

ABSOLUTE FREEDOM AND ITS LIMITS
IN
BEING AND NOTHINGNESS

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Abstract

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Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of freedom, as expressed in Being and Nothingness, is generally considered to be as radical as any conception of human freedom ever presented in the history of Western philosophy. It is interesting to note, however, that this "radical" concept has not only a limited application, but also meets with internal and external restrictions.

This thesis attempts to describe the limits to Sartre's concept of freedom, and to explain the meaning of the phrase "absolute freedom" in light of these limits. It also offers a suggestion that may help to explain why this aspect of Sartre's concept of freedom, and the related "objective" side of his dualism, is so generally neglected.

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Introduction

According to Wilfrid Desan,

"Sartre's freedom is something absolute; he rejects all determinism whatsoever, even under its mitigated form as imperialism of the passions. Consequently, he presents us with a freedom more acute than, possibly, has been seen in two thousand years of philosophy. And yet he too is obliged to cope with the classical argument against freedom, namely our lack of freedom. For there are so many things which seem to handicap us and make us dependent."¹

In light of Desan's further criticism that Sartre's conception of freedom is "thoroughly unrealistic"², it becomes clear that, in Desan's opinion, Sartre has failed to cope effectively with the aforementioned "classical argument". Nor is Desan a voice crying in the wilderness: Sartre is generally considered the paradigm example of the partisan of a radical, absolute freedom, which many find too extreme when attention is directed on the many factors which seem to influence the human condition.

The aims of this thesis will be:

- 1) To describe the various limits to freedom allowed for within the context of Sartre's philosophy, as expressed in Being and Nothingness.
- 2) To elucidate the meaning of the word "absolute" as used to qualify Sartre's concept of freedom, in light of the above descriptions (1), and to elaborate on the relation between Sartre's freedom, its limits, and his ontology.

¹ Desan, Wilfrid; The Tragic Finale; Harper Torchbooks, U.S.A., 1954, p. 107.

² Ibid., p. 173.

³ Sartre, Jean-Paul; Being and Nothingness, translated with and introduction by Hazel Barnes, Washington Square Press, 1953.
Hereafter designated as BN.

The presupposition, on which rests my belief in the value of such a thesis, is that too many people, even 29 years after the original publication of Being and Nothingness, place undue emphasis on such Sartrean phrases as "absolute freedom", "condemned to be free", "man is a useless passion", and this, at the expense of the more sober reflections which are their ground and context. The realistic appraisal of "absolute freedom" which I intend to carry may contribute in a very small way to a less emotional appraisal of Sartre.

This thesis will be divided into four chapters. The first chapter attempts to situate Sartre's concept of freedom within the general structure of his ontology. The second and third deal with the limits to Sartre's concept of freedom. And the fourth will deal with the meaning of "absolute freedom" and its relation to Sartre's ontology.

CHAPTER I

Freedom as a Type of Relation

Jean-Paul Sartre's ontology, as expressed in Being and Nothingness, is a particular kind of dualism in that the two aspects of reality, far from being substances independent of each other, cannot be described separately.¹ To attempt a description of what I shall temporarily call the subjective side of reality without taking the objective side into consideration would be absurd, since this subjective side "has no reality save that of being the nihilation of being"², (where "being" = objective). On the other hand, to attempt a description of the objective without taking subjectivity into consideration is impossible, since the objective is revealed only through subjectivity.³ Thus Being and Nothingness is in a large measure an attempt to describe the different types of relation between the two aspects of reality. I will briefly describe in this chapter some of these types of relation, with the purpose of providing an intelligible context for the one particular relation with which I will be more particularly concerned in this thesis.

¹ This aspect of Sartre's ontology offers a sharp contrast with Cartesian dualism in particular.

² BN, p. 786.

³ By the end of this chapter, I will have substituted Sartrian terms for what I now call "subjective" and "objective"; my purpose is to remain on traditional (even if objectionable) ground until I have elucidated a little more what I understand the Sartrian terms to mean.

Consciousness of the Phenomenon

A basic type of relation between subject and object is that the former is consciousness of the latter. The mutual dependence between subject and object, which is a theme throughout the book, is here grounded partly in the doctrine of intentionality, in so far as it states that every consciousness is consciousness of something. By both adopting this position and rejecting Husserl's phenomenological reduction ("epoché"), Sartre implies the logical priority of being over consciousness; for, while it is true that consciousness needs an object in order to exist, it is not the case that being must be the object of a consciousness in order to exist, although Sartre wants to maintain that being must be the object of a consciousness in order to be revealed. It follows that the "mutual dependence" which I mentioned above applies only to the level of the concrete revelation of particular phenomena (and not to that of Being in general), in the sense that a particular phenomenon is always the object of an "intention" and that, on the other hand, a particular consciousness is nothing but the revelation of that of which it is conscious. This level, moreover, is precisely the one at which Sartre wishes to work: he will derive his ontology from the description of particular phenomena. Thus, although he admits the logical priority of Being (in a general sense) over consciousness, he will refuse to consider the question of the historical origin of either Being or consciousness at any length: this,

he says, is the problem of the metaphysician.⁴

Sartre considers that he has never deviated from the goal of providing a "philosophical foundation for realism...", to "avoid idealism without lapsing into a mechanistic materialism."⁵ Since there is no doubt that the idealism that Sartre wants to avoid is partly that of Husserl,⁶ it might seem surprising that he should make use of the doctrine of intentionality. One should keep in mind in this regard that first, the doctrine of intentionality dates at least as far back as Franz Brentano and is thus not characteristic of only one school of thought, and, second, that Husserl himself often digressed from a particular discussion to point out that what he was saying could be applied as well by a psychology which, while making use of the doctrine of intentionality, did not perform the phenomenological reduction. In other words, the value of the doctrine of intentionality is not limited, even for Husserl, to its use within the context of a pure transcendental phenomenology.

Thus, like Husserl, when Sartre speaks of

⁴ BN, p. 795.

Cf. Desan, *op. cit.*, p. 174: "Sartre makes a distinction between ontology and metaphysics. Ontology is the phenomenological description of being...Metaphysics, on the other hand, is...a search for the origins of the for-itself and in-itself.

⁵ "Itinerary of a Thought", The New York Review of Books, March 26th, 1970, p. 46; originally published in the New Left Review.

