becoming self-conscious? But according to Sartre, there is an implicit form of self-reflective consciousness that comes before the explicit self-consciousness of the *cogito* itself. For instance, when I see a table, I am implicitly aware that I am not the table that I see. In other words, just by existing and being aware of things, a consciousness that is aware of those things must already exist. Sartre is able to assert that consciousness, which is nothing, is yet aware of itself in the *pre-reflective cogito's* implicit link to consciousness. This is where the for-itself comes into play, because consciousness is always self-aware, Sartre says that it has being-for-itself: its very existence involves an internal relation to itself.[1] The *pre-reflective cogito's* implicit connection to consciousness is this internal relationship it has with itself. The in-itself is now made plain as well because only things that are the object of consciousness, such as actual, physical objects, may have being-in-itself. It is obvious that awareness itself cannot have being-in-itself but simply being-for-itself because it is never expressly an object of its own consciousness.

What makes this in-depth explanation of the being-in-itself and the being-for-itself so crucial? The for-itself is explored further by Sartre, and it serves as the foundation for the rest of his philosophical work. The inherent nothingness that it holds is crucial to understanding the for-itself. As we've already said, consciousness is empty. The for-itself is a nothingness that exists in the centre of being. The for-itself is actually nothing

more than the absolute annihilation of the in-itself; it is like a gaping fissure at the centre of Being.[2] From this, Sartre derives his now-famous conclusion that "existence precedes essence." Since nothingness is the foundation of consciousness, which exists despite this, consciousness must define itself by the things it projects onto itself. There is no predetermined existence to which consciousness is bound and no path that consciousness is compelled to travel. Regarding the nothingness of the for-itself, Sartre discusses the concepts of time and freedom. In his opening statement, Sartre claims that the nothingness of consciousness is what separates consciousness from its past and future. This seems like a pointless remark, but when his notion of freedom is considered, it makes sense. The for-itself has the capacity to define itself at any time since it is completely empty. This is its freedom. Freedom offers the for-itself the capacity to redefine the future and the past at any given moment. In the sense that having freedom equates to being conscious, freedom is the fundamental component of consciousness. The driving force for all consciousness is this freedom, which is found at the core of the being for itself. Here, it is crucial to clarify exactly what Sartre means by freedom. Many readers of Sartre are initially shocked by his view that the individual is absolutely free and absolutely responsible. Taking this literally, they believe that Sartre means that one is always free to do whatever one wants. Readers often confuse Sartre's notion of freedom with the freedom of acting whimsically upon any desire or the capacity to achieve whatever one wishes. It would be shocking if he did claim that. However, when Sartre claims that we are absolutely free, his claim stems not only from his ontology but also from his atheistic position. There is no God who decides for us and imposes values on us; accordingly, we must create our values. As free beings, we can create our values but must be ready to accept the consequences. Indeed, for Sartre, freedom is not merely a license to act whimsically; it entails responsibility. One is free, but one is also entirely responsible for one's freedom. Sartre spent much of his career thinking about freedom and its role in existence.

In *Being and Nothingness,* Sartre makes a distinction between two senses of the word freedom, on the one hand, "the technical and philosophical concept of freedom called freedom of choice, in which success is not essential to freedom, and, on the other hand, the practical and popular idea of freedom called freedom of obtaining, in which success is vital to freedom.[3] Also, David Detmer refers to these two senses of freedom as ontological and practical freedom, respectively.[4] The two definitions of freedom put forth by David Detmer will be adopted for further discussion.

Ontological Freedom
Ontological freedom and practical freedom can be defined with recourse to Sartre's *pour soi/ en soi* model.[5] The ontological basis of the first sense of freedom is derived from the idea that free choice and consciousness (*pour soi*) are the same things.[6] The ontological freedom that Sartre is talking about is the freedom of consciousness. It is important to note that freedom is not understood in the ordinary sense of the word. It does not refer to political or social freedom, which means that we are free from poverty

and hence enjoy the freedom of, for example, consumerism, but refers to the autonomy of choice. For Sartre, ontological freedom is a quality of action or the condition of freedom.[7] It is a metaphysical necessity. It is not an empirical observation where being a free person implies being free from a constraint. Ontological freedom does not admit contingencies or possibilities other than those that signal its absolute freedom. Metaphysically, Sartre's consciousness is freedom. Like the structure of consciousness (always action) that is a perpetual flight towards the fundamental project, ontological freedom is always a freedom 'to.' Hence, ontological freedom is always a 'freedom to' but never a 'freedom from'.

