

Freedom as the Core of Art: A Sartrean Account

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Abstract

This article explores Jean-Paul Sartre's conception of freedom and its integral role in artistic creation. In his seminal work *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre distinguishes between two realms of being — being-in-itself and being-for-itself. Sartre argues that consciousness, unlike objects, is inherently free because it can negate, reflect, and imagine alternatives. Freedom, for Sartre, is not simply a philosophical idea but a practical condition of existence that allows humans to define themselves. This freedom, according to Sartre, is what enables conscious beings to transcend the deterministic world of objects and engage in self-reflection, choice, and creation. Art, for Sartre, is not a mere representation or imitation of the world but a creation that reflects the artist's subjective experience and freedom. It challenges traditional notions of art and instead emphasizes the active role of both the artist and the spectator in interpreting and giving meaning to the artwork. By engaging with art, the spectator participates in the process of creation, bringing their own freedom to the interpretation. Finally, the article shows how freedom is the foundation for artistic creation.

Keywords: *freedom, art, nothingness, consciousness, being*

Section I

Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy presents a radical approach to human freedom, which is central to both consciousness and art. In his seminal work *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre explores the concept of freedom by distinguishing between two 'regions of being.' Conscious beings, unlike objects, are free because they possess the ability to negate, question, and imagine alternatives. For Sartre, being conscious is being free; freedom comes out of the ability of humans to reflect, choose, and transform their experiences and circumstances.

In the realm of art, Sartre extends his philosophy of freedom to artistic creation and interpretation. Art, for Sartre, is an expression of freedom, both for the artist and the spectator. This paper intends to show freedom as the core foundation of art. To argue for this, the paper is divided into five sections. Section II discovers the concept of freedom. The next section is about the concept of art. Section IV discusses the relationship among freedom and art. The last section is the concluding section where it argues that freedom is the foundation of art.

Section II

This section deals with the question what does Sartre mean by freedom? Sartre discussed freedom in his *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Sartre, like Husserl, says that aboutness is central to consciousness. Consciousness is always of something. Consciousness refers to the things which are outside of it. From this, Sartre distinguishes between two 'regions of being'¹ — being-in-itself and being-for-itself. The former is the being which is of the object of consciousness. This being is independent of the consciousness. The latter is the conscious beings. The objects of the world are the being-in-itself of in-itself. They are governed by causal laws. As they do not possess any consciousness, they are not aware of any other being. On the other hand, being-for-itself or for-itself is conscious of objects and of itself. It is always self-conscious, which means that it is always aware about its consciousness of the object.²

Sartre argues that consciousness brings nothingness to the world.³ Being-in-itself is the realm of all the deterministic things. All objects are determined to be as they are. There is no consciousness. On the contrary, conscious beings can separate themselves from the objects and are aware about what it lacks or what it is not. He says, 'The being of *for-itself* is defined...as being what it is not and not being what it is.'⁴ He further describes consciousness as nothingness. Here, it seems to be contradictory, because nothingness does not indicate any being or in his terms 'is not.' So, if consciousness is equivalent to nothingness, it has no being. But according to Sartre, consciousness has its being.⁵

Apparently, Sartre seems to keep a paradox with his position. However, according to Sebastian Gardner, there are no paradoxes. For him, existence comprises of multiple modes, and nothingness is one of them. So, as reality include the both the things — mode of being and mode of nothingness, there are no paradoxes⁶

¹ Lavine, T.Z., (1984) p. 352

² Ibid., pp. 352-353

³ Ibid., p. 354

⁴ Sartre, J.P., (1957) p. lxxv

⁵ Gardner, S., (2009) p. 69

⁶ Ibid., pp. 69-70

So, in a nutshell, human consciousness or being-for-itself possesses the characteristics to negate. It can distinguish itself from the objects and can be aware about the gap or the difference or 'nothingness' between the consciousness and the world. This gap allows the being-for-itself for self-reflection, imagination, and choice.

