

Sartre and Freedom

Leo Franchi

Human freedom is undoubtedly one of the most fundamental ideas that has driven the development of democratic politics in the last few hundred years. Freedom is taught in school as one of the essential tenets of human life, and lack of freedom is used as a reason for meddling in the affairs of others. In our modern life, rarely does something as fundamental as freedom emerge as a contentious issue, and rarer still does it get redefined. But Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, upends the conventional view of freedom and frames the issue in a new, existential framework. Sartre's existential philosophy stems from his new vision of consciousness, and by answering the question of the being in a new way, he provides a different understanding of our existence in this world. At the heart of Sartre's new philosophy is his division of being into two categories: the for-itself and the in-itself. At the heart of his philosophy is the concept of nothingness—or, as he puts it, the nihilation of being. This is the for-itself, and the for-itself is an empty negation of the non-conscious being which is called the in-itself. In simpler terms, we can look at the consciousness of human beings as the for-itself, and the non-conscious being of human beings the in-itself. Although it seems that these two terms divide the being of humans into two separate parts, Sartre explains that because the for-itself is nothing more than the negation of the in-itself, they are irrevocably linked, and we can avoid the pitfall of having a dichotomy at the heart of being. 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. Although it sounds uncomfortable, if not unnerving, Sartre maintains that human beings are necessarily free, always, and it is impossible for a human to fail to be free. To fail to be free, in his view, is the same as to cease to be. So the result Sartre ends up with—redefining the

role of freedom as the mode of being of the for-itself—while unexpected, provides for a new way of looking at our lives, and I think that Sartre successfully sheds light on our understanding of ourselves and our choices in the world.

In order to understand Sartre's concept of freedom and its role, we must start at the foundation of his existentialism, and that is the duality of the Being-for-itself and the Being-in-itself. Sartre's essential description of consciousness is simply that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, but by itself is nothing. Without something to be conscious *of*, consciousness cannot exist. Therefore, he states, consciousness itself is nothing. Consciousness is nothing more than an empty container that defines itself in relation to the objects that it is conscious of. This is the initial step in his reversal of the traditional ontology of being—he posits consciousness as being nothingness, and that which consciousness is conscious of, having being. However, consciousness is self-aware of itself as consciousness. This, initially, sounds doubtful. How can consciousness, which in itself is nothing, be aware of itself? Sartre, to explain this paradox, begins his exploration at the *cogito* of Descartes, but introduces a new term to describe what he finds is even more fundamental: the *pre-reflective cogito*. The concept of a *pre-reflective cogito* sounds like it should be a contradiction, for how can one be conscious of a self before self-consciousness? But Sartre claims that there is an implicit sort of self-reflective consciousness that is prior to the explicit self-consciousness of the *cogito* itself. "When I see a table, I am implicitly conscious of myself as *not* being the table which I see." (Macann, 1993, p. 114) In other words, the act of existing and being conscious of objects immediately implies that there is a consciousness which is conscious of said objects. In the implicit relation to consciousness that exists in the *pre-reflective cogito*, Sartre is able to claim that

consciousness, which is nothing, is nevertheless aware of itself.¹ 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.” (Gutting, 2001, p. 136) This internal relation to itself is the implicit link to consciousness by the *pre-reflective cogito*. The in-itself is now made clear as well, for only things that are the object of consciousness—concrete, existing, objects—can have being-in-itself. It is clear that consciousness itself, which is never *explicitly* an object of its own consciousness, cannot have being-in-itself, but only being-for-itself.

Why is this elaborate description of the being-in-itself and the being-for-itself so important? Sartre goes on to explore the for-itself, and it provides the scaffolding upon which he builds the rest of his philosophy. Essential in the description of the for-itself is the inherent nothingness that it contains. Consciousness, we have stated, is empty. The for-itself exists as a nothingness in the middle of being. “The For-itself, in fact, is nothing but the pure nihilation of the In-itself, it is like a hole in being at the heart of Being.” (Sartre, 1984, p. 786) From this point Sartre concludes, in a now famous sentence, that “existence precedes essence.” As the fundamental being of consciousness is nothingness, but nevertheless consciousness exists, consciousness has the task of defining itself by what it projects upon itself. There is no predefined being that consciousness is tied to, and there is no path that consciousness is forced to take. Sartre talks about two things in relation to the nothingness of the for-itself: *time* and *freedom*. Sartre begins by saying that consciousness is separated by its past and its future by the nothingness of its being. This sounds like a vacuous statement, but once his concept of freedom is brought to bear, it becomes clear. The for-itself, by being completely empty, has the ability to define itself at any moment. This is its freedom. Freedom allows the for-itself to redefine itself in every instant, it gives it the power to break from the past and to