⁶ More precisely, Sartre views transcendental phenomenology as a doctrine which offers a shelter from the world, rather than as an idealism in the strict philosophical sense of this term. Cf. Sartre, Jean-Paul; La Transcendance de l'Ego; introduction, notes, and appendix by Sylvie Le Bon, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, Paris, 1966, p. 86. (Originally published in 1936).

"consciousness of...", he includes such functions as perceiving, imagining, and recollecting.⁷ As a result, the objective side includes for him many "things" which are not ordinarily thought of as objects.⁸ Thus our past, our psychic states (e.g.: love, hate), even our own ego⁹ are objects in the world, alongside the many more traditional sorts of objects (like tables and chairs): all these are objects by virtue of the fact that they are transcendent to consciousness.

At this point someone might point out that Sartre's use of the doctrine of intentionality, although it says something about the relation between subject and object, does not really clarify the meaning of consciousness itself as a particular entity. Before touching on this question, I must introduce a second type of relation between subject and object: negation.

Negation

What does it mean to say of someone that he is consciousness of this book? According to Sartre, it is impossible to be conscious of anything without effecting an internal negation, that is, without realizing that we are not that of which we are conscious. To be conscious of this book implies that this book is not my consciousness, but rather an object of my consciousness. Human reality (as consciousness) is therefore that which can stand at a distance from Being, which

⁷ BN, p. 14; also Sartre, Jean-Paul; L'Imaginaire, Paris, Gallimard, 1940; BN, p. 405.

⁸ One is reminded here of Alexius Meinong's theory, where objects may or may not have physical existence.

⁹ Cf. La Transcendance de L'Ego, p. 13.

can effect a negation of Being. Negation is then a second type of relation between the two components of Sartre's dualism.

It might appear at first that negation implies the existence of a third term which would be able to compare in turn the book and its consciousness, and to affirm that one is not the other. Sartre avoids this problem, which might lead to an infinite regress, such as Spinoza's "idea ideae ideae etc.," by introducing the concept of the pre-reflective cogito, whereby he shows that it is in the very nature of the consciousness of an object to be simultaneously self-consciousness: "...every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself."¹⁰ This notion also allows Sartre to avoid some major epistemological problems. For, if one were to object that before we can speak of ontology we must ask the question "how can we know?", Sartre would reply that knowledge, far from being prior to ontology, only arises as a result of the upsurge of the absolute fact "consciousness of..." whose structure involves self-consciousness, the necessary and sufficient condition of knowledge.¹¹

¹⁰ BN, p. 13.

¹¹ BN, p. 11.

See also: Moore, E.G.: Philosophical Studies; Littlefield, Adams, & Co.; Totowa, New Jersey; 1968, p. 25, where Moore writes: "To have in your mind 'knowledge' of blue...is to be aware of an awareness of blue; awareness being used, in both cases, in exactly the same sense."

Thus, to be consciousness of this book is to be consciousness (of) being consciousness of this book, or, to be consciousness (of) not being this book.¹²

Nothingness

But what is this subjectivity which is conscious of objects while simultaneously denying that it is these objects? If I mean to ask: "What is it outside of these relations to Being (i.e.: outside these phenomena)?", the answer must be: "Nothing." If it defines itself only in terms of its relations to its objects, then we can do nothing but describe these relations; any attempt to describe it in isolation is in principle bound to fail: "An abstraction is made when something not capable of existing in isolation is thought of in an isolated state."¹³ But Sartre is concerned with the concrete, the totality which can exist by itself alone.

Similarly, when E.G. Moore attempts to depict consciousness, he does so within the context of a concrete particular phenomenon: the perception of blue:

"The term 'blue' is easy enough to distinguish, but the other element which I have called 'consciousness'---that which sensation of blue has in common with sensation of green---is extremely difficult

¹² Sartre uses "of" in parentheses to denote a non-positional self-consciousness (or unreflective consciousness), as opposed to a positional self-consciousness (or reflective consciousness). In the latter case, one attempts to be conscious of one's consciousness of...

¹³ BN, p. 33.

to fix. That many people fail to distinguish it at all is sufficiently shown by the fact that there are materialists. And, in general, that which makes the sensation of blue a mental fact seems to escape us: it seems...to be transparent---we look through it and see nothing but the blue; we may be convinced that there is something but what it is no philosopher, I think, has yet clearly recognized." "..."
 "...the moment we try to fix our attention upon consciousness and to see what, distinctly, it is, it seems to vanish: it seems as if we had before us a mere emptiness."¹⁴

Moore and Sartre draw different conclusions from their almost identical descriptions. Moore seems to be using the words "transparent", "nothing", and "emptiness" metaphorically; he does not seem to doubt that consciousness must be something. Sartre, on the other hand, concludes that all revelations of being (all possible modes of consciousness of being) add nothing to being; they are unsubstantial; they are only the being of which they are conscious; they are nothingness. I do not think that this is the place to further discuss this controversial concept of nothingness, and the arguments which Sartre uses to establish its presence "at the heart of being." However, perhaps the most acceptable way to interpret it is as a function of the mind, as a capacity of the mind to direct itself at will toward particular objects.

Despite these differences, however, Moore and Sartre confirm our suspicion that a division of subject and object

¹⁴ Moore, op. cit., p. 20, 25.

into two independent entities would be sterile. Despite his criticism of a Gestalt approach,¹⁵ Moore is incapable of analysing consciousness independently of its object ("I fear I shall have succeeded very ill.")¹⁶ If Sartre, on the other hand, attempted to do so, he could only "pass over" the subject "in silence".

Freedom

A third type of relation between subject and object is that of "freedom from..." and "freedom to...". Since this relation is the main topic of my thesis, I shall restrict myself here to a few general remarks.

