

## **Freedom as the meaning of existence**

For Sartre each individual agent has unlimited freedom. This statement may be puzzling because of the obvious limitations of every agent's freedom of choice. Physical and social constraints cannot be overlooked in the way in which we make choices. This is however a fact which Sartre accepts in so far as the being for-itself is facticity and this does not lead to any contradiction in so far as freedom is not defined by an ability of act. Freedom is rather to be understood as characteristic of the nature of consciousness.

Sartre's conception of choice can be best understood by reference to an agent's original choice. Sartre says that our freedom as a conscious being enters our own existence. Consciousness is totally free, undetermined and spontaneous. Since we are totally free, our past does not determine what we are now. Between ourselves as we are now and our past we have put a gap, which is nothingness. We are free from our past.

Suddenly we see a conscious being to be free – free in relation to any particular object of consciousness, free from the causally determined world of things, free to negate- to say no, to raise doubts, to imagine possibilities which are not present, free to reduce to nothingness, to negate and nihilate the region of things, of being-in- itself.

We now become aware that our freedom as being- for- itself is our power. As a conscious being, we have the power of negation. So, our past does not determine our future. Suppose we choose from among possibilities to become a teacher. Since we are totally free, our future actions are not determined by this choice to become a teacher. What we will actually do at a future moment of uncertainty about our teaching career will be a totally free action on our past, a new choice and wholly unpredictable.

Now, we begin to understand what it is to be totally free and we experience this as anguish. We feel anguish in discovering that our freedom destroys, nihilates the determining force of our past decisions and of our pledges for the future. But Sartre opposes any form of determinism which would relieve this anguish. In this regard Sartre making explicit his position to the traditional philosophic controversy between determinism and the doctrine of free will. We find in *Being and*

*Nothingness* a passionate defense of freedom as the essential characteristic of human beings.

For an Existentialist like Sartre, to exist is to be free. Humans are free even before we can think of such a question as to whether we are free or not. Moreover, freedom is freedom to act because for Sartre, human beings are agent rather than just thinker. However, if freedom means that our acts are uncaused in all sense of the term then it will be a mistake. If one analyses the concept of action, she could see that actions cannot be separated from motives and end. An action is a conscious project for fulfilling certain end and it cannot be separated from the prior awareness of the lack of the desired goal. Motives are not like natural causes, so an action cannot be said to be caused in the sense natural events are. But actions are neither without motive. Freedom cannot mean that our actions are accidental.

Even in the concept of determinism we can find that the varieties of determinism are vast ranging everywhere:

- 1) "Plato, who held that one's ethical choices are determined by his view of what is good.
- 2) B. F. Skinner, who believed that stimuli, disposition and motives govern all human behavior.

- 3) Democritus, Hobbs, Spinoza and many others who held that every event in the universe is determined by physical cause.
- 4) Theological determinists, who hold that all events occur exactly as good as foreordained them. These would include Calvin and others in his tradition.”<sup>51</sup>

Through the above discussions it is clear that there are two types of determinism. William James also accept that and classified determinism into Soft determinism and Hard determinism. For soft determinism, all events including human decisions are determined, but some kind of freedom and responsibility must do exist. On the other hand for hard determinists like James, hold that because human choices are determined for us, this would require us to reject the concept of moral responsibility. So, hard determinism is in direct conflict with the concept of free-will. William James wrote in his article “The Dilemma of Determinism” for that, “of two alternative futures which we conceive, both may now be really possible; and the one becomes impossible only at the very moment when the other excludes it by becoming real itself. Indeterminism thus denies the world to be one unbending until of fact.”<sup>52</sup>

This means that once a person makes a choice to make one reality real, then only the other becomes impossible in itself.

The key concept of existentialism is “existence precedes essence”. This simple phrase contains within it a radical change from the previous archetypes of western philosophy. To accept this premise is to both deny the existence of human nature and open the doors to true human freedom. Jean Paul Sartre rigorously examines the implications of this premise with a focus on the roles and definitions of both freedom and determinism.