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redefine the future. Freedom is the essential being of consciousness in the way that to be conscious is to have freedom. It is now clear that instead of saying that consciousness is separated by nothingness from its past and future, it is equivalent to say that consciousness is separated by *freedom* from its past and its future.

This freedom which lies in the heart of the being-for-itself is the driving force behind all of consciousness. It is important here to define exactly what Sartre means by freedom. It “does not mean ‘to obtain what one has wished’, but rather ‘by oneself to determine oneself to wish’ (in the broad sense of choosing). In other words, success is not important to freedom.” (Sartre, 1984, p. 621) This is not exactly the same definition as the commonplace definition of freedom, as he cares solely about the ability of consciousness to determine what it wishes, rather than its ability to actually achieve that wish. Sartre coins two terms that define and further explain the role of freedom—the *facticity* of freedom and its *situation*. The facticity of freedom, quite simply, is the fact that human beings are not free to not be free. Human beings do not have the freedom of choosing whether or not they are free—they simply are, essentially, free. This sounds like a great thing, for isn't freedom one of the most positive terms that you can apply to a human being or situation? This is not at all the case— another way of putting this, with a darker tone, is that “we are condemned to freedom [...], thrown into freedom.” (Sartre, 1984, p. 623) We are forced to be free, Sartre claims, even when we do not want to. The facticity of freedom is fundamentally what allows Sartre to build up his concept of *bad faith*, which is our attempt to avoid our own freedom by lying to ourselves. If we do not wish to own up to our own essential freedom, we treat ourselves as an in-itself, by explaining something as determined by our past, or by saying that something is foreordained for the future. But these are inauthentic explanations, for as we are forced to be free, we continuously choose our own past and future.

What Sartre calls situation completes his view of the role of freedom in everyday life, and I think that it provides the most fascinating part about his philosophy as a whole. He uses the term situation “for the contingency of freedom in the *plenum* of being of the world inasmuch as this *datum*, which is there only *in order not to constrain* freedom, is revealed to this freedom only as *already illuminated* by the end which freedom chooses.” (Sartre, 1984, p. 626). This is a very convoluted and confusing way of stating what is a very clear and powerful point—through freedom, we continually choose our goal, or project, and it is this choice that controls the way that we interpret the objects that we deal with in everyday life. As a consciousness that is always redefining its project, which continually projects itself towards its chosen end, we frame our understanding of what we encounter in the world in terms of this choice. If our goal is to scale a certain rock wall, we see the steepness of the cliff as an obstacle. If, however, we are carrying a camera and attempting to take pictures of scenic cliffs, the steepness of the wall is not part of the object itself, but rather the location and color of the cliff become important. Sartre uses the world *datum* to mean the “brute existent,” that is, the raw phenomenological data which we perceive. But this is far from the whole picture, as the freedom of consciousness contributes to the understanding of the object by interpreting the brute existent in light of its currently chosen future project. So “the *situation*, the common product of the contingency of the in-itself and of freedom, is an ambiguous phenomenon in which it is impossible for the for-itself to distinguish the contribution of freedom from that of the brute existent.” (Sartre, 1984, p. 627) We do not know to what extent our free choice of the future contributes to our concept of an object or idea, we just know that it has a hand in shaping it.

