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Is Sartre's Notion of Radical Freedom Coherent?

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1. Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre's views on freedom have been criticised by authors from various philosophical traditions, including Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Albert Camus and Charles Taylor. These criticisms, however, often involve misunderstandings of the subtleties of Sartre's views. Widespread sweeping generalisations of Sartre's conclusions, such as the label 'radical freedom', as well as Sartre's own provocative statements, have been the source of the common misconception that Sartre simply assumes that we are free in an implausibly extreme sense. This dissertation attempts to show that Sartre's notion of radical freedom is not merely dogmatic, and that it is in fact coherent from an analytical perspective, provided that certain foundational elements are brought to light and that the theory as a whole is placed within the perspective of the Husserlian phenomenological tradition. After briefly presenting the account of freedom presented in Sartre's early works, mainly *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, I shall draw on arguments put forward by Merleau-Ponty, Camus and Taylor in order to identify three major challenges to the theory. Assessing the strength of these objections will enable us to clarify and develop Sartre's position and, ultimately, to recognise that the label 'radical freedom' merely applies to the ontological side of his account of freedom, which must nonetheless exercise itself against the background of the world.

2. Outline of Sartre's views

One must note from the start that Sartre does not use the notion of freedom in the popular sense of 'being able to satisfy one's desires', nor is he talking about freedom of the will. Rather, Sartre is talking about the autonomy of choice one possesses in determining oneself to choose by oneself, thereby being able to significantly change the way one understands, interprets and acts as regards the world and others. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre undertakes to show that we can, and should, regard this kind of freedom as an ontologically primitive aspect of human consciousness: to be conscious, for Sartre, amounts to being free, in the specific sense of possessing the ability to change our character by forming new life projects at any point of our lives. 'These extraordinary and marvellous instants', he writes, 'when the prior project collapses into the past in the light of a new project which rises on its ruins and which as yet exists only in outline [...] have often appeared to furnish the clearest and most moving image of our freedom' (B&N, 476).

Sartre's intricate justification for these contentious conclusions about human freedom can be summarised as follows. A careful phenomenological analysis of human consciousness shows that it is necessarily intentional, that is, necessarily *of* something, directed at an object that is not it. For Sartre, to be conscious of an object, whether material or psychological, amounts to 'intending' (literally 'going-out-to-grasp') that object by transcending oneself (Gardner, 2009, 45) [1]. Identifying consciousness with its intentional nature, Sartre argues that consciousness *per se* must be empty, or its own 'no-thing-ness', for the objects of consciousness, such as beliefs, desires, emotions, empirical objects, and even our own notion of the self can be nothing but *relata* of consciousness's relation to them[2]. Therefore, consciousness cannot be identical to self-consciousness, because reflective intentional states, such as 'I am aware of my consciousness of

[1] Sartre distinguishes between what he calls 'positional' consciousness, which is consciousness *of* an object X, and 'thetic' consciousness, which is consciousness in its judgemental or propositional form, i.e. consciousness *that* P. It is important to note that the relation of intentionality must be grasped, not as a mere property or faculty of consciousness, but as identical with consciousness (*Ibid.*).

[2] These ideas were already present in Sartre's first philosophical publication, *The Transcendence of the Ego,* where he writes against Husserl that 'the Ego cannot be an inhabitant of consciousness, not formally nor materially speaking' and so can only be an object of it (Sartre, 1965, 14–19).

X', introduce a gap within subjectivity[3]. This non-self-identity, or internal gap between the pre-reflective consciousness and the reflecting subject, is precisely where, according to Sartre, human freedom is to be found. If we fully coincided with ourselves, there would be no room for the kind of freedom we exercise, because human freedom is something that can only be exercised through the realisation of a non-actual possibility of some kind. But the possibility we want to realise is necessarily something we are not yet; it is something we want to become but is not something we are, and so provides us with a reason for action. Freedom thus appears to require that subjectivity is constantly trying to close the gap between where it is and where it wants to be, hence the descriptions of consciousness as ineluctably 'being what it is not and not being what it is' and as 'a being which has yet to be what it is' (B&N xli/33). What exactly Sartre means by this will be clarified below, in our discussion of the two fundamental modes of being.