It follows from the assertion that subjectivity is nothingness that it cannot be subject to the principle of causality, in so far as the relation of cause and effect necessarily holds only between two "things", and not between one thing and no thing. In this sense, as Norman McLeod points out, freedom is freedom from the causal chain.¹⁷ But the matter is not so simple, for a problem arises when we consider that freedom is not only a negative concept, but that it also designates the capacity of consciousness to form projects whose fulfillment demands that a change take place in a given situation. Now it is true that freedom is the capacity to choose, and has nothing to do with the success or lack of success in reaching the desired end; yet, changes do sometimes

¹⁵ Moore, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁷ Dialogue, June 1968, p. 29, "Existential Freedom in the Marxism of Jean-Paul Sartre"

take place in the physical world as a result of what Sartre would consider freely chosen projects. But if the principle of causality does not allow for the determination of consciousness by matter, should it not also be true that it does not allow for the determination of matter by consciousness? This question opens up an exciting field of possible investigation, that of the links between consciousness and the world, in particular its relation to the body. Sartre calls the body the "necessary condition of my action";¹⁸ he maintains that "the body is what this consciousness is; it is not even anything except body. The rest is nothingness and silence."¹⁹

Here again, then, we see the impossibility of considering subject and object in isolation from each other.

Throughout this chapter I have used the terms "subject" and "object" in order to remain on familiar ground. Throughout the rest of this thesis, I will try, as does Sartre, to avoid them and to substitute for them the terms "for-itself", "in-itself", and some of the other terms I have already used.

Sartre uses "in-itself" to mean sometimes the undifferentiated mass of being, and sometimes a particular concrete phenomenon (e.g.: a table). "Being is. Being is in-itself. Being is what it is. These are the three

¹⁸ BN, p. 431.

¹⁹ BN, p. 434.

characteristics which the preliminary examination of the phenomenon of being allows us to assign to the being of phenomena."²⁰

The "for-itself", on the other hand, does not have such a general use. It is used mostly to emphasise the capacity of consciousness to stand at a distance from being-in-itself; thus, it is used predominantly in the descriptions of such relations as "negation of..." or "lacking in...", while it will be used much less in the case of a simple unreflective "consciousness of...", where it is likely that Sartre will use only the term "consciousness".

It may seem to be an anomaly to speak of consciousness of being, nihilation of being, freedom from being, lack of being, and knowledge of being,²¹ as different types of relation between being and nothingness; since nothingness is an identical component of each relation, the use of different names seems to suggest that there must be a difference in the "being" aspect of each relation. This is not always the case. The fact is that some of these relations are, strictly speaking, inseparable. For instance, the occurrence of consciousness implies the simultaneous occurrence of negation and knowledge. They are different only in the sense that they are different ways to describe the same phenomenon. Sartre, the descriptive phenomenologist, unveils different perspectives that can be taken toward the goal of defining human reality. Thus, Being

²⁰ BN, p. 29.

²¹ For "lack", see BN, pp. 134ff; for "knowledge", cf. pp. 240ff.

and Nothingness should not be viewed as a series of arguments that follow logically from each other (although this may be partly the case), but as a series of perspectives which tend to give us a fuller picture as we proceed. It is clear, then, that Sartre would at no time suggest that the picture is complete, no more than we can ever claim to have seen a tree from all its possible perspectives; this is why Sartre has often suggested that those who understood his work always went beyond it, and failed to see in it a definitive statement of the nature of human reality.

There are other relations, however, such as freedom, whose status is much more ambiguous. For instance, the consciousness of a particular state of affairs, although undetermined by this state of affairs, is not for all that a free act. I suspect that critics who call Sartre's concept of freedom "absolute" tend to overemphasise this idea of the lack of prior determination of consciousness. Sartre himself lends fuel to the fire when he emphasises the individual's responsibility for the whole world. What this means, however, is that all meanings inevitably originate in man, that being-in-itself only is and that therefore all categorizations and qualifications are human.²² In other words, Being does not reach over to consciousness in order to imprint itself on it under the aspect "tree" (for instance); rather, it is

²² I shall deal with this in greater detail in Chapter IV.

consciousness whose very existence is a reaching out toward being in order, for instance, to reveal it as tree. In this sense, consciousness is free from determination by Being. This may be a valuable insight, but a discussion of Sartre's concept of freedom should begin, and not stop, here. Indeed, a consciousness which would passively receive pre-fabricated objects from its past without altering them is not acting and is therefore not using its freedom, and "...in so far as consciousness simply suffers what is, it must be included in being."²³

I will therefore begin by examining this concept of action.

²³ BN, p. 563.

CHAPTER II

Action: The Field of Application of Freedom

We have established in the previous chapter that freedom is a type of relation between the for-itself and the in-itself. If man were only for-itself, we could say that there is no aspect of man's being which does not express his freedom in relation to the world; man would be only freedom (although of course this fact could be expressed in other ways). However, the ordinary usage of the term "man", when referring to a particular individual, encompasses much more than what Sartre calls "for-itself": it includes a physical appearance, a personality, a series of hidden biological organs. These considerations seem to suggest that we would be justified in performing a sharp dichotomy between that aspect of man which can properly be called free and other aspects which are irrelevant to the problem of freedom. Such an abstraction cannot be justified when we consider Sartre's emphasis on concrete everyday situations: how, for instance, can we divorce body from consciousness in the analysis of a philosophy which explains nausea as an expression of a fundamental free project on the part of the individual who is nauseated? Yet, freedom cannot possibly be at the origin of all the events encountered by a human being. If I slipped and fell on an icy sidewalk and broke a leg, can it be said that I have freely broken my leg?

If we are not justified in detotalizing man, the alternative is to differentiate between the types of events

which occur in a human context. In relation to any human being, some events are merely witnessed while others are his actions (acts). If Sartre's concept of freedom is applicable only to actions, it becomes imperative to elucidate the nature of action.

The Nature and Conditions of Action

Let us first enumerate the conditions that must be met in order for an event to be an action.

The first condition is "the constitution of the state of things under consideration into an isolated system."¹ There is nothing unusual here: we constantly become conscious of new phenomena or states of affairs. This condition, then, although necessary, is by no means sufficient for action. The second condition is a rupture or wrenching away of consciousness from this state of affairs toward an alternate state of affairs which is not yet, so that this new end can illuminate the former state of affairs as "lacking in...".

Action thus presupposes the capacity of consciousness to effect a rupture not only with the world, but with its own past, and this permanent possibility is freedom.

But what does the term "rupture" mean here? In its negative sense, it means that consciousness cannot be determined by a given in-itself; in other words, an action cannot

¹ BN, p. 562.

be the effect of a physical cause, since consciousness is not part of the physical continuum. Correlatively, "rupture" implies that an action must be intentional, that is, that its structure involves the activity of a consciousness directing itself toward its objects.

