

JEAN PAUL SARTRE'S CONCEPT OF FREEDOM: EXPLORING HUMAN AGENCY AND RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract

The notion of freedom is fraught with complexities, obscuring the understanding of human nature. This paper delves into Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy, examining the tension between human freedom and determinism. Sartre posits that humans are "condemned to be free" implying limitless freedom. However, this raises questions about the extent of human agency and responsibility. Through critical analysis, this study investigates Sartre's concept of freedom in relation to human existence, highlighting potential limitations and implications. This research argues that individuals are responsible for their choices and actions, shaping their concrete existence.

Keywords: Freedom, choice, existence, human agency, responsibility

Introduction

The human condition is shrouded in complexities, sparking intense debates about the nature of existence and freedom. The concept of freedom has been a perennial concern, with philosophers and thinkers grappling with its implications. Human beings express their emotions and rationality within societal and cultural contexts, which can either enhance or hinder their freedom. The age-old question persists: Is humanity truly free, or is free will an illusion? This conundrum has puzzled philosophers from antiquity to the present. Our capacity for understanding, reasoning, and intuition enables us to make choices, but do we genuinely possess free will? Popkin astutely notes:

In most of our judgment about people we assume that in some sense, they choose freely to do what they do. We punish, condemn or blame individuals for making certain choices and decisions and insist they ought to have done something else, and if they had, they would then be deserving of reward and praise.¹

Freedom is integral to human existence, empowering individuals to shape their reality. Jean-Paul Sartre, a prominent existentialist, posits, "man is free, man is freedom, I am freedom".² He rejects determinism, instead emphasizing human agency and freedom. Sartre's philosophy asserts that individuals are "condemned to be free,"³ necessitating choices that define their essence. In his view people are condemned to be free and by their free choices, people make themselves out of nothing by a series of choices and decisions they convert themselves or their existence into the essence of their final self. Scott commenting on Sartre's freedom enunciates that:

Indeed human freedom is something truly dreadful, for it is absolute and unconditional. Man cannot choose to be free or to be unfree. It is freedom out of which he is constituted and in which his essence, if he can be said to have an essence consists.⁴

Human existence is characterized by absolute freedom. According to Sartre, with the "death of God," humans are left to their own devices, shouldering the responsibility for their choices. Even when surrendering freedom to external authorities, individuals are still exercising their own freedom. This perspective emphasizes human agency and the inherent freedom to choose, highlighting the complexities of existentialism. According to Iroegbu, Sartre asserts, "we are not free to cease being free",⁵ emphasizing the inherent nature of freedom. However, Sartre's thesis diverges from determinists' views, which posit that various aspects of human nature are beyond our control.

Human beings are often regarded as rational entities, exercising their rationality within the societal and cultural contexts that either foster or hinder their freedom. This freedom is the cornerstone of authenticity, enabling individuals to be true to themselves. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, "human reason is

inextricably linked with freedom, and it is through the realization of freedom that reason attains its full expression".⁶ In this sense, freedom is not only a fundamental aspect of human existence but also the very essence of being. Determinists argue that factors like birth, physical characteristics, and certain moral values are predetermined.⁷ Additionally, cultural, social, and religious influences shape our thoughts and behaviors, questioning the extent of our voluntary choices.

Freedom as a Concept

The term "freedom" is often juxtaposed with opposing concepts, sparking intense debate about its application to human nature. Despite overwhelming evidence suggesting otherwise, philosophers like Sartre argue that humans are genuinely free agents. Sartre famously declared, "there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom".⁸ However, the influence of factors like upbringing, education, environment, and biology raises questions: Are humans truly free? Are thoughts and actions determined? Can humans be both determined and free? Which aspect, freedom or determination, dominates human nature? What are the consequences of upholding either freedom or determination?

Freedom is generally understood as the absence of external constraints—that is, environmental factors or influences. Modern society heavily emphasizes freedom, making it a cornerstone of social and political theories. European individualism and liberalism primarily refers freedom as a condition characterized by the absence of coercion or constraint imposed by another person. Gabriel Marcel believes that it is appropriate to say that every man has to make himself into a free man or achieve his freedom by taking advantage of the structural conditions within the bounds of possible things that makes freedom possible. In this regard he says "In other words, freedom is a conquest always partial, always precarious, always challenged...it is in the midst of captivity that freedom can be born at first the shape of the aspiration to be free."⁹ Freedom is often understood as the ability to choose one's own goals, select from available alternatives, and act without compulsion. In essence, freedom implies the absence of constraints that prevent an individual from acting in accordance with their desires.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica John Locke's perspective on freedom focuses on whether a person is free to will, to act upon their desires, and to refrain from acting upon undesired impulses. John Locke believes that the question of whether human beings are free is the question of whether human beings are free with respect to the action and forebearance. As he puts it, "the idea of liberty is the idea of a power in any agent to do or forbear any action according to the determination or thought of the mind whereby either of them is preferred to the other".¹⁰ The concept of freedom is closely tied to the idea of willingness, raising questions about the nature of free will. The empirical notion of freedom, as expressed by the phrase "I am free when I can do what I will," suggests that freedom is synonymous with the ability to act upon one's desires.