Furthermore, not only is consciousness identical to the relation of intentionality, but it is also identical to the spontaneous activity of 'nihilation' (*néantisation*). This activity does not simply amount to negation, nor does it mean total annihilation. 'Nihilation', in the Sartrean sense, is a subtler notion whereby consciousness constantly secretes nothingness into the world by intending non-existing future possibilities and realising (or temporalising) them, thereby nullifying all the other ones, through an action or a choice of itself (O'Shiel, 2013, 3). It is this very process of nihilation that characterises the being of human consciousness as a projected 'nothingness' and that Sartre takes to constitute our freedom: 'What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the being of "human reality". Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of man and his being-free' (B&N, 25). Freedom is thus not a property or a faculty that is possessed by consciousness, nor is it a characteristic belonging to its essence. Rather, to be conscious is equivalent to being free, ontologically speaking. This is the meaning of what is probably the most famous phrase of *Being*

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[3]Sartre also argues that consciousness must be non-positionally aware of itself through a pre-reflective act of self-consciousness. This special relation of consciousness to itself is a transcendental necessity for grounding the certainty of the Cartesian cogito, as it would otherwise not be certain that the consciousness which says 'I think' is precisely the consciousness that thinks. Note that the 'pre-reflective cogito', as Sartre calls it, does not posit the existence of a transcendental object of or in consciousness, like Husserl's transcendental Ego; it is rather the expression of a metaphysically necessary act of apperception that is and remains, though non-temporally, within consciousness.

and Nothingness, 'We are condemned to be free' (B&N, 129/439/509/525/553); or, in Sartre's alternative formulation, 'We are not free to cease being free' (439). So Sartre's notion of radical freedom consists in the view that, at every single moment of choice, we have the possibility to re-invent ourselves by formulating new projects, although this might be at the cost of modifying our entire way of being in the world.

3. Objections to Sartre's conception of freedom

In response to this brief outline of Sartre's account of 'radical' freedom, let us now consider three interrelated objections. Sartre's theory may be attacked from various possible angles, but I have selected, for the sake of relevance, only those objections directly aimed at his notion of radical freedom *per se,* independently of his metaphysical commitments and phenomenological method.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French phenomenologist and contemporary of Sartre, first critiques Sartre in the closing chapter of his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), which begins by acknowledging Sartre as a philosophical companion, but then moves on to accuse him of having executed the project of phenomenology inadequately. However, it is only in the *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955) that Merleau-Ponty explicitly formulates direct objections to Sartre's views on freedom. Essentially, Merleau-Ponty argues that the attempt to counter natural determinism by means of a notion of freedom that is outside all effective constraints is bound to be inadequate, since we are not free-floating spirits existing independently from our environment and background but rather embodied beings situated in a world that exists before us and that is already infused with meaning. This is what it really means for us to be 'situated' beings: we are entangled in real relations of reciprocal determination, with our environment, with other persons and institutions, and through our own bodies. Physical behaviours and external causes determine the contingencies of our environment, which in turn constitutes the prior background against which deliberate choices are made and personal histories develop.

However, as we will see below, Sartre clearly fully acknowledges the fact that freedom can only occur within an articulated situation involving the contingencies of the world. Thus, in response

to Merleau-Ponty's early criticism, Simone de Beauvoir pointed out the many passages of *Being and Nothingness* where Sartre does indeed recognise that the world already contains contingencies, meaning and value that exist independently of our individual projects.

What, then, is Merleau-Ponty really disagreeing with? Jonathan Webber identifies that the fundamental source of contention between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty concerns not the origin of meaning we find in experience, nor does it strictly speaking concern the extent to which our situation in the world affects our choices; their disagreement is rather about what constitutes the source of motivation for action (2012, 331). Whereas Sartre holds that nothing past or present existing in the world of being can provide us with a reason to act one way or another, Merleau-Ponty asserts that the constraints of the world, and especially our past, not only provide us with reasons for actions but also determine the extent to which we actually are able to realise the projects that we formulate. In other words, denying the claim that we can only make sense of what it is to be conscious if we regard our freedom as ontologically primitive, Merleau-Ponty argues that our freedom is not ontologically prior to but significantly dependent on our situation. This leads him to the conclusion that we can only engage with a world that is already structured by a framework of meaning and provides the necessary background against which our freedom may develop to a greater or lesser extent. Freedom is thus a matter of degrees for Merleau-Ponty: the more the contingencies of my situation, both physical and social ones, past or present, are articulated in such a way as to enable the pursuit of my projects, the freer I will be.