Sartre opines that nothingness or negation is brought to the world by conscious beings and freedom is inherent to this nothingness. He holds that being conscious means it is free. They are free because they can freely negate, question, or imagine the alternatives of the present situation. This freedom makes it possible for individuals to separate themselves from the world which is determined by causality. Freedom also allows conscious beings to reduce an absence to nothingness. Sartre gives an example of Pierre's absence in a café.⁷ When Sartre enters the café, he searches for Pierre. The environment of the café, sound, sights, and objects like tables, and chairs become the background against which he is searching for Pierre. Here, Sartre says that the perception of the seeker is not neutral, rather it is guided by intention. In this case, the objects in the café like tables, chairs and people present in that café are not perceived for their own sake, rather they are perceived in connection to the broader background. The café itself transforms into a being where the absence of Pierre is. This absence is not only a void or lack of something—rather it can be perceived. Sartre is perceiving this absence. This search for Pierre transforms the café into a background and the absence into nothingness. This is possible due to freedom. Lavine commented,

Through my freedom and power as conscious being, I think of what is *absent*, of what is *not* the case, of what my *future* job possibilities are, which do *not* exist at present, I think of how I would like to change my personality or my appearance to be *other* than what they are now.⁸

So, what Sartre wants to convey is that, being consciousness is being free.

⁷ Sartre, J.P., (1957) pp. 33-34

⁸ Lavine, T.Z., (1984) p. 356

Sartre distinguishes between two kinds of freedom — freedom to obtain and freedom to choose.⁹ The former indicates practical actions along with the ability to achieve specific outcomes in the physical world. On the other contrary, freedom to choose indicates to the autonomy to define oneself and determine the meanings associated with the circumstances. Sartre says that while external limitations may restrict what people can achieve, still they are absolutely free to choose their attitude and the fundamental project that defines their lives. For instance, a person without a leg cannot walk, but he/she is free to give meaning to his/her life through his/her choice. He says,

...we are a choice, and for us, to be is to choose ourselves. Even this disability from which I suffer I have assumed by the very fact that I live; I surpass it toward my own projects, I make of it the necessary obstacle for my being, and I cannot be crippled without choosing myself as crippled. This means that I choose the way in which I constitute my disability (as “unbearable,” “humiliating,” “to be hidden,” “to be revealed to all,” “an object of pride,” “the justification for my failures,” etc.).¹⁰

So, according to Sartre, we are free. There is absolute freedom in terms of freedom to choose.

Section III

This section delves into the concept of art according to Sartre. Sartre’s concept of art is based on his humanist aesthetic existentialism and phenomenological ontology.¹¹ For him, artwork is ‘irreality.’¹² According to Sartre, the aesthetic object in a work of art is not real. Its existence is different from the physical objects. Sartre challenges the traditional notion that art is the realization of a mental image. According to him, an artist does not translate a mental image into a physical form, rather the artist creates a material piece, which viewers

⁹ Landau, I., (2012) p. 463

¹⁰ Sartre, J.P., (1957) p. 328

¹¹ Bal, M., and Sokmen, S., (2012) p. 255

¹² Sartre, J.P., (2010) p. 188

interpret to form their own imaginative take of the artwork. Thus, there is no realization or objectification of the imaginary in art.¹³

This way Sartre criticizes the mimetic theory of art espoused by Plato. For Plato, art is an imitation of the natural world. According to this view, a work of art represents the object. But for Sartre, a work of art cannot be regarded as a representation, but rather a new reality or analogon.¹⁴ He opines that a work of art evokes unreal or imaginary objects. These objects do not exist in space and time. For instance, the sounds of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* are the analogon of the work. When we listen to this, we '...listen to it in the imaginary.'¹⁵

According to Sartre, this imagination is possible because of freedom. Art is expressed out of freedom. But art, according to Sartre, is not about the creator only. There is an important role of the spectator. He said, "There is art only for and by others." It means that the creator creates a thing, but it becomes an art only after the spectator engages with the thing. He also said that,

The creative act is only an incomplete and abstract moment of the production of a work. If the author should exist alone, he could write as much as he might wish; never would the work as *object* see the light of day, and he would have to lay down his pen or despair.¹⁶

For him, writing implies reading which is its dialectic. Writing and reading indicate two different agents. Their collective efforts create an imaginary object, which is the work of the mind.