Killinger writes in this concern, “this philosophy demands that the highest moral value of man is freedom, which is to say that all values are revealed through choices and subsequent actions. To focus on actions is to create a sense of responsibility in man: one has no excuses in the world because one always faces a free choice. This is not to say that choices, or responsibility, are always easy. In fact the recognition of responsibility creates what Sartre called a feeling of *nausea*: man troubles before the weight of his responsibility, it is a crushing realization to understand that one is abandoned in the world and must take credit for both one’s success and failures.”<sup>53</sup>

To have freedom is to instill anguish in the individual. In Sartre’s philosophy we find that our “our freedom is a fact, that determinism of any sort is a lie and an excuse, and that the consequences of this reality are that man has both responsibility and dignity.”<sup>54</sup>

Sartre's theory of freedom emerges out of dissatisfaction with the traditional debate – a debate he refers to as “those tedious discussions between determinism and proponents of free will”<sup>55</sup>. The traditional debate consists of a series of arguments that claim in their various ways that free will is an illusion and that everything that happens including everything that people do, is causally or logically necessitated. Each argument for determinism or pre-determinism is followed by its accompanying refutation in favour of free will. By this process the free will that people naturally assume they have is defended against the perceived threat of determinism.

Unfortunately, the traditional debate says very little about free will except that there are for apparently no indubitable reasons to suppose that people do not possess it. It seeks to make room for free will but it does not say how free will is possible or what it really involves.

Within the traditional debate free will remains a mysterious capacity. The theory of freedom offered by existential phenomenology on the other hand attempts to demystify free will by showing that it is an intrinsic and necessary feature of the human condition: a feature that is directly implied by the very nature of consciousness as being-for-itself. Although free will is a contingent fact- given that there is being-for-itself, it is necessary that this being be free. Furthermore as will

be seen, the account of human free will offered by existential phenomenology also offers valuable insights into human psychology and behavior.

Although the traditional debate has tended to proceed by way of hard determinism and ‘free will partisans’<sup>56</sup> placing themselves at loggerheads with one another, more subtle thinkers have recognized the need to reach a compromise and develop theories showing that free will and determinism are compatible. As a result the theory of soft determinism and compatibilism have emerged. If free will and determinism are utterly incompatible and free will is simply freedom from all constraint then free will cannot be determined in any way. Only random, chaotic behavior in an equally random and chaotic world could count as an expression of free will. But acting freely is not acting in a random and chaotic manner. It is acting with reason and purpose in a world that is structured and predictable to a significant degree. If chaos reigned and there was no way of establishing imperatives of the form ‘If you want x then do y’, then meaningful action would be impossible and, hence, the possibility of acting freely. Without a reasonably coherent framework of conditions within which to act the only possibility would be to act like the proverbial headless chicken. Freedom is not free fall and free actions require that a person act within a situation that has a degree of coherence. As will be seen, in the view of existential phenomenology, free will and determinism are

not compatible, they necessarily require one another. They are the internally related aspects of an original synthesis.

Sartre's argument for freedom is one of philosophy's most influential argument against determinism; the depressing idea that despite feeling in control about the daily choices we make in life, we do not have free will. But like all ideas, determinism is not accepted by everyone and consequentially, the problem of free-will becomes one of, if not the most perturbing head scratcher in metaphysical philosophy.

In relentless war of semantics on free will, philosophers had recognized themselves into two main groups: The determinist and the compatibilist. Determinists believe that free will is nothing more than an illusion, and everything that happens inevitably does. The compatibilists believe that despite it being true that our lives are highly determined by uncontrollable factors, free will and determinism are still compatible ideas.

Although they do it in varying degrees, which dichotomizes them accordingly into the two groups as mentioned, almost all philosophers admit to the influence of determinism- but not Sartre.

Sartre specialized in existentialist philosophy popularized the idea of 'Existence Precedes Essence', extended his idea from existentialism to the problem of free



will. Human being and freedom is identical claims Sartre, treating freedom to be an essential characteristic of human consciousness as opposed to a property or capacity of consciousness. In simpler words, only existence is true and essence on all objects is interpreted through the consciousness from freedom. According to Sartre the world has no intrinsic meaning, and whatever meaning it has can only be putative and interpreted from an agent. When it is so, it is upto the agent to interiorize and be bounded by his interpretation and therefore, for determinism to work, it requires a concrete essence in things themselves, and has no real efficacy and can only work around the agent's interpretation of it, our freedom to choose is a definite, allowing us free will.

Sartre's argument is comforting and sound. But it to be justified there are two questions that it must first overcome. Firstly, must we recognize X rules for us to be constrained by X? Secondly, how well does freedom that gives us the platform of consciousness to find meaning in thing, associate itself free-will?

Is the apple fresh just because the agent thinks it is? Will the agent suffer from a tummy ache by thinking the rotten apple that just the agent had as a fresh one?

This is not an epistemic question but a question against Sartre's idealistic surmise that the agent's interpretation of it. This is true in circumstances and false in some. On the example above we will call B circumstance is the latter. Assuming there are

no in between, an apple can only either be fresh or rotten. Although it is the agents freedom to interpret it to be either way, if it's rotten, the agent will inevitably suffer a tummy ache from eating it.