That an action is not the effect of a cause does not mean that it does not have a cause. Sartre only means that the cause must be apprehended as such by consciousness within the complex structure "cause-intention-act-end". This of course is not meant to deny that our bodies are subject to physical laws regardless of our consciousness of these laws; but only that in these cases our bodies are not "acting". An action, for Sartre, involves a conscious awareness of a desire to change a situation in the light of our awareness of a situation (end) which does not yet exist. Non-being as an object of our consciousness is a necessary condition of action, and constitutes the most original aspect of Sartre's theory of action. For example, in the case of the broken leg, it is likely that I did not first apprehend my leg as in good condition, and then decide to change this state of affairs in light of the not yet existing state of affairs "I-having-a-broken-leg"---thus I did not act. On the other hand, my walking to the store to buy coffee is an action, since I am performing it in order to remedy my present state of affairs which I apprehend as lacking in coffee, and that, in light of my goal of drinking coffee. In this latter case, I might apprehend my motive as wanting to keep wide awake, but Sartre's

point here is that the motive cannot determine my action; rather it is part of the complex constituting this free action. It is clear, then, that for Sartre action can only occur if a result is being aimed at, and this result, before it is realized (and it may never be realized) must be grasped as a not-yet-existing-end. It follows that only beings capable of conceiving what is not the case can act, that is, beings capable of effecting a rupture with the world and with their past consciousness of the world as such and such.

How restricted is this field of application of freedom? No day goes by without a man having performed a vast quantity of actions. Even a bed-ridden convalescent is likely to adopt different attitudes toward his environment which fulfill Sartre's conditions of action; even a change of feelings, or a change of attitude toward one's past, could fulfill this definition. Now, according to Sartre, the consciousness of our freedom implicit in action leads to a state of anguish. Yet, we do not often seem to be faced with choices that result in anguish. It might be helpful to suggest some reasons for this state of affairs.

First, many of our choices seem to entail such trivial consequences that we do not consider the matter at length, but act spontaneously. Secondly, in more important decisions, it is possible for human beings to pretend that they did not in fact have any choice, that they only "suffered what is" (e.g.: fate), and the purpose of self-deception is precisely to avoid anguish. Thus the criterion of action is not

our awareness of anguished deliberation, but the realization that we are considering a situation in the light of a possible alternative.

The above remarks, however, do not imply that all human events involving consciousness are acts. It is indeed possible to "suffer what is" without considering it in light of any alternative, and it is precisely this state of consciousness that we are eliminating from the field of application of freedom. (Yet, as we shall see in Chapter IV, we are no less responsible for this state of affairs than for a free action).

CHAPTER III

Restrictions on my Freedom¹The Situation

We have seen in the previous chapter that the first condition of action consists in the conscious apprehension of a particular state of affairs. This already seems to imply a serious limitation on my freedom, for I can only perceive some states of affairs, and not others. For instance, I am not free to attempt the escalation of a 40,000-foot mountain. Before I could perceive the particular state of affairs involving me-climbing-a-40,000-foot-mountain as lacking (and desirable), I would first have to perceive a 40,000-foot mountain; but no mountain of such height exists in my environment. Of course, I could imagine such a mountain, and then imagine myself trying to climb it, and this would constitute a free act of my imagination.² However, I am not here concerned with acts of the imagination, but with acts involving the physical world. This particular act, then, the attempt to climb a mountain 40,000-foot high, I am not free to perform. Similarly I am not free to adopt a particular attitude toward my sister, since I have never had a sister. These acts cannot

¹ Throughout this chapter, I will use the first person singular because "I could not describe a freedom which would be common to both the Other and myself." BN, p. 566.

² The act here would not be the imaginary climbing, but the passing from the first image to the second.

be performed because no corresponding state of affairs can be perceived³, that is, because the first condition of action is not fulfilled. I will return to this shortly.

Let us now imagine a situation where the first condition of action is fulfilled, but where the second one is not. For instance, I suddenly become aware of the apparently very dry condition of the earth in the flower-pot, but immediately return to my work without giving the matter further thought. I did not perceive the earth as lacking water, and then decide that I did not want to water it; rather, the state of the earth appeared disconnected from any possible alternative---it simply was dry. It is not clear that my very indifference does not in itself constitute an action, although I cannot see that decision enters in. What is clear, however, is that the apprehension of the dry earth could have served as the basis for action. In other words, the fulfillment of the first condition of action implies the possibility of fulfilling the second condition; although some states of affairs are not acted on once they have been perceived or imagined, all of them could have theoretically been acted on, at least insofar as an attitude toward them is always possible. If this is the case, then our freedom is never restricted by an incapacity to act on a state of affairs, once the first condition has been fulfilled.

³ Although it can be imagined.

Suppose now that both conditions are fulfilled, but that I fail to realize my project. For example, I project going to a certain place, but I am somehow prevented from reaching my destination. Only a profound misunderstanding of Sartre's conception of freedom could induce one to consider this failure as a restriction on my freedom, for Sartre insists that:

"...success is not important to freedom... The empirical and popular concept of 'freedom'...is equivalent to 'the ability to obtain the ends chosen.' The technical and philosophical concept of freedom, the only one which we are considering here, means only the autonomy of choice."⁴
(my emphasis)

Yet Sartre also says that "Equating the result with the intention is here sufficient for us to be able to speak of action."⁵ It is clear, then, that freedom and action are not identical; to our two previous conditions of action, a third one must be added: that the intended result actually take place. If the intended result does not take place, but an unforeseen consequence results, then this unforeseen consequence is not a free action. This does not imply, however, that the attempt to reach the intended result was not free. But if this is the case, then what did we mean when we said that action was the field of application of freedom? What this meant is that freedom reveals itself in our attempts to bring about a change in the state of the world; if these attempts

⁴ BN, p. 621-2.

⁵ BN, p. 560.

bring about changes which we had not intended, then these changes are not free actions, even if they had not occurred if we had not attempted to act; yet, these changes, although not actions, are the results of attempted actions, and we must bear the responsibility for them. It would be more accurate, then, to say that freedom is revealed in the choices that we make, and that some of the results of these choices will be actions, and others not; furthermore, the capacity to choose presupposes the first two conditions of action. To return to our problem, if the first two conditions of action are fulfilled but we fail to realize our project, we shall say that we have not acted (or better, that the result, if there is one, is not an action) and yet that we have exercised our freedom of choice, which is quite independent of our success in reaching the desired end. It is the failure to make this distinction between freedom and action which is in part responsible for leading Desan to conclude that "absolute freedom is an illusion."⁶ His conclusion may be true, but not for the reasons he mentions: if freedom is autonomy of choice, what happens after this free choice has been made is irrelevant; furthermore, autonomy of choice does not for Sartre imply an unlimited number of choices (possibilities), as he seems to think.