Section IV

In the earlier sections, we have seen that freedom is an integral part of consciousness and freedom allows conscious beings to create art. Art, for Sartre, has two aspects — the creator and the spectator. In this section, we will see how these two aspects are related to freedom. Sartre primarily talks about literature to describe art. However, his views are likely to apply to other forms of art too.

¹³ Bal, M., and Sokmen, S., (2012) p. 255

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 256

¹⁵ Sartre, J.P., (2010) p. 193

¹⁶ Sartre, J.P., (1949) p. 93

When a person creates a work of art, he/she expresses freedom. Sartre's view that 'existence precedes essence' is the foundation of his theory of art. He upholds that humans are born without any predefined purposes. They need to create their essence through their choices and their actions. Art is one of these kinds of creations. While creating a work of art, the artist imposes meaning on something, like words, colours, or sounds. This act of creation highlights human freedom, reflecting an individual being's capacity to overcome their situation and bring a subjective vision to the world.

According to Sartre, artistic creation is an authentic expression of human freedom. Authenticity means living in accordance with one's true self, free from societal conventions and imposed identities.¹⁷ By creating works of art that are unique to them, the artists highlight this authenticity. Their creations are not dictated by external factors, rather they are the expression of the artists' experience and imagination. This expression is possible because of the freedom.

However, according to Sartre, though art is the expression of freedom and there is no external force, art does not come out of nowhere. There is always a context. He says, 'One cannot write without a public and a myth — without a certain public which historical circumstances have produced, without a certain myth of literature, which depends in a very large measure upon the demands of this public. In a word, the author is in a situation, as are all other men.'¹⁸ This view of Sartre is similar to the theories propounded by Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno.

According to Benjamin, traditional works of art possess, which is deeply tied to their originality, their specific place in time, and their historical or ritualistic context. For Benjamin, the aura of a work of art is connected to its authenticity. In traditional contexts, the authenticity of a work is based on its presence in space and time, its specific ritual or social practice.¹⁹ Adorno too talks about the importance of context in art. According to him, art has the potential to resist or critique society. Art can either conform to the ideological needs of society or challenge them. In a

¹⁷ Thomas, P., and Das, B.R., (2022) p. 1179

¹⁸ Sartre, J.P., (1949) p. 188

¹⁹ Benjamin, W., (1969) p. 4

capitalist context, art is often commodified, packaged, and sold like any other product. This commercialization of art turns it into a tool of ideological control. For Adorno, the true power of art lies in its autonomy—the ability to exist independently of the market and question dominant ideologies. He also says that art is not a direct reflection of reality, but an expression of its tensions and contradictions. In this way, art serves as a critical form that opens up possibilities for alternative ways of thinking and being.²⁰

So, an artist's creation is not isolated but influenced by the surrounding world. Social, political, cultural, and historical factors all contribute to shaping artistic choices. The artist may respond to or challenge prevailing ideologies, reflect societal changes, or draw inspiration from specific cultural contexts. Everything that happens in society is associated with human beings who have their own thinking and understanding, which depends on their background. Every person associated with some events of society has their own understanding of that event. For example, a photographer has his/her understanding. When a photographer captures something of an event out of his/her understanding, that photograph might seem objective to the photographer, but others may think of that same photograph as a subjective interpretation of the situation by the photographer.