From a moral perspective, freedom implies that individuals are responsible for their choices and actions. That is individuals are morally responsible for their actions, as they result from free choices. This perspective implies that freedom involves making decisions without coercion, leading to moral accountability. As A.J. Ayer notes, some philosophers define freedom as "the consciousness of necessity,"¹¹ suggesting that freedom can coexist with causal determinism. Ultimately, true freedom is not about permissiveness or license, but rather about making choices that align with moral values. Pope John Paul II emphasizes, "freedom is not merely the absence of constraints, but rather the ability to live in accordance with a higher purpose."¹²

Metaphysicists view freedom as self-actualization. Iroegbu defines freedom as the absence of external restraints."¹³ In a democratic system of government, it is assumed that everyone is free. Kant in another development though accepted determinism in science, insisted that even if determinism is true, one must always view him or herself as an agent as necessarily free. For Kant, freedom is a power to initiate action

from oneself and the only way to initiate this power is through the power of one's own will- the moral law. " ¹⁴ This means that freedom is an important aspect of pure reason and not what is seen and verified in the empirical world and he stressed further that freedom is that which causes events without itself being caused by anything else. In this sense freedom is attributed only to something that is not a thing at all, that is the noumenon. Contrary to this view, Kant upheld that at the moral level, however we must admit freedom for it is the necessary condition of the duty of morality. Thus, from the above explanation of the term freedom, even a lay man will be in a better position to understand. Kant accepts scientific determinism but advocates for viewing oneself as a free agent.

Stace asserts " that morality requires free will, as moral precepts would be meaningless without choice".¹⁵ He identifies semantic confusion as a major problem surrounding freedom. Jaspers sees freedom as "existenz," enabling individuals to make decisions and shape their being. " Freedom facilitates a leap from immanence to transcendence."¹⁶ Marcel views freedom as a conquest, achieved through structural conditions and personal effort. True freedom is tied to obligation, not opposed to it.¹⁷ In this assertion , Marcel demonstrates that a true freedom is one that is tied to an obligation and not one that sees an obligation as burden or contrary to freedom. Merleau-Ponty identifies freedom in action, exercised through consciousness.¹⁸ According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Freewill in philosophy is the supposed power or capacity of humans to make decisions or perform actions independently of any prior event or state of the universe. ¹⁹

How ever, The term determinism is also variously used. It is mainly used by many philosophers for accounts of human choices and actions that make them into effects of causal sequences- sequences of such a kind as to raise a question about the freedom of choices and actions. Determinism so understood has a limited subject matter- ourselves and our lives and indeed less than that. It is not the scientific and general or cosmic doctrine associated with Newtonian physics in the past. Certainly the term determinism can be differently used for the general doctrine as it typically is in the philosophy of science. ²⁰

Sartre'S Philosophy

Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical framework revolves around the concept of human freedom, a notion that underscores the inherent liberty and responsibility that define human existence. In contrast to other forms of freedom, Sartre's emphasis on human freedom is rooted in the existentialist tradition, which prioritizes the individual's concrete experience and existence. Sartre's conception of human freedom is absolute and boundless, implying that individuals possess complete autonomy over their choices and actions. This perspective is encapsulated in his statement, "I am condemned to be free," which suggests that human freedom is both empowering and burdensome. By rejecting determinism and the idea of divine intervention, Sartre asserts that human beings are entirely responsible for shaping their own lives and creating their own meaning.

In Sartre's view, human freedom is not only a fundamental aspect of human nature but also an inherent part of human existence. He argues that there is no distinction between being human and being free, emphasizing the integral relationship between human existence and the freedom to choose. This perspective is further underscored by his assertion, "Man is free, man is freedom, I am my freedom."²¹ Ultimately, Sartre's philosophy highlights the significance of human freedom and its attendant responsibilities. By acknowledging the absolute nature of human freedom, individuals can take ownership of their choices and create their own path in life.