To summarize what I said so far:

- 1) The impossibility to fulfill the first condition of action

⁶ Wilfrid Desan, op. cit., p. 170.

may constitute a limitation of sorts on my freedom.

- 2) The lack of fulfillment of the second condition does not constitute such a limitation.
- 3) The failure to reach the desired end, once the first two conditions have been met, does not restrict my freedom, although it means that I did not perform the act which I intended to perform.

The concepts of place, past, and environment⁷ can be incorporated into a discussion of the first and third points above. As regard (3), for instance, my failure to reach the desired end, let us say to drink a cup of coffee, may be due to my place (the fact that I am 50 miles from the nearest store), to my environment (the fact that my hydroplane lacks fuel), or to my past (the fact that I forgot to bring coffee with me yesterday). As we have seen, however, these "obstacles" do not limit my freedom to choose, but only the complete performance of the action. Let us then turn to (1).

In the above example, I grasped my particular situation in the world as presenting certain obstacles in relation to my desire for something which was not a content of that situation; we can see that if I had in fact been drinking coffee at the time, my desire to have a cup of coffee would not make sense. An autonomous choice is always directed toward a state of affairs which does not yet exist; it is useless to object that

⁷ Taken together, these three factors constitute what Sartre calls the situation; they are part of what he calls facticity, although he also uses this latter term in a more restricted sense to describe the fact that freedom is condemned to be free. (See section entitled The Facticity of Freedom).

I can desire to continue or perpetuate the present state of affairs, because in this case I am still desiring something which does not yet exist, that is, a future state of affairs. Now, leaving aside imaginary states of affairs, the only states of affairs which can be perceived as lacking in something are factual ones; but the set of factual states of affairs is limited: it does not include, for instance, my having a sister or a 40,000-foot high mountain. These examples are not revealed as obstacles as a result of a free choice, but their exclusion from the set of factual states of affairs precludes even the possibility of serving as ground for the use of my freedom. For instance, there are a multitude of choices in relation to my sister which I am forever doomed never to be in a position to make, and I can see that one of the reasons for the irreversibility of this situation is that my past cannot be changed. If my place, past, and environment cannot limit my free choice once it has been made, do they not here limit it a priori?

Let us widen the set of factual states of affairs to include any state of affair imaginable, and see if our freedom has been increased. I can now make a variety of choices both in relation to my sister and in relation to the fact that I do not have a sister. Despite the fact that I am now doing things which contradict the law of non-contradiction (and that this gives me a perverse sort of satisfaction), I can't say that my choices appear any more or any less autonomous than they had previously been. Of course, perhaps my imagination is not too reliable, and that if I were to really undergo the

experience, I would realize my new freedom. At any rate, I do not see why and in what way my choices would be more autonomous. Thus, when I read that:

"After having spent years preparing myself for the Marines, the result is that I am prepared for the Marines and not for the Air Forces or for a chair of philosophy. Whatever Sartre may say, this is a limitation of my choice."⁸

I ask myself: "But suppose I were prepared for all three, in what way would I be more free?" For Desan, the answer seems too obvious to be worth elaborating: if I could exercise more choices, I would be more free; thus whenever one choice precludes another, I am limited. But what does the quantity of available choices have to do with the autonomy or lack of autonomy of my choices? Nothing. We have here in fact a classic example of confusing an issue. What Sartre is trying to establish is that human beings have the capacity of making choices that are undetermined, that originate in consciousness. To object that there are some choices which we cannot make, or that we cannot always attain the end chosen, or that the end that we attain sometimes precludes our making a subsequent choice, is irrelevant. The only reason these comments could be relevant is if Sartre had maintained that all events occurring in a human context were free. But we have already seen that this is not the case. When Sartre maintains that we are absolutely free, he means that all our choices are autonomous, but not that human beings are only choice-making

⁸ Desan, op. cit., p. 170.

consciousnesses.

However, if the number of possible situations on which we can act is irrelevant, the fact remains that there must be some situation. Since the first condition of action is the consciousness of a situation, then the total absence of situations would destroy freedom, or rather, freedom would never have existed. But what is a situation? It is the conscious organization of Being into a meaningful pattern, or, meaningful Being instead of undifferentiated mass. The first condition of action really boils down, then, to the priority of Being over consciousness. This is what Sartre calls the contingency of freedom: the fact that freedom is not its own foundation. This allows us to reiterate two points mentioned in the first chapter: first, Sartre consistently clings to a metaphysical realism; second, freedom is a relation to Being, and cannot be considered in isolation: "Without facticity freedom would not exist---as a power of nihilation and of choice---and without freedom facticity would not be discovered and would have no meaning."⁹

Have we, then, finally found a real limit to our freedom? No, for as long as I remain unconvinced that my consciousness could exist independently of my body, I do not consider facticity a restriction but the necessary condition of my freedom. Furthermore, my autonomy of choice is not

⁹ BN, pp. 636-7.

hindered by the necessity to operate in a situation.

It should be clear by now that as long as we insist on interpreting freedom in a Sartrean sense as autonomy of choice, then no consideration having to do with the situation can be used as an effective argument to point out the limitations of my freedom. It might nevertheless be useful to enumerate certain data of the human condition with which we have met, even though we do not think it fair to Sartre to call these data restrictions on our freedom.

These data are apparent both before and after a free choice. Before we make a choice, there must first be a particular state of affairs of which we become conscious (i.e.: a situation), and this, because of the contingency of freedom. After making a choice, on the other hand, we sometimes become conscious of phenomena which prevent the realization of the end chosen. As we have seen, neither group of phenomena prevent my choice, if I make or have made one, from being autonomous. Yet both groups point to the opacity of Being within whose context my choices are made. The chooser is like a potter: what he decides to make out of clay is not determined either by the clay or by the earthquake which will destroy his work while he is in the process of making it; yet, if clay did not exist as a particular type of matter, he could never choose to make an earthenware pot; furthermore, the earthquake will cause the fact that he will never complete the pot. Thus, although my choice is autonomous, both the

conditions under which it is made and its results are partly dependent on Being. I say "partly" dependent because insofar as those conditions and results are phenomena, they must be revealed to a consciousness, without which they would have no meaning; now, since the consciousness in question is mine, the very revelation of Being-in-itself as a necessary condition or as an unsatisfactory result depends on my consciousness. Yet, Being is independently of my revealing it.