According to Sartre, art is not just a mere expression, it is a judgement of the present. Whenever an artist creates something, that representation is a judgement by the artist to the present situation. This judgement is not a description. The world is revealed to the emotion of the creator, and that emotion makes the judgement. Sartre rejected the idea that art is objective. Instead, he opines that art is a subjective reflection, and when an artist reflects, they do not simply replicate the world, they interpret it and transform it through their own understanding, values, and judgements.²¹

Sartre believes that the artist is responsible for his/her creation, because the artist expresses the emotion or makes a judgement on the present out of his/her freedom, and freedom has always some limitations. According to Sartre, the

²⁰ Fianco, F., (2020) pp. 2-3

²¹ Rau, C., (1950) p. 143

irresponsibility of the artist is propaganda which was supported by the bourgeoisie against the proletariat.²² Sartre criticizes the notion of 'art for art's sake' as bourgeois propaganda because he believes it reflects a detached and apolitical stance. The idea of art for its own sake, independent of social or political concerns, was seen by Sartre as a luxury embraced by the bourgeoisie, a class that could afford to detach itself from the pressing issues of the time.

Sartre emphasized the responsibility of individuals and artists to engage with the social and political realities of their era. He argued that true art should be involved in addressing and reflecting the struggles of society, rather than existing in a realm of aesthetic detachment. In Sartre's view, the concept of 'art for art's sake' represented a form of escapism and a refusal to acknowledge the moral and political responsibilities of the artist in the face of societal challenges.

So, to summarise the artist's creative process it is evident that Sartre believes in the autonomy of the artist. The artist is a conscious being, who belongs to a particular social context and reflects on the present issues. At the same time, this makes them responsible for their work. This whole creative process is possible because of the nature of the consciousness — freedom. There is another aspect of art apart from this — the spectator's aspect. Now let us see how a spectator is related to art.

According to Sartre, a spectator of art is a free subject who interacts with the art and interprets the work according to their subjective perspective. A work of art, like a painting or literature, is a creation which expresses the artist's freedom. However, this creation gets its meaning when it is encountered by the spectator.²³ The spectator does not merely observe the artwork but actively engages in the art and brings their own subjective experience to the artwork.

So, according to Sartre, art is not limited. There is always a space for the spectator to comment or interpret the work. An episode in his novel *The Age of Reason* explains this. The character in the novel goes to an exhibition of paintings by Gauguin. He was very impressed by the paintings. He decided that he would

²² Ibid., p. 143

²³ Ibid., p. 141

come to the exhibition again with this friend. When he was coming with his friend, he had an argument with the person. Later, when he stood before the paintings, he did not find anything impressive. He finds only some marks on the canvas. This highlights that the involvement of the spectator is necessary for the appreciation of something as an art.²⁴

Sartre argues that literature as an art form is a way to engage with the freedom of the reader. The artist chooses and creates a vision, but the spectator brings in the meaning by interpreting it. This participation of the spectator is not a passive reception of the artist's intention, rather the subject engages actively and can reshape its meaning. This participation of the spectator is possible as the subject is free.

Section V

The above discussion leads us to say that Sartre's maxim 'existence precedes essence' is seen in all his works. Art is the creation of the conscious subject. The subject, as a conscious being, is free. This freedom makes the subject capable of reflecting and creating new perspectives. If we consider the creator's aspect in art, we find that the creator reflects what he/she perceives as a situation. The reflection can be made in several ways. For instance, one can write or paint about a situation. The reflection is distinct from a mere observation — it is a judgment. This reflection or the judgement is the outcome of freedom. This is one of the two aspects of art. Another aspect is the spectator. The spectator too is a conscious subject. He/she perceives an art and reflects based on his/her experience. This reflection too is the outcome of freedom.

So, it can be said that freedom, as an integral part of conscious beings, is core to human perspectives and human creation. Each and every aspect related to human beings is possible because of freedom. That is why, freedom is the foundation of art creation. There cannot be any art if the being is not free.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 140

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