At the core of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy lies the concept of freedom, which profoundly shapes his understanding of human existence. For Sartre, human freedom is not merely a quality or attribute, but the very essence of human being. Freedom precedes human essence, making it possible for individuals to define themselves and create their own path in life. In Sartre's view, human freedom is not something that is acquired or achieved; rather, it is the fundamental foundation of human existence. He argues that

humans do not exist in order to be free, but instead, freedom is the inherent condition that makes human existence possible. Sartre opines that, "Freedom is precisely the nothingness which is made-to-be-at the heart of man and which forces human reality to make itself instead of to be."²²

By equating freedom with nothingness, Sartre underscores the idea that human existence is characterized by a fundamental void or absence of predetermined essence. This void is filled by the individual's freedom to choose and create their own life. Consequently, Sartre sees humans as beings whose existence precedes their essence, meaning that they are not predetermined beings with a fixed nature, but rather free beings who shape their own destiny. For Sartre, human freedom is an all-or-nothing concept. Individuals are either wholly free or not free at all; there is no middle ground. Freedom is not something that can be acquired or lost; it is an inherent and essential aspect of human existence. Sartre emphasizes that freedom accompanies the being of man, underscoring the intrinsic relationship between human existence and freedom.

According to Scott, Sartre's notion of freedom is "truly dreadful" because it is absolute and unconditional. Human freedom is not a choice, but an inherent aspect of human existence. As Scott notes, "Man cannot choose to be free or to be unfree. It is freedom out of which he is constituted and in which his essence, if he can be said to have an essence, consists."²³ Sartre's concept of freedom is deeply rooted in his existentialist philosophy. With the absence of God, human freedom becomes the sole source of liberation. Sartre sees freedom as an integral part of human existence, inescapable and identical with man's being. He famously declared it in his lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism," that "Man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet in other respects is free because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he chooses."²⁴ For Sartre, human freedom is inescapable, and man is defined by his possibilities and freedom. This notion of freedom is closely tied to Sartre's concepts of choice and responsibility. Authenticity, in Sartre's view, requires accepting the full implications of one's freedom. To reject this responsibility is to succumb to inauthenticity, self-deception, or bad faith.

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, freedom is the fundamental essence of human existence. He famously declares, "Man is freedom and freedom is man." This notion emphasizes that freedom is not merely an attribute or quality that humans possess, but rather the defining characteristic that constitutes human existence. Sartre's philosophy posits that human freedom precedes essence, implying that freedom is the foundation upon which human existence is built. In this sense, human essence is not predetermined, but rather suspended in freedom, allowing individuals to shape their own existence. Sartre's concept of freedom is intimately tied to the idea of nothingness. He sees freedom and nothingness as inseparable, with freedom constituting the inner structure of consciousness. This relationship between freedom and nothingness implies that human consciousness is characterized by the ability to choose and create, thereby introducing the possibility of nothingness into existence.

Implications of Sartre's Notion of Freedom

Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of absolute human freedom has far-reaching consequences. His philosophy, which emphasizes individual liberty and choice, leads to several implications that are crucial to understanding human existence. One of the primary consequences of Sartre's notion of freedom is the concept of responsibility. Sartre's philosophy, which initially appears to be an amoral subjectivism, ultimately gives rise to an ethics of strict accountability based on individual responsibility. As Sartre famously declared, "Man is condemned to be free." This means that humans have the full weight of being responsible for their choices and actions. According to Iroegbu, Sartre's freedom implies that individuals are entirely responsible for who they become, and they have no one to blame but themselves.

Furthermore, Sartre's philosophy suggests that when individuals make choices, they are not only choosing for themselves but also for all people. This implies that individuals are responsible not only for their own individuality but also for the collective human experience. As Sartre puts it, individuals are "responsible for all people." This notion of responsibility has significant implications for human existence. It emphasizes the importance of individual agency and the need for humans to take ownership of their choices and actions. By acknowledging that individuals are responsible for themselves and others, Sartre's philosophy encourages humans to adopt an ethics of accountability and to recognize the impact of their choices on the world around them.

However, Sartre's notion of responsibility appears to contradict his earlier emphasis on individual freedom and the rejection of universal laws. To suggest that individuals must consider the consequences of their actions on others seems to imply a shared human essence, which Sartre's philosophy rejects. Instead, Sartre's concept of responsibility is unique and rooted in his idea of absolute freedom. Thus Roberts explains, "I am responsible for everything... except for my responsibility, for I am not the foundation of my being."²⁵ This formulation highlights the anguish and burden of responsibility that accompanies unlimited freedom. Individuals must create their own image and make a choices without being able to shift the responsibility to others.

This responsibility leads to a profound sense of loneliness and isolation. According to Stumpf "The act of choice, then, is one of anguish, for in this act, people are responsible not only for themselves but also for each other."²⁶ Sartre's philosophy suggests that individuals are responsible for the entire world, as every event and the existence of others are mere chances. Sartre's freedom implies strict accountability, making individuals responsible for their choices and actions.