Another contemporary of Sartre, Albert Camus, was highly critical of his views on freedom, though for different reasons. Camus accuses the notion of radical freedom of being both unintelligible and intolerable, for when we push it to its logical conclusions, and thus attempt to render it fully coherent, then everything is permitted. So Camus thinks that radical freedom is an incoherent notion, and even if it were not, it could not be true by Sartre's own light, for by rendering axiological nihilism unavoidable it vitiates Sartre's promise of providing a viable foundation for ethics.

Camus was already exploring the implications of radical freedom four years before the publication of *Being and Nothingness*, in his jarring play entitled *Caligula,* which he started writing in 1938. Pushing the absurdity (or meaninglessness) of the world to its logical conclusions, Camus concludes that unrestrained radical freedom, which the Caligula seems to possess in the play, not only leads to axiological nihilism, but is also a deeply incoherent notion, since after massacring anyone and behaving however he wants, Caligula could still not succeed in 'achieving the impossible', such as 'getting the moon'. At the end of the play, Caligula has the following realisation: 'I have chosen the wrong path, a path that leads to nothing. My freedom is not the right one…' (2006, 103) This fictional work was, arguably, already aimed at what Camus would later take to be Sartre's position on freedom. Subsequently, in his review of Sartre's *Le Mur*, Camus criticises the 'excess of liberty' possessed by the characters of the story, objecting that such a radical freedom is of no use to them. Later on, in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), Camus asserts that 'eternal freedom', though man might feel like possessing it, is in fact meaningless and illusory, and that the only kind of freedom of interest to him is the 'freedom of thought and action'. His disagreement with Sartre reached its climax after Camus published *L'Homme Révolté* (1951), where he insists on the impossibility of absolute human freedom and claims that freedom can only be acceptably conceptualised as having limits. Although this is not the place to enter into the details of their vehement disagreement, what clearly emerges is that Camus took Sartre's account of human freedom to be 'radical' in the sense of being a kind of wholly unconditioned, absolute, or free-floating freedom 'without brakes' that permits the individual to do anything that she wishes, without any external constraints. So, Camus's objection is twofold: not only is radical freedom an unintelligible notion, but even if we were free in such a radical sense, then anything would be permissible, and that is an unacceptable consequence.

More recently, in his paper 'What is Human Agency?' (1985), Charles Taylor in a sense combined the two above-mentioned objections, namely that radical freedom cannot accommodate for the significance of external motivations for action and is unable to provide an objective foundation for values, by posing the following dilemma to the radical-choice theorist: either we want to maintain the notion of radical choice independent of any evaluation that weighs in our decisions, and then

it becomes a simple expression of preferences leading to arbitrary choices (if choices at all), or we start taking such evaluations seriously, but then we are forced to recognise that these are, at least for the most part, not issued from radical choice – so, either way, radical freedom crumbles. How does Taylor get to the formulation of this dilemma? And how exactly is it relevant to Sartre's theory? Let us examine more closely what Taylor's objection really consists in.

Taylor's view is that we cannot understand individual responsibility for what he calls 'strong evaluations', which roughly amount to the judicative form of second-order desires, through the Sartrean notion of radical choice, since a radical choice *between* strong evaluations is quite conceivable, but not a radical choice *of* such evaluations. Strong evaluations cannot stem from radical choice on the part of a subject if they are determined by external reasons pushing her to formulate one evaluation over another. So, for the notion of radical choice to be coherent, it requires either that choices occur wholly independently from such evaluations, or that such evaluations are themselves the product of radical choice independent of any further consideration. In other words, Taylor argues that speaking of choice as being *radically* free precludes us from saying that a possible action is the *right* one (deontological justification), or 'to-be-chosen' (intrinsic value to the project), or the preferred one (desire-based justification), etc. because strong evaluations would then be externally determined judgements rather than an expression of radical choice itself. However, if radical choice cannot be grounded in anything but the subject's autonomy, it seems merely to amount to arbitrarily throwing oneself one way rather than another. Would that still be a desirable kind of choice? Do I really choose if I just find myself performing one action rather than another without any grounds? Taylor's answer is clearly no: wholly ungrounded choice is no choice at all. On the other hand, as soon as we allow anything to ground our choices of strong evaluations, then these choices stop being 'radical', for they would be somehow determined by something other than the subject's autonomy of choice. As a matter of fact, allowing external elements to cause our choices of strong evaluations opens the door to the truth of psychological determinism, thereby suggesting that consciousness cannot, as Sartre thought, be independent of the natural causal order of the world. Accordingly, the theory of radical choice turns out to be deeply incoherent, for it wants to maintain both strong evaluations

and radical choice, when any choice in fact requires a field of already value-laden possibilities from which to choose and so cannot be radical. Therefore, the very notion of radical choice is intrinsically self-contradictory and fundamentally incoherent (Taylor, 1985, 29–35).