The conclusion of Sartre works on false premises he assumes that we live in a world where only a circumstances happens and ignores all B circumstances. Although the essence or properties we find in things are extrinsic and up to our own interpretation, we don't have to be aware of them to be affected by it. We do not need to recognize X rules to be constrained by X.

Consciousness, freedom and free will, these are terms terribly hard to define, and Sartre, being notorious as a man of abstract semantics does not ease the problems. Sartre believes that only through freedom there can be consciousness. Consciousness has no properties as all and only through freedom, we can relate to the World around us, which makes us conscious, in short, freedom is the a priori for consciousness. It is understood why Sartre claims that freedom is a prerequisite for consciousness to function.

The problem lies in the word "freedom" and how we would directly associate it with free will. But there two words are not siblings, they are very different ideas. We may have the freedom of swatting the mosquito that has been buzzing around our ears for the past hours and we will do it but that alone does not give us the free

will that most philosophers refer to; an action devoid of constraints. In fact, by swatting the mosquito, we become a victim of social determinism since it is through society that we know mosquitoes are carriers of malaria etc, and therefore although it's my freedom to swat it, the act of swatting it does not necessarily make me free.

To avoid the confusion, the word that Sartre could have better used to substitute freedom was volitions, the faculty or power of willing to do something. However, for Sartre, freedom is not just of will but it is the very meaning of our existence.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> G.E. Moore, *Ethics*, p 105

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, *Metaphysics*, p44

<sup>3</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, p 59

<sup>4</sup> *The Oxford Handbook of Free-Will*, Kane, OUP, p3

<sup>5</sup> *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, p 322

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p323

<sup>7</sup> Michael Dummett in “Bringing about the Past”, *Philosophical Review*, 1964.

<sup>8</sup> Oxford Handbook of Free Will, p 69

<sup>9</sup> The Oxford Handbook of Free Will, p127ff

<sup>10</sup> .G.E.Moore,*Ethics*,p114-5

<sup>11</sup> Ibid,p115

<sup>12</sup> *Handbook of Free Will*, p159

<sup>13</sup> [\*Nicomachean Ethics III 1\*](#)

<sup>14</sup> [\*Nicomachean Ethics III 3\*](#)

<sup>15</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/.../Nicomachean\\_Ethics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicomachean_Ethics)

<sup>16</sup> *Treatise / Abstract*,34/661

<sup>17</sup> *Metaphysics of Morals*, p 66

<sup>18</sup> *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p 66

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- <sup>19</sup> *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p.39
- <sup>20</sup> Y. Masih, *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, p.p 165-166
- <sup>21</sup> William L. Rowe, *God and the Problem of Evil*, p. 235
- <sup>22</sup> Kaufmann, 1975, p.12
- <sup>23</sup> *Les Mots*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964, p. II
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. II
- <sup>25</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, p.
- <sup>26</sup> Sartre, “Cartesian Freedom”, *Literary and Philosophical Essays*. Chapter 12, Collier Books, New York, 1955, p. 182
- <sup>27</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, p.59
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.64
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 564
- <sup>30</sup> A critical Study of Sartre’s Ontology of Consciousness, M.K. Bhadra, p.134
- <sup>31</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, p. 567
- <sup>32</sup> ibid, p. 568
- <sup>33</sup> ibid, p.569
- <sup>34</sup> ibid, p.575-6
- <sup>35</sup> ibid, p. 579
- <sup>36</sup> *A Critical Study of Sartre’s Ontology of Consciousness*, p.136
- <sup>37</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, p.591

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, p. 599

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, p. 707-8

<sup>40</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, p. 71

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, p. 73

<sup>42</sup> *The Philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre*; Robert Denoon Cumming, p. 162

<sup>43</sup> *From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest*, T.Z.Lavine,p57

<sup>44</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, pp 629-630

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*, p-640

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, p-647

<sup>47</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, p-621

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p 629

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*. p-654

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, p-680

<sup>51</sup> Frame, John M., “Determinism, Chance and Freedom”, For IVP Dictionary of Apologetics.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>53</sup> Killinger, John “Existentialism and Human Freedom”, JSTOR. Web 9 Apr. 2010  
([http://www.jstor/stable 810349](http://www.jstor/stable/810349))

<sup>54</sup> Frame, John M. “ Determinism, Chance and Freedom”, for IVP Dictionary of Apologetic P 330

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<sup>55</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, p 436

<sup>56</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, p 490