But Being is not only given meaning by me; it is also given meaning by the Other.¹⁰ Can my freedom be limited by the meaning given to me by the Other's consciousness?

The "Unrealizables"

We have seen in the previous section that neither the necessity for there to be a situation nor the particular character of this situation can limit my freedom if we define freedom as autonomy of choice; moreover, it would seem absurd to think of my situation as a limit, since it derives its meaning from me, that is, since I have freely chosen it.¹¹

However,

"...as soon as a freedom other than mine arises confronting me, I begin to exist in a new dimension of being; and this time it is not a question of my conferring a meaning

¹⁰ For Sartre's discussion of the existence of the Other, cf. BN, pp. 301-400.

¹¹ The fact that we usually choose what has already been defined by others does not allow us to escape responsibility for this choice.

on brute existents...It is I myself who see a meaning conferred upon me."

"...we have just encountered a real limit to our freedom---that is, a way of being which is imposed on us without our freedom being its foundation."¹²

For Sartre, there are several dimensions to a man's being; one of these is the being that I am for others, or being-for-others, which manifests itself whenever I realize that I am an object for the Other (particularly apparent in the experience of shame or pride). This being-for-others is me; yet I do not create it, but only experience it indirectly through the look of the other.

What happens to my situation through the upsurge of the Other? Suppose that it is late at night and that I am walking at a brisk pace through a deserted area in order to reach the store before it closes, and to buy a jar of coffee. As before, I have become conscious of my environment as lacking coffee, and this, in light of my desire to drink a cup of coffee; I then decided to bring about changes in the situation that would remedy the problem, and have proceeded toward the store by a certain path, etc. Now suddenly a woman appears on the path ahead of me, and I deduce from her behaviour (running, for instance) that she is interpreting my situation and my intentions in a manner totally different from me: in her mind, I have been lurching in the dark

¹² BN, pp. 671-2.

waiting for the opportunity to exercise an act of violence. If I quicken my pace in order to reach her and reassure her that she has nothing to fear, she will only become more strongly convinced of the truth of her assessment of the situation, and may start screaming for help. I decide to lessen my pace and become resigned to the idea that I cannot force her to see me as I see myself---that aspect of my being is forever doomed to escape me; in a sense, it belongs to her.

At no time in the above example was a choice forced on me, yet the type of limit encountered here differs from the pseudo-limits discussed in the previous section. Before the upsurge of the Other, not only was my choice autonomous but any meaning in the situation originated in me (or, at least, I was responsible for its meaning); now, however, although my choices are still autonomous, the very situation in whose context my choices are made is itself given meaning by a freedom that I do not directly encounter, a meaning, therefore, that is always beyond me. Thus, strictly speaking, I am still absolutely free, but this absolute freedom meets with a boundary that it will never be able to transcend. I have not met a limitation within the very "stuff" of freedom, but a boundary which it cannot cross. I will therefore call this an external limit¹³ of my freedom, to differentiate it from the pseudo-limits of an internal type which I discussed in the previous section.

¹³ Sartre calls these limits "unrealizables"; Cf. BN, p. 677, for example.

The limit encountered by the Other's seizure of my situation is not the only type of "unrealizable". Another perhaps more obvious one is death. "Dead represents the future meaning of my actual for-itself for the Other."¹⁴ Here again, then, we are limited by the Other's freedom; death, however, is more than this: it is the temporal limit of my capacity to make free choices, that is, it stands for a future time when my freedom will simply not exist. This limit is external because it does not prevent my choices from being autonomous, it does not qualify my freedom internally, but only refers to another boundary beyond which my freedom cannot cross.

The Facticity of Freedom

As mentioned at the end of Chapter II, even a bed-ridden convalescent may be continuously acting. A moment of reflection on our personal experience should be sufficient to convince us that we are almost constantly contemplating given situations in light of possible ends, although it is doubtless true that most of our decisions will result in trivial consequences not really propitious to soul-searching examinations. Nevertheless, we are all sometimes confronted with a situation in relation to which our possibilities of acting carry with them momentous consequences for our lives: for instance, many young Americans had to face such a situation when they were drafted into the Armed Forces. The anguish

¹⁴ BN, p. 699.

that accompanies such moments can be explained by the fact that a decision is inescapable; even the decision to do nothing appears in this context as very much an important decision: passivity is here just one way among others to confront the situation. In such situations, it becomes apparent that as soon as we have fulfilled the first two conditions of action, that is, as soon as we have become conscious of a situation and that we have turned from it to consider an alternate state of affairs as one of our possibilities, then we must choose, even if our choice is to attempt no action. This is what Sartre means when he says that we are condemned to be free. This fact also constitutes an internal limit on our freedom, for our freedom is not free not to choose.

This facticity of freedom is not limited to important situations. The reason why it is less apparent in most of our daily actions is that we do not usually deliberate on our choices: we are usually faced with familiar situations, and what is easier than to constantly re-adopt familiar responses? If I am thirsty, I go to the kitchen and have a drink of water: what is there to deliberate about? I could conceivably consider whether water is the best possible drink at this time, whether there is a typhoid epidemic that I do not know about, that I should first consult the City Health Department, etc. However, if each of our potential actions were submitted to such careful scrutiny, one wonders if man could do enough in one day to keep himself alive. It is therefore important

to clarify the relation between freedom and deliberation: freedom is exercised in the autonomous choice which accompanies the consciousness of my possibilities in relation to a given situation; sometimes, deliberation will enter in the weighing of the various possibilities, but more often the choice is only between acting on the one possibility that I am considering or not acting upon it, and if that possibility is of the trivial type (such as having a drink of water) the choice will appear almost automatic both because of the rapidity of the whole process and because it seems to be the obvious and only natural response to this physical need. However, there is no denying that the act of having a drink of water is a different type of phenomenon than the "knee jerk": in the latter case, there is no room for decision while in the former I could conceivably and sometimes do choose the alternate state of affairs (e.g.: not bothering to drink).