4. Defence and development of Sartre's theory

The trio of objections just presented – namely (1) that Sartre disregards the direct effect that the contingencies of the world have on our choices and actions; (2) that his notion of radical freedom is simply unintelligible and, when properly examined, a pathway to axiological nihilism; and (3) that radical choice is an incoherent notion, since groundless arbitrary choice is no real choice at all but grounded choice cannot be radically free – are interrelated in many ways and in fact based on similar underlying misconceptions of Sartre's views. However, before being in a position to address them properly, we must step back and examine where Sartre's conclusions about human freedom stem from, namely his dualistic ontology and his 'negative' theory of action.

First of all, in the line of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, Sartre is primarily interested in developing a 'phenomenological ontology', i.e. a study of the structures of experience and consciousness *qua* being that will make sense of the way human reality manifests itself. At the outset of the introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, the Kantian framework of the world of appearances and the world-in-itself is rejected on the grounds that a conception of the world from no particular perspective is not simply unattainable but also unintelligible, and therefore superfluous. Instead, Sartre adopts a phenomenal ontology in which the real or objective existence of an object reveals itself in a particular *mode* of appearing, where each one of its particular appearances is a manifestation of the infinite series of other possible appearances of that object. There is thus nothing 'behind' the appearances of the empirical world, and that means that the phenomena of experience tell us something about the way the world actually is. Now, with this phenomenal framework in mind, we can see how the fact that a phenomenological analysis of consciousness reveals the above-mentioned detachment on the part of consciousness in relation to both itself and the world is the source of Sartre's intuition that the two *relata* of the relation of intentionality, namely subjective consciousness and some object other than itself,

cannot be ontologically identical with each other. In other words, Sartre wants to distinguish the being of the empirical phenomenon from the being of consciousness. It is important to note that Sartre does not purport to identify two kinds or types of being, but rather two distinct modes of being belonging to a single reality, where these different modes can be viewed from different perspectives. These 'regions' of being, as Sartre calls them, are 'being-in-itself' (*l'être-en-soi*) and 'being-for-itself' ('*l'être-pour-soi*').

What Sartre refers to as 'being-in-itself*'* is the mode of being of the phenomena that we experience as objects of the world. Strictly speaking, nothing more can be said about being-in-itself than that it 'is (*est*)', 'is in itself (*est en-soi*)' and 'is what it is (*est ce qu'il est*)' (B&N, lxv). As Gardner points out, the goal of these peculiarly vague ontological characterisations is neither to describe informatively nor to assert analytic truths regarding this mode of being, but to alert us to the special, unordinary, negative character of its relation to discursive concepts and judgements of consciousness (2009, 55). There is indeed a limit to the extent to which one can explain what the ontology of being-in-itself consists in, not because of shortcomings of our cognitive capacities, but rather because the mode being-in-itself has no secret for us: it is an absolute and self-identical plenitude of being, a perfect coincidence with itself, an infinitely dense 'opacity', which can never be what it is not and can only be what it is. So, the complete ontological mode of being-in-itself can be captured in the claim that it simply *is*, without requiring further justification in terms of, say, natural laws or a God. It is worth observing that Sartre here acknowledges the truth of naturalism, in at least some sense of this versatile concept, since being-in-itself is the mode of existence of actual physical objects, including my own body, and so corresponds to the naturalist's notion of a mind-independent natural reality.

However, Sartre's ontology is more inclusive than that, since he identifies another mode or region of being, and that is the mode of being of consciousness, or what Sartre calls the 'being-for-itself'. It cannot be the same as, and must in fact be diametrically opposed to, the ontological character of being-in-itself. For, as Gardner puts it, 'whatever falls outside the bounds of material nature cannot have [full, genuine] being, and so must be nothing' (2011, 50). In contrast with being-in-

itself, which is an absolute coincidence with itself, the being of consciousness does not coincide with itself in a full equivalence, since consciousness is necessarily intentional. Here, the descriptions of the necessarily consciousness mentioned in the first section resonate, since the for-itself is precisely that which is what it is not and is not what it is. The fact that consciousness is constantly trying to be where it is not leads us to Sartre's definition of its mode of being: it is 'a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself' (B&N, lxii).