In this context, the being-for-itself (human consciousness) experiences anguish, recognizing that it is neither the foundation of its own being nor of the other's being. Instead, it is compelled to decide the meaning of being, both within itself and in the world around it. Sartre warns that individuals who attempt to evade this responsibility through self-deception will be haunted by a troubled conscience. Another significant implication of Sartre's notion of freedom is the rejection of rationalism and idealism. In his quest for meaningfulness in human existence, Sartre critiques the rationalist theories of Descartes and Kant, as well as the idealist philosophies of Plato and Hegel. Rationalism, as espoused by Descartes and Kant, posits that knowledge can be acquired through reason alone, independent of sense experience. Idealism, on the other hand, asserts that reality is fundamentally mental rather than physical.

Sartre's philosophy, as outlined in "Being and Nothingness," diverges from these perspectives. He argues that we must begin with pre-reflective consciousness, which challenges the tenets of idealism and rationalism. Furthermore, Sartre rejects the idea of a noumenal world behind the phenomenal one, instead introducing the concept of the "transphenomenality of being." He posits that consciousness is not a mode of particular knowledge, but rather the dimension of transphenomenal being in the subject. As Sartre notes, "The law of being in the knowing subject is to be conscious." This perspective underscores the inherent freedom of human consciousness, unencumbered by the constraints of external ideals or rationalist frameworks. In contrast, idealism and rationalism would limit human freedom by imposing preconceived notions of human nature. Sartre's attribution of absolute freedom to humans thus stands in stark contrast to idealistic and rationalistic theories.

If idealism and rationalism were to prevail, Sartre's notion of human freedom would be severely curtailed by the external world of preconceived ideas that dictate human nature. In contrast, Sartre's philosophy attributes absolute freedom to humans, which fundamentally contradicts idealistic and rationalistic theories. Another significant implication of Sartre's absolute freedom is the denial of God's existence. Atheism is a central aspect of Sartre's philosophy, and he is arguably the most ardent advocate of atheism

among existential phenomenologists. Sartre's atheism is distinct in that he does not merely assert that God does not exist; instead, he posits that God's existence is impossible.

Sartre presents three primary arguments to deny God's existence which includes absolute freedom, intersubjectivity, and the concept of God as self-contradictory. By employing these arguments, Sartre aims to demonstrate that the idea of God is inherently flawed and therefore, impossible. Sartre's concept of absolute freedom is incompatible with the idea of God's existence. According to Sartre, human freedom cannot coexist with the notion of a divine being. He posits that if God exists, human freedom is compromised, and conversely, if humans are truly free, then God cannot exist.

Sartre's philosophy asserts that the existence of God would inherently limit human freedom, which he believes is boundless. In his view, the absence of God enables infinite possibilities, rendering God an existential absurdity. As Macquarrie notes, "Either man is free and does not derive his meaning from God, or he is dependent on God and is not free."²⁷ Sartre unequivocally advocates for the former, arguing that humans do not depend on God for meaning or purpose. Instead, humans are free beings, unencumbered by divine authority. Sartre reasoning that if God had intended to govern humanity, He would not have created humans as free beings. By granting humans freedom, God would have relinquished control over them. As Sartre emphasizes, "At the moment when God created man as a free being, this freedom turned against God." Consequently, humans are beholden only to their own laws and desires. For Sartre, the existence of a real God would necessarily extinguish human freedom, but since humans are indeed free, the notion of God becomes untenable.

Sartre's study of intersubjectivity provides another basis for his denial of a real God. In human relationships, Sartre famously declares that "hell is other people." However, he suggests that God would be an even more oppressive presence, representing a "third order" of existence that transcends human relationships. As the ultimate observer, God's gaze would be objectifying and annihilating, destroying human freedom and reducing individuals to mere objects. Under God's gaze, humans would be unable to defend their subjectivity or assert their autonomy. Collins notes, that "The great eye would include all men together in a common objective field, so that all would have the same mode of being."²⁸ In this scenario, acknowledging God's existence would mean surrendering one's freedom and existing as a mere object, stripped of autonomy and agency.

Sartre's concept of intersubjectivity highlights the tension between human freedom and the idea of a divine observer. By rejecting the notion of God, Sartre aims to preserve human freedom and autonomy, ensuring that individuals remain subjects rather than objects. Sartre's third argument against the existence of God posits that the concept of God is inherently self-contradictory. Drawing from Catholic theology, Sartre conceives of God as a Self-Existent Being, possessing the fullness of being, perfect self-efficiency, and independence. These attributes align with Sartre's notion of the "being-in-itself" (*en soi*). However, God is also conceived as consciousness, which is a characteristic Sartre attributes to the "being-for-itself" (*pour soi*). This fusion of attributes leads Sartre to describe God as "being-in-itself-for-itself" (*Causa Sui*). Sartre argues that such a being is