This leaves us with a somewhat complete view of the consciousness of human reality² and Sartre's radical stance on freedom. This radical ideology brings up some important questions, ranging from what Sartre thinks of responsibility for their own life as a factor in human life—in light of the existential freedom that consciousness is—to the possibility of oppression. I think that Sartre would hold a relatively negative view of human responsibility. That is, I do not think that there is much room for responsibility in his description of human reality. In order to be responsible for something, it is necessary to be held accountable. There needs to be some sort of ramifications, whether social, physical, mental, or otherwise that are linked to the act or thing that you are responsible for. When talking about the responsibility that one has over one's own life it is no different. If one is to be responsible for the place at which they are at a certain point of their life, it requires them to be held accountable—to themselves—if they fail to be where they expect. Right here is it clear why this completely falls though according to Sartre. The essential freedom that human beings are forced to have does not allow there to be a "fixed" goal by which someone can measure himself. For example, if a drunkard were to sit and reflect upon his current life and feel bad because he is not living his life as responsibly as he thinks he should, he merely needs to exercise his freedom to reposition his project in order to allow himself to be a drunkard without remorse. There is nothing that is tying him to his goal of being a businessman—his belief that he has been bred to be a business man is nothing more than he holding himself in bad faith. So we see that according to Sartre, there is no room for responsibility and accountability, whether it be to oneself or to others. This is a similar line of reasoning to that needed to explain Sartre's take on the possible oppression of a person. A conventional explanation of oppression is simply when one is held and unable to do that which he wishes—escape, speak freely, etc. But does this have any effect on a human being's freedom? To

²Sartre uses the term "human reality" which can also be interpreted as Heidegger's *Dasein*

Sartre, absolutely not. Whatever situation that a person may be in, it is impossible for his freedom to be enclosed. The only way to affect a person's freedom is to affect his being—which outside of killing him, is impossible to do.

This is evidently a very uncomfortable and unnerving position to take. It does not feel completely natural to say that no matter what is done to a person, that person is completely free. Furthermore, it is clearly odd to state that humans do not have responsibility for their actions and their own position in life. If there is to be a critique of this existential philosophy, I think it must originate from Sartre's almost careless redefinition of the term "freedom." When he explains that freedom is merely the ability to wish what one wants, not actually achieve it, he loses one of the essential aspects of the term. Without being able to actualize the wish that is desired, one is doing no more than dreaming. What Sartre has done is to split the "freedom" that he talks about into two, existential freedom on one side, and all other forms and understandings of freedom on the other. While it sounds bizarre to claim that the tortured prisoner of war is completely free, it sounds much less bizarre to state that this same prisoner is existentially, but not physically, free. So what do we make of Sartre's philosophy, and his radical repositioning of the role of the for-itself and the in-itself? Even with the idea that his idea of freedom is significantly different to most others, I think that Sartre is able to redefine the way in which we look at our role in life. Regardless of his conception of freedom, it is still possible to apply his idea of situation to everyday life, and it enhances our understanding of both our actions and our future. Knowing that the way in which we see things right now is ultimately colored by how we view the future, while sounding almost self-evident, allows us, ironically, more freedom (in the normal sense) in choosing our path in life.

Sartre's philosophy provides us with a philosophical break from all previous philosophies, as he rejects Husserl and Heidegger in order to create his dual ontology of the for-itself and the in-itself.

We have seen how he defines consciousness in terms of nothingness—that is, he defines consciousness as that which is conscious of something, so that in itself it is nothing. This allows Sartre to claim that existence—of consciousness—comes before essence—the meaning consciousness ascribes to objects. Furthermore, we have seen freedom to be the underlying fundamental being of this nothingness, for freedom is that which gives meaning to the objects of consciousness by continually choosing an end and projecting that onto the objects that it is currently dealing with. This freedom, though, is not one that we choose, but rather one that is forced upon us. However, we do not *want* to be free at every moment, and we do not *want* the responsibility of continually acknowledging that we are free and hence acting upon it. We are left with one option: we lie to ourselves. We knowingly accept that things are true in themselves, for example, that we *need* to do well on this exam in order to be happy, because doing well in college is *necessary* to do well in life, and doing well in life is *necessary* for happiness. By doing this we make our life easier to live, but we are also living in bad faith. Bad faith, I think, is the most common mode of living. It is impossible for us to be continuously exercising our existential freedom. It is much easier to live our lives, day to day, if we ignore the existential freedom that Sartre demands and instead stick to the commonplace definition of freedom, while in bad faith. So Sartre allows us to critique our own way of living, of existing, but in the end, I think we need to be happy with ourselves as beings of bad faith in order to successfully navigate through life.

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