Furthermore, being-for-itself is characterised by a faculty that is distinctive of human consciousness: it is not merely capable of intending existing objects, which exist under the mode of being-in-itself, but also non-existing ones, such as fictional entities and non-actual possibilities. These manifestations of non-being, which are real yet non-actual objects of consciousness, are what Sartre calls *négatités.*[4] Now, according to Sartre, the various phenomena of human experience that involve *négatités*, such as those of imagining, negating and questioning, cannot be conceived outside of (some mode of) being. So, *négatités* must somehow be ontologically real, but of course not in the same way as tables and chairs are real. Sartre argues that nothing that exists under the mode of being-in-itself could be the source of the reality *négatités*, for full genuine being can only engender being. Therefore, 'there must be a being – which could not be being-in-itself – whose property is to support and sustain nothingness; a being by which nothingness comes to things' (B&N, 22). This mode of being is in fact being-for-itself, which pertains to consciousness: 'Man is the being through whom nothingness comes into the world' (B&N, 45).

With Sartre's basic ontology in place, we are now in a position to turn to his theory of action, which is precisely what Merleau-Ponty disagreed with. The fourth section of *Being & Nothingness*, '*Avoir, Être et Faire'*, begins with the allegation that most debates about freedom,

[4] '*Négatités*' are defined as the infinitely many non-existing 'realities', which are not only objects of subjective judgement but which are experienced, opposed, feared, etc. by conscious subjects and which, in their inner structure, are negative, i.e. made of non-being, or nothingness (B&N, 21).

in particular those between determinism and libertarianism or between compatibilism and incompatibilism, are fundamentally groundless, since the structure of the concept of an action must be clarified in the first place. According to Sartre, an action necessarily involves the existence of a project or intention, so that events occurring through accidents or clumsiness are not to be treated as actions *per se*. Moreover, actions always require the recognition of a '*desideratum*', i.e. a lacking object or state of affairs. The concept of an action is therefore fundamentally concerned with the realm of non-being, i.e. with what is not but will be or ought to be. Sartre writes, 'From the moment of the first conception of the act, consciousness has withdrawn itself from the full world of which it is conscious and to leave the level of being in order frankly to consider that of non-being' (B&N, 434).

Consequently, Sartre takes the view that no fully existing thing or state of affairs, whether it is present or past, political or personal, physical or psychological, can by itself motivate an action, since all actions stem from the projection of consciousness towards a state of affairs that is not. Sartre gives the example of a worker whose situation is miserable. He will only be motivated to start a revolution if he places his present suffering in the light of another, though non-existent, possible state of affairs. Note, however, that the possibility of starting a revolution will only provide him with a reason for action if it appears to be one of *his* possibilities, that is, one that he can practically realise from his present situation. Thus, the key idea in Sartre's theory of action is that the structure of an action requires there being an *ontological* break from being-in-itself to contemplate one's desires in the light of what is not, a requirement that precisely confirms the gap between consciousness and its objects that our previous phenomenological investigations have already revealed. If the ontology of consciousness must somehow be different from that of physical things, and if only *négatités*, non-actual possibilities in particular, can provide it with reasons for action, then it must be the case that consciousness exists and projects itself independently from the natural causal order of being-in-itself.

We are now in a position to see how Merleau-Ponty's objection can be answered. As a matter of fact, allowing the contingencies of the past, which exist under the mode of being-in-itself, to

provide us with reasons for choice and action while at the same time maintaining that we freely formulate personal projects is an ambiguous position, which arguably amounts to natural determinism in disguise. Although a complete account of Merleau-Ponty's views cannot be given here, a careful look at his objection shows that he trying to have his cake and eat it, for he is constantly oscillating between advocating the autonomy of choice of consciousness and its being absorbed into the world of physical objects. However, as Sartre clearly pointed out, we are either ontologically free or fully determined; consciousness can only be either detached from the deterministic causal order of things or enmeshed in it – there can be no coherent middle ground. In other words, allowing causal crossings between the in-itself and the for-itself amounts to collapsing the two modes of being, thereby treating subjective consciousness as a mere object and contravening the phenomenal analysis of the ontological structure of consciousness that Merleau-Ponty himself endorses.

Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty's equivocal position is understandable, for Sartre himself recognises that, in our attempt to bridge the gap within our own subjectivity, we often try to elevate our perception to a third-person or objective point of view (which is that endorsed by scientific enquiry). We consequently tend to treat our first-person experience as if it were an *object* of inquiry independent of our awareness of it and, in doing so, see ourselves as if we were patients, or mere physical objects, rather than conscious, active and responsible agents. Sartre contrasts these two perspectives in *Being and Nothingness* when he describes a man walking along a precipice: instead of viewing himself as a passive object, subject to the transcendent probabilities that could affect him, such as the wind propelling him from the edge, he should not attempt to escape his own responsibility but rather focus on his own possibilities as a conscious subject, e.g. sitting down to take a break or paying closer attention to the twists and turns ahead (Eschleman, 2011, 38).[5] Of course, certain 'third-person' elements of his experience are inevitably determined beyond his choices, such as the weather or the size of his body, yet from his 'first-person'

[5] This tendency to deny that one is a being-for-itself and so to treat oneself as a mere object of the world rather than a responsible subject is precisely what Sartre calls 'bad faith'. Not only is Sartre's lengthy analysis of the phenomena of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness* remarkably insightful and accurate, but it also provides an idea of what a Sartrean ethical theory could be, that is, one based on the value of authenticity (for more on this topic, see Christine Daigle's 'The Ethics of Authenticity' in Webber 2011).

subjective perspective, there are countless *négatités* that are also objects of his consciousness and provide him with reasons for action. Although it is true that, for Sartre, our 'situation' as ontologically free beings-in-the-world is an intrinsically ambiguous phenomenon, it being practically impossible for the subject to distinguish between what exactly stems from his radical ontological freedom and what comes from the contingencies of the world, it nevertheless does not follow from this ambiguity that we are in fact both autonomous agents and externally caused to act in a certain way. Merleau-Ponty's position reduces human freedom to a mere matter of luck, which ultimately amounts to no freedom at all. By contrast, Sartre's theory of action is robust enough to ground our choices and actions in reality, though in the realm of non-being, while leaving room for freedom. As regards Merleau-Ponty's remarks on meaning and value, Sartre claims that being-in-itself might not possess intrinsic value, yet it is meaningfully revealed to consciousness 'only as already illuminated by the end which freedom chooses', and this meaning freely ascribed to it will provide the relevant framework for future decisions. For example, the fact there will be snow tomorrow can be regarded either as exciting news or as an unwelcome hindrance, depending on the ends and projects which I have already freely posited and which constitute my character. It is thus through the light of our freely chosen projects that our own fundamental choice of self takes shape and that our relationship to the world becomes increasingly specific and meaningful.

Covertly deterministic objections out of the way, let us now turn to a widespread misunderstanding of the notion of radical freedom: the term 'radical' has led many, including Camus and Taylor, to understand Sartrean freedom in the sense of an unlimited, absolute, or free-floating freedom. This confusion is comprehensible since Sartre spends most of *Being and Nothingness* focusing on the ontology of freedom rather than the practical exercise of it. This is because he takes the latter to be a matter of ethical philosophy and, unfortunately, never wrote the ethical treatise he had promised to publish. Moreover, like many other French thinkers of his time, Sartre had a taste for ambiguous, provocative, and striking statements. For instance, the claim that 'no limits to my freedom can be found except in my freedom' (B&N, 462) does indeed seem to suggest that freedom is unrestricted. However, in this statement, Sartre is actually

insisting in a hyperbolical fashion on the ontological freedom that we are. But he does acknowledge in numerous other passages that the exercise of freedom is in fact practically restricted by the contingencies of the world: the facts of my body limit my freedom, as does the causal order of nature, as well as, most importantly, other conscious subjects, who limit my freedom not only factually through their concrete actions but also ontologically, since the stare of others modifies the very structure of my being.[6] Consequently, the contingencies of my situation in the world do indeed restrain the exercise of my freedom in the world, but only by reducing the range of possibilities that I can realise, while my autonomy of choice itself remains unaffected. In another provocative statement, Sartre writes, 'even the pincers of the torturer do not exempt me from being free.' (B&N, 506) What he means here is that although my torturer can significantly limit the range of possibilities that are mine and from which I choose my project in life – that is, he can reduce my practical freedom – he nevertheless cannot affect my ontological freedom, which is what my consciousness consists in, unless, of course, he kills me.