This brings up another interesting Sartrian concept: self-deception.¹⁵ Is it possible to say that the man who is having a drink of water without deliberating is in self-deception, that is, that he is hiding his freedom from himself? If we wish to be faithful to the letter of Sartre's use of this term, we must answer in the affirmative. However, I do not believe that Sartre recommends a constant awareness of one's freedom;

¹⁵ "Mauvaise foi", sometimes translated as "bad faith", notably by Hazel Barnes; "self-deception", which is Walter Kaufman's translation, is more accurate even if less literal.

habits are necessary to free us for concern about more important things. The spirit of his meaning is that we should not hide from ourselves our capacity to choose simply in order to avoid anguish; in the case of the drink of water, for instance, we are not bypassing the consideration of our freedom so much in order to avoid anguish, as because the triviality of the situation does not do justice to such consideration. If the situation were more vital, if, for instance, there really was a typhoid epidemic and we knew this, then our drinking water "because we are so thirsty that we have to drink" might be self-deception in a real sense. Whether trivial or important, however, as soon as the situation is grasped against the background of a future possibility, we must make a decision, even if that decision is not to act, and this constitutes a limit on my freedom.

To summarize: (1) The situation, taken as the meaningful arrangement of Being into my place, my past, and my environment, cannot restrict my freedom, because the autonomy of my choice in no way depends upon the character of my situation and because I am at any rate responsible for this meaning. On the other hand, the fact that there must be a situation, and thus Being, as a condition of the possibility of my freedom, does not limit my autonomy of choice, but refers us to Sartre's insistence on the metaphysical priority of being over consciousness (the contingency of freedom).

(2) Two external limits of my freedom are my situation as the object of the Other's consciousness, and death. These are phenomena of which I am aware but which escape my capacity

to make autonomous choices. (3) Finally, the very operation of my freedom involves a limit upon itself: the fact that I cannot help being free. (The facticity of freedom).

CHAPTER IV

Freedom, Responsibility, and OntologyThe Meaning of Absolute Freedom

In Chapter II, we eliminated the state of consciousness that we called "suffering what is" from the field of application of freedom. In Chapter III, we discovered that freedom was not its own foundation, but a 'datum' (contingency), that freedom could not choose what is for the Other (unrealizables), and finally that freedom could not choose not to choose (facticity).

In light of these four concepts, what does it mean to say that freedom is absolute? The answer is supplied most clearly by Desan when, in a section entitled "The Theory of Absolute Freedom", he paradoxically writes: "There is only one limit to freedom, and that is freedom itself..."¹ The assumption that allows Desan (and Sartre) to juxtapose "absolute freedom" and its "limit" is that only a limit other than freedom itself could make freedom relative. In this sense, freedom can be both absolute and limited by itself, where "itself" can also refer to the freedom of the Other.² Let us review, then, and see whether these four concepts are examples of freedom being limited by itself.

¹ Desan, op. cit., p. 97.

² Ibid., p. 116, note.

Facticity and the unrealizables are both clearly cases where freedom is limited by freedom, in the first case by itself (literally), and in the second instance by the freedom of the Other. Contingency and "suffering what is", on the other hand, are not cases where freedom is limited by itself, but neither are they cases where freedom is limited by something else; contingency does not limit my autonomy of choice, but refers to the ontological priority of Being over consciousness; "suffering what is" is simply outside the realm of application of freedom. If we grant that these four concepts exhaust the set of possible impediments to freedom, (I hope that the previous chapter disposed of arguments based on the situation and on our lack of success in reaching the desired end), then it follows that freedom is indeed absolute. It is important, however, to have a clear idea of what this means: it means that our autonomy of choice, wherever it is applicable and applied, is limited only by itself (where "itself" includes the autonomy of choice of the Other).

Freedom and Responsibility

The phrase "wherever it is applicable and applied" serves to eliminate contingency and "suffering what is" from the context of absolute freedom. I would now like to explain a fact of considerable importance, which has to my knowledge been entirely ignored by commentators: man is responsible, according to Sartre, not only for the actions and attempted actions which derive from his freedom, but also for whatever

he "suffers" passively. Thus, for Sartre, responsibility is not an exact correlate of freedom; although freedom is absolute, responsibility is a more extensive concept than freedom, that is, it applies not only to all our free actions, but also to at least some events which are outside the realm of applicability of freedom.

The juxtaposition of the two following passages makes this clear:

"There is a factual state...only be means of the nihilating power of the for-itself. But this power of nihilation can not be limited to realizing a simple withdrawal in relation to the world. In fact in so far as consciousness is 'invested' by being, in so far as it simply suffers what is, it must be included in being."³

"...the responsibility of the for-itself is overwhelming since he is the one by whom it happens that there is a world".⁴

This first passage served as a basis for my eliminating "suffering what is" from the field of application of freedom: an unreflective consciousness of a factual state is not by itself sufficient for action. Yet, Sartre maintains, since we are the ones through whom this state of affairs is, we are responsible for it.

The above must be understood in light of Sartre's conception of meaning. A state of affairs, indeed anything other than the undifferentiated mass of being of which we

³ BN, pp. 562-3.
⁴ BN, p. 707.

are never directly conscious, is meaning. When Sartre speaks of being invested by being, he means that certain objects or events have by convention or habit been given standard meanings which the individual now passively "receives". In other words the individual's past, which is now part of being-in-itself, absorbs consciousness; there is no question here of consciousness giving the past meaning in light of a future goal, even if this meaning is the same as before: there is no project, but only acceptance of what is.

Nevertheless, without a consciousness to accept it, that particular meaning would be only past, and would have no presence. Furthermore, although consciousness did not qualify this meaning in light of a future possibility, it could have done so. Therefore, consciousness is responsible for all its meanings, whether they be actively assumed or passively accepted, simply because it is the necessary condition for there to be meaning, and that it always has the possibility of adapting meanings.