Furthermore, to say that man is absolutely free is also to say that his choice is not in any way undermined by causal factors. The freedom of consciousness is absolute; hence, the activity of consciousness is not subject to strict causality. Strict causality here refers firstly to the Sartrean idea that one could not appeal to an endowed universal essence to account for the activity of consciousness.[8] For example, it cannot be the case that a particular disposition or inherent genetic composition of mine has caused me to perceive the café in a specific way. Secondly, consciousness is not subject to strict causality as there is no causal link between *en soi* and *pour soi*. While we cannot appeal to a divine being that endows us with an essence that causes us to behave in one way or another, Sartre would also reject the notion that something in the external environment has the power to effect a change in the decisions we make and the behaviours we choose. Thus, ontological freedom cannot be defined in terms of cause and effect. This squares perfectly with Sartre's repudiation of determinism and "all forms of thought which evade responsibility in essentialism."[9]

With this definition of ontological freedom, Sartre makes the apparently preposterous proclamation that "the slave in chains is as free as his master."[10] Though subjugated, the slave is ontologically free to interpret the situation or environment he is in. He could continue to conceive a plan to escape and risk his life or choose to be resigned to his fate. Nothing in his environment can influence his freedom to interpret the situation he is in. Also, success is not important when applied to Sartre's concept of ontological freedom.[11] When we say that the slave is absolutely free ontologically, there doesn't need to be a corresponding freedom that he could exercise physically or practically.

Practical Freedom
After considering ontological freedom, it is reasonable to look at practical freedom. One is practically free when it could be said that he/she can be engaged in free acts. Also, practical freedom means freedom to obtain our freely chosen ends.[12] Sartre's practical freedom is the sense of freedom in which success is vital to freedom. Returning to the example of the prisoner, he is practically free when he is no longer chained. Since he is chained, he is practically unfree. His freedom has been limited; this does not mean the prisoner is not free ontologically. To be practically unfree is the same as saying that

there are limits to freedom. Sartre recognizes the factors that can limit freedom as facticity.[13]

The facticity of freedom is the given which human reality has to be and which it illumines by its project.[14] Thus, my facticity refers to the set of "facts" that my consciousness encounters as already present in every one of its acts. Freedom always presupposes facticity and a free act cannot occur, nor can the idea of a free act even be rendered intelligible, except against a background of facticity. My age, past, sex, date and place of birth, nationality and so on, can exemplify facticity. For Sartre, although we cannot change it, I can change or take a different attitude to the meanings that I give to it. Therefore, by freedom, Sartre does not mean that I can change my environmental, biological or social conditions. But, I can change the meaning that I give to them and take responsibility for the changes.

Responsibility

Descriptively, responsibility simply expresses a cause-effect relationship between an agent and an action without referring to the ethical character of the act. Prescriptively, it indicates a moral and legal obligation binding one to do what is good and to avoid evil. Ascriptively, it attributes credit or blame to an agent as one who acts with or without conformity to moral norms.[15] But for Sartre, responsibility simply means "a consciousness of being the incontestable author of an event or of an object."[16] Responsibility presupposes freedom, and freedom is the condition of being responsible. Sartre argues that there is no God to justify our existence and our actions. This results in our abandonment in the world. Also, since our existence precedes our essence, we should make who we are through our actions. Therefore, we are only responsible for our actions and our self-determination. Yet, our responsibility is not limited to our self-determination, but it extends to all humanity. We are responsible for all humankind since we constitute what it means to be human in every action.

> If existence indeed does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is to make every man conscious of what he is and to make him solely responsible for his existence. And when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.[17]

According to Sartre, when we are in a situation in which we should decide, we choose what we consider to be true. For Sartre, it is not possible for us to do something without is the right thing to do. On the same ground, Sartre argues that our choices reveal values. In other words, if I choose to do something, I believe that this something is both right and valuable. He exemplifies this with the choice of marriage. When I choose to marry, I suggest monogamy to the rest of the world. I affirm that marriage is a true and valuable thing. Therefore, Sartre argues that our actions point out an image of man as we think he ought to be. In other words, our choice binds ourselves and the rest of the world. This

binding brings absolute responsibility since all of our actions take place as if the entire human race were staring at him and measuring itself by what he does.[18] The awareness of responsibility is not an easy task to accept. Thus, we behave as if our actions are binding only on us. The understanding of absolute responsibility, however, brings nausea and anxiety with itself. As Sartre says: "A man who commits himself, and who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility."[19] Yet, it is possible for us to take an attitude of bad faith to escape from anguish.