At this point, our discussion has surfaced a tacit yet essential distinction that can, arguably, be found throughout *Being and Nothingness* as well as in later Sartrean works. That is the contrast between ontological freedom, on the one hand, which is the absolute and inescapable autonomy of choice that constitutes the being of human consciousness, and practical freedom, on the other hand, which consists in the extent to which we actually can exercise the freedom that we are against the background of the given of the world in-itself (Santoni, 2008). Note that this distinction does not identify two separate freedoms but rather two interdependent aspects of one human freedom. Although not explicitly stated by Sartre himself, this distinction appears to provide a solution to several puzzling passages in *Being and Nothingness*. For example, when Sartre says that 'there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom' (B&N, 509), he means that ontological freedom requires a given, as there can be no consciousness unless there is something of which it can be conscious in the sense of relating to,

[6] The phenomenological analysis of the subjective internalisation of the stare of the other subjective consciousness leads Sartre to introduce a third mode of being that is socially constituted, viz. being-for-Others. The key idea here is that, although my psychological Self is a construct supported by my own consciousness, its character is significantly conditioned by the freedom of others.

choosing, selecting, negating, and projecting itself toward an object that is not itself, whether it is an existing object of the world or a *négatité*. So, the freedom of the for-itself can only formulate projects within a 'situation' – that is, the common product of the contingencies that impede the for-itself and of its own radical freedom – where adversity from or accordance with the world occur to a certain degree.

It must by now be clear why Camus's criticism of radical freedom is in fact misguided. Not only did Camus misunderstand the notion of 'radical' freedom as a totally unrestricted freedom, but he also missed the distinction between our purely ontological freedom and the practical or 'situated' freedom we exercise. Accordingly, Sartre wrote in a 1952 response to Camus published in *Les Temps Modernes*, 'you, like so many people, are confusing the political and the philosophical'. In his usual ambiguous style, Sartre further writes that 'our freedom is nothing but the free choice to struggle in order to become free'. What Sartre means here is that we are ontologically free to choose to act so as to practically 'become free' in the sense of maximising our range of realisable possibilities within the contingencies of the world. In light of this, Camus's objection that radical freedom precludes any workable grounds for morality is simply false, for many philosophers have already shown that it is possible to construct a viable moral system while denying the existence of subject-independent moral facts. This is not the place for providing a complete suggestion of what a Sartrean morality would consist in, yet it is worth mentioning that, according to Sartre, values stem from our freedom: 'Values derive their meaning from an original projection of myself which stands as my choice of myself in the world' (B&N, 39). Thus, moral values cannot be found in the in-itself (like Hume, Sartre thinks that one cannot derive an 'ought' from an 'is'); they must, therefore, originate internally. So, arguably, Sartre could be read as a kind of moral projectivist, at least in the sense that, for him, 'value can be revealed only to an active freedom which makes it exist as a value by the sole fact of recognizing it as such' (B&N, 38). This indicates that Sartre agrees with Camus that the world in-itself is meaningless, but the very fact of my existence as a projected being-for-itself situated in that world with others entails that I cannot escape engaging with the world in at least *some* way, thereby infusing it with meaning and value. Accordingly, axiological normativity is not to be regarded as a primary notion that must be grounded by a

universal ethical theory; it is rather a consequence of our situation as necessarily engaged free beings-in-the-world (Crowell, 2010 ed.).

Finally, Charles Taylor's objection still needs to be addressed. As a reminder, the issue is the following: if the contingencies of the world merely limit the range of my possibilities but do not affect my freedom, on what grounds (if any) am I meant to choose to realise one of these possibilities over another? A straightforward response would be that the way in which I choose to act in a particular instance depends on the life projects that I am freely choosing to formulate, continue, adjust or abandon at this very moment. But this does not dispose of the problem, for it merely defers the issue to a temporally larger scale: on what grounds, then, do I choose to formulate one life project rather than another? Taylor's intuition here is that such overarching life decisions necessarily rest on my set of 'strong evaluations', i.e. the set of judgments that determine which values are important to me. Thus it appears that what really is puzzling Taylor is the issue of ascertaining whether or not these evaluations themselves are the product of radical choices. For if they were, then the choice of our projects would be groundless, and that is no real choice at all according to Taylor; but if these evaluations were not chosen, then the choice of projects and character would not be radically free but rather ultimately grounded in individual evaluations and responses to the world. So, either way, the notion of radical choice crumbles.