The following example may help to clarify this point. For the last hour I have been concentrating on this work. When I look up from the typewriter through the window, I realize that the tree-tops in the distance have been part of my situation as "trees" during that time: I am certain that I was all along vaguely conscious of their presence. I did not give them a meaning as "a pleasant sight propitious for concentration", or as an incentive to finish my work so that I could go for a walk in the park where they stand;

their meaning had nothing personal about it: they were simply trees. This, I believe, is an example of suffering what is. Yet, I cannot deny my responsibility for this meaning, both because they would not have this meaning without me or someone like me giving it to them, and because I could have given them a totally different meaning. Nevertheless, this is not an example of the exercise of my freedom, since I simply "suffered" a social convention deeply rooted in my past.

It is my contention that this different application of two concepts (freedom and responsibility) which are normally thought of as closely correlated, is partly responsible for a large amount of confusion surrounding the interpretation of Sartre's concept of freedom. A careful analysis of Being and Nothingness can, I think, remedy this situation. Unfortunately, however, unwarranted emphasis has been placed on one of Sartre's less representative works, Existentialism is a Humanism,⁵ which tends to add to this confusion. In this lecture, Sartre was essentially concerned with defending existentialism from both Communist and Catholic objections;⁶ as a result, he emphasises the social and moral responsibility implicit in action, and almost totally ignores the personal responsibility implicit in meaning. The subsequent influence of this lecture has tended to obscure the gap between freedom and responsibility, and

⁵ Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre: selected and introduced by Walter Kaufman, Meridian Books, U.S.A., 1956, pp. 287-311.

⁶ Ibid., p. 287.

made it easy for readers to assume that our "responsibility for the whole world" implied a total freedom in the popular sense of this word: success in reaching desired ends.

In fact, we have seen that Sartre wants to emphasise our responsibility for any meaning which the world or our situation can have for us, while maintaining that not all such meanings are the result of a free choice. We are absolutely free because, whenever we confront possibilities, we are limited only by freedom.

Ontology

The traditional problem of dualism since Descartes is that of interaction. If one posits two independent substances, one must explain the possibility of interaction between them. Such attempted solutions as Descartes' God, his pineal gland, or the theories of pre-established harmony, occasionalism, and epiphenomenalism, have not been generally well received by philosophers, so that there has been a movement away from dualism toward monism.

Sartre avoids the problem of interaction by positing two interdependent aspects of being, one of which is not a substance at all, but simply a relation to the other aspect. However, Sartre's retention of the Cartesian Cogito under a modified form as the starting-point of his philosophy (the pre-reflective cogito), his use of the doctrine of intentionality, and above all his use of such terms as "wholly free", and "responsible for the whole world", have contributed to a

general impression of his philosophy as wholly subjectivistic.

In view of this impression, it is important to emphasise the concepts of contingency and "suffering what is". The former emphasises the primacy, the latter the power, of being within the context of Sartre's ontology. Consciousness is originally a product of being-in-itself:

"...everything takes place as if the in-itself in a project to found itself gave itself the modification of the for-itself."⁷

Not only is consciousness not its own foundation, but even after the original upsurge of consciousness, it still tends to slip toward being, although it never fully succeeds. "Suffering what is" is an example of this tendency, where the power of nihilation of consciousness is overshadowed by the object (without, however, disappearing). Other examples of the power of being are self-deception, where man's attempt to reduce himself to an object relieves his anguish, and the value of our projects (the in-itself - for-itself) which is the symbol of our desire for absolute Being. Similarly, possession of being is the underlying project of many of our concrete activities.

Thus being-in-itself is the foundation of a consciousness which in many ways desires to return to it. The relations between being and consciousness are more subtle and balanced than the use of a phrase like "absolute freedom"

⁷ BN, p. 789.

would imply. Even our "responsibility for the whole world", a more extensive concept than absolute freedom, refers at most to our responsibility for the meaning of the world, and not for its being as such.

To say that Sartre avoids the traditional problem of interaction is not to say that no other problems creep up in his ontology. For instance, it might at first sight seem difficult to conceive of the co-existence of intentionality and "suffering what is".

Nevertheless, a re-appraisal of the importance of the "objective" side of Sartre's ontology might serve another important purpose: it might throw new light on what is often considered to be the irreconcilable turn toward Marxism. If one becomes convinced of the importance of contingency and "suffering what is" in Being and Nothingness, one may find that the gap between the early and the late Sartre is not as wide as is often assumed.

Conclusion

Freedom, as discussed in Being and Nothingness, is but one type of relation between the two sides of Sartre's dualism. It means autonomy of choice. Thus, not only phenomena such as the "knee jerk" which do not involve the for-itself, but also a state of consciousness which I have called "suffering what is" (where no choice is involved), must be eliminated from the field of application of freedom.

Within the field of application of freedom, the situation cannot act as a limit on my freedom nor can my lack of success in reaching desired ends. Freedom, however, is limited both by itself in a narrow sense (facticity) and by the freedom of the Other (unrealizables). These limits to my freedom are not inconsistent with the use of the term "absolute freedom", since "absolute freedom" means precisely a freedom that is limited only by itself in a broad sense.

That absolute freedom has a restricted application is exemplified by the much more extensive application of the term "responsibility", which extends to cover "suffering what is".¹ It is one of the contentions of this thesis that this unusual lack of correlation between freedom and responsibility is at least partly responsible for the misunderstanding of

¹ Responsibility also extends to the unintended consequences of our actions, while freedom does not, a factor which I have mentioned only in passing.

Sartre's concept of freedom. It is easy to believe that one has found limits to our freedom in areas where Sartre's concept of freedom is not applicable, precisely because his concept of responsibility does cover these areas.²

Contingency and "suffering what is" are two concepts which, while not describing limits to our freedom and thus not prohibiting the use of the phrase "absolute freedom", nevertheless emphasise the primacy and the power of being in Sartre's philosophy. As such, they can serve as a basis for an understanding of Sartre's global work, with the possible result that the differences between the early and the late Sartre would now appear largely artificial; such an approach might also give more credibility to Sartre's assertion that he has never deviated from the goal of providing "a philosophical foundation for realism...", to "avoid idealism without lapsing into a mechanistic materialism."

It is unfortunate that Sartre's literary style does not always reflect the delicate balance between being and consciousness which he is trying to describe. This fact, however, does not provide the critic with an excuse for failing to dig beneath this literary surface into the ground in which it is rooted.

² Such a misunderstanding of the uncorrelated application of responsibility and freedom is, I believe, at the root of Desan's mistaken criticism in the example cited above (p. 26). Cf. Desan, p. 170; example of preparation for the Marines.

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