Bad Faith and Authenticity
As we have seen from the previous paragraphs, absolute freedom entails absolute responsibility. The lack of a transcendent being such as God condemns the human Being to act by himself and create values for himself, but this makes him entirely responsible for his deeds. Because the human being is the sum of his deeds, the human being is thus wholly responsible for what he makes of himself. Sartre is fully aware that the weight of his absolute responsibility might crush the individual who is aware of this. He acknowledges that most of the time, individuals will have recourse to bad faith to hide their freedom from themselves. The responsibility that follows from our absolute freedom is tremendous, and it is always tempting to try to escape it by using self-deception. Bad faith can be understood in two different ways. First, ontologically, bad faith is said to be an unavoidable state for the for-itself. Second, ethically, bad faith is presented as something the for-itself ought to avoid while striving for authenticity.[20] Authenticity is the key to Sartrean and most existentialist ethics.

The concept of bad faith emerges relatively early in Being and Nothingness. It immediately follows Sartre's definition of consciousness as nothingness and as freedom. As a freedom, consciousness is anguished. The individual realizes that he is responsible for all his choices and actions and is not determined in any way. This responsibility is a heavy weight to bear. Consequently, given that the human being is fundamentally anguished and that anguish is a state that any individual would instead escape due to the weight of responsibility, it is natural that any individual will attempt to flee anguish. This is what bad faith is, to Sartre; the attempt by consciousness to lie to itself.[21]

Authenticity
Authenticity is a fundamental value in Sartre's ethical thought; it is what we should strive for as human beings. Authenticity is a deliberate and sustained project in which a person affirms his freedom and takes full responsibility without regret for his past, for his present situation and for his actions within that situation. That is, he assumes full responsibility for his being-in-situation. Authenticity involves a person recognizing and valuing the fact that he must continually choose what he is without ever being able to

become what he is once and for all."[22] Denial of such a reality would be a sign of an inauthentic existence or bad faith.

In *Notebooks for an Ethics,* Sartre explains that the human being is a project that aims toward authenticity.[23] However, it takes an act of will for the individual to make his own freedom an essential part of his project. What this implies is that. I must acknowledge that I am free and that freedom lies at the heart of my being as a being that makes itself; only then can I be said to be authentic. In addition, I also have to accept the responsibility that is entailed by my freedom. The authentic individual bears a tremendous responsibility as he must create meaning for himself and the world. Additionally, it seems that authenticity is simply the acknowledgement of one's way of being, which ontologically is the individual's freedom. With this freedom, the individual can create meaning and values and, at the same time, must acknowledge doing so. This is the requirement of authenticity; the failure to recognize oneself as such is bad faith. Besides all that has been said, it is important to this study that this is mentioned. The notion of absolute freedom and responsibility has heavy ethical implications. Though in his existential thesis, Sartre did very little to address existential ethics, he left the discussion of ethics very open-ended. However, the question of existential ethics is considered important to this study. Existentialist ethics cast doubt on established moral theories and religious beliefs that typically attempt to explain the human experience in terms of fundamental human nature or universal ethical standards. Also, existentialist ethics does not assess actions as right or wrong objectively or universally. Hence, when we say that Sartre's existential thesis has an ethical implication, it does not mean that he emphasizes actions that are socially acceptable or unacceptable like in traditional normative ethics; it does not mean judging the actions performed by the agents by referring to some moral principles; however, he intends to make people realise the ethics of authenticity.

Sartre's Existential Ethics
From the forgoing paragraph, we can infer that Sartre left the issues on ethics inconclusively. However, some have argued that Sartre's existential thesis implies ethics. From an existentialist's viewpoint, ethics questions traditional moral theories and religious doctrines that describe the human condition concerning essential human nature or universalistic moral principles. Sartre's form of existentialism is thus committed to the idea that universal theories cannot sufficiently grasp the unique existence of an individual in concrete situations. The existentialist believes in a vision of a world or an environment of humans, where a person, as a unique being, has the freedom or power to choose the right course of one's actions. This sounds like a license to do as one pleases. If we all lived by this code of ethics, the world would be in chaos; however, Sartre thinks that "man is in an organized situation in which he himself is involved."[24] By this, Sartre means that ethics is situational, decided by the concrete human situation in which we are thrown into. Our choices are not random; we still decide based on our interests (conscious or not). Sartre argues that there is no *a priori* ethical law that must

be followed. Humans choose their ethical codes to live by. Sartre also argues that we should not judge others' morals so long as they choose their morals freely. This seems to abandon concern for ethics. Nevertheless, Sartre argues that ethics is an invention like any other, but that a person must still be held responsible for their ethics.[25]