At first glance, this objection seems powerful, yet a closer look reveals that it assumes the following two things: that 1) radical choice of our projects is determined only by strong evaluations, and that 2) ultimately ungrounded choice is arbitrary and so amounts to no choice at all. Challenging both of these assumptions will enable us to see that the first horn of the above dilemma is in fact unproblematic for Sartre. Firstly, Sartre would not want to say that radical choice of our projects is fully grounded in our strong evaluations; these might indeed play a significant role in the process of choice, yet they certainly cannot provide us with decisive reasons for choosing or acting one way or another. His negative theory of action precisely precludes the notion of consciousness being directly motivated to choose by anything other than itself and the *négatités* it intends. So Taylor is simply unjustified in supposing that our choices rest solely on

strong evaluations. Secondly, it is also false that radical choice is wholly ungrounded, since there are various kinds of factual elements that are relevant considerations in the process of free choice of oneself, such as one's personal background, strong evaluations, social constraints and, above all, the particular projects that one has already decided to undertake. However, these relevant considerations only provide the framework within which free choice occurs; yet none of them directly determines me to choose one way or another. This choice comes down to me,[7] it is my constantly renewed responsibility, and that is a necessary condition for my being free at all. 'There is no doubt that I could have done otherwise', Sartre writes, but the true question is 'at what price?' (B&N, 476) Sartre's notion of radical freedom is, therefore, partly constituted by the free internalisation of environmentally, socially or historically given elements, while the 'radical' nature of it points at Sartre's finding it always possible, though often very costly, to make choices that alter one's life in significant ways and so to re-invent oneself.

Conclusions

We have seen how a phenomenological analysis of certain subjective aspects of human reality reveals that the distinctive feature of consciousness consists in its intentionality, i.e. its capability to be directed at both existing objects of the in-itself and *négatités*. Secondly, this identification of consciousness with the relational property of intentionality has led us to the conclusion that the objects of consciousness cannot be in it, and so that consciousness *per se* must be empty. This is what Sartre means when he claims that consciousness is its own 'nothingness'. Thirdly, following Sartre's intuition that the ontology of the conscious subject must somehow be distinct from that of the objects it intends, we have distinguished between two fundamental modes of being, namely the in-itself and the for-itself. Combining this ontological picture with Sartre's theory of action, which essentially relies on the activity of nihilation of non-actual future possibilities through the realisation of one of them, has enabled us to rebut the objection that Sartre dogmatically disregards the effect that our environment has on our choices. Crucially, the capacity of intending non-existing objects, through imagination, prediction, interrogation and negation, cannot

[7] It is precisely the fact that our choices are ultimately ungrounded, or at least undetermined, which is the source of our anguish and of our tendency to flee into bad faith.

amount to mere functions of judgements, but rather indicates an ontological break from the realm of being-in-itself. This detachment on the part of consciousness both vis-à-vis its own empirical self and the world of being-in-itself is precisely where human freedom is to be found. Therefore, to be conscious is to be free, in the sense of possessing genuine autonomy of choice, and nothing can reduce or suspend the ontological freedom that we are.

However, this is only part of the overall Sartrean picture of the human condition, since he insists that we are free beings-*in-a-situation.* Although human consciousness can be nothing but free by its very ontological nature, radical freedom can only exist against the background of the world. The physical facts of the world, our individual and social past, as well the stare of others are among the many contingencies of my situation that reduce my range of realisable possibilities. As we have seen, the fact that the notion of 'radical freedom' merely denotes our ontological freedom has led many commentators to understand Sartre's freedom as absolutely unrestricted, while it is now clear to us that Sartre's theory does indeed take into consideration the contingencies of the world. For Sartre, the paradoxical nature of our human condition resides in the fact that we are constantly formulating projects against the background of a resisting world to which we do not belong, ontologically speaking, while ceaselessly trying to become one with it.

In the end, Sartre's notion of radical freedom appears to be fully coherent from an analytical point of view. His dual-aspect ontology does not appeal to any metaphysically queer entities, since *négatités* merely amount to the infinite number of possible non-actual entities, his theory of action provides an effective solution to many contemporary issues regarding reasons for action, and his account of human freedom ultimately meets both compatibilist and libertarian expectations. Further investigation into Sartre's philosophy could, therefore, significantly benefit contemporary philosophical discussion of freedom and action.

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