In addition, Sartre contents that our value is derived from our actions, not from abstract ideas or ethical principles. By adopting certitude-giving systems, ideologies, and principles, we frequently deny this and lessen our existential worry and uncertainty. But by doing so, we limit our ability to doubt and raise questions, which prevents us from becoming fully human. We refuse to look for the values that give life purpose and do not bravely face the anxiety that comes with creating value in our own lives. We act authentically or in good faith if we have the courage to create value, the guts to commit to a course of action, and the courage to accept responsibility for our choices fully. Sartre does not say much about good faith other than that it involves choosing the values, purposes, and projects for which we accept complete responsibility. Individuals who are truly authentic do not let anything dictate to them; instead, they make a conscious decision to follow a particular course of action. However, this viewpoint raises very serious issues.

Problems for Existential Ethics
The most obvious problem for Sartre's ethics is whether freedom exists to the extent that he supposed it or if it exists at all. And there are other difficulties. Let us consider again the Sartrean project. When acting in bad faith, we pretend that something controls our behaviour. Now imagine individuals who live according to the moral principles with which they have been raised. Occasionally, they have considered that these principles may be groundless and that they could be rejected. However, the idea that they must create their own principles, values, and meaning in life is frightening. So they silence their doubts. Sartre believes such individuals are morally culpable for accepting their initial moral principles, for supposing that these principles control them. But are such individuals really so bad? Suppose they are pleasant, dutiful, conscientious, and kind? Is it really true that those who deceive themselves into thinking moral rules control them or who have never considered the possibility of other principles are immoral? It doesn't seem so. Now our appraisal would probably be different if these individuals had accepted dubious principles. If they had been taught since youth to torture animals and set houses on fire, we would likely condemn the actions that follow from their principles. But this suggests that we condemn their acts, not because they performed them in bad faith, but because their principles and actions are immoral. This suggests that it doesn't matter whether actions are done in good or bad faith but whether the actions are good or bad.

The point becomes even clearer if we examine cases of actions done in good faith. Imagine individuals who strive all of their life to create their own values. After a long

and arduous intellectual journey, they decide that there are no gods or objective values. Nonetheless, they dedicate their lives to working arduously to feed the poor. They give no reason for their choice other than to say, "We freely commit ourselves to this project and take full responsibility for the outcome of our life." Whatever else we may think of it, there is something praiseworthy about this enterprise; this life lived in good faith. This exemplifies what some existentialists call a project. Projects are self-created endeavours which allow us to experience freedom and authenticity. Whether our project is to be a parent, medical researcher, plumber, teacher, dancer, or concert pianist, the way we do it, according to Sartre, says more about the morality of the action than the action itself. This follows from the fact that there are no objective values. If we act in good faith, the unique expression of our own being with full recognition of our freedom and its attached responsibility, then we act morally.

The problem here is with sincere killers, torture advocates or Nazis. If they really believe they are doing the right thing, say killing for their gods, and they do it without hypocrisy and in good faith, then, according to Sartre, they act morally. In fact, it doesn't matter what they do as long as it's done in good faith. Here we encounter the same problems that plagued other theories of subjective value. If there is no objective foundation to morality, then anything is allowable. Thus, good and bad faith are unable to distinguish between what we ordinarily assume are right and wrong actions. This suggests that something more is needed to understand the nature of morality than mere commitment.

Conclusion
If we really do create values by freely choosing projects, then there is no way to distinguish good projects or actions from bad ones other than to say some are freely chosen and some aren't. But it just doesn't seem true that our commitment to something makes it valuable. Nor does it seem true that our lack of commitment makes something worthless. As with various elements of other theories we have examined, there is something counter-intuitive about existential ethics. It appears that the existential account of value is just too subjective. Another difficulty with the existential theory of value is its irrationalism. If ethics is merely a matter of choosing, then no choice is irrational. If we ask existentialists why they chose "x," their only possible reply is, "we just choose." But this is unsatisfactory. If we can give no reason why we choose something, then our choice isn't rational.

Existentialists can give no reason why they chose anything precisely because there is no reason to choose. If there were, then ethics would be rational and objective. This is another problem with the existential account of value; it's too irrational. Of course, an existentialist rejects this critique. They argue that the whole point of an existential ethic is to show that reason is an inadequate instrument to understand morality. But are we really satisfied with a theory that can give us no reason why we ought to do something?

If I tell you that you should go jump in the lake but can't tell you why, aren't you hesitant to do it? And doesn't this show that reason must play *some* role in ethics? Thus, even if the existentialists are right about reason's limitations, it doesn't follow that reason plays no role in the moral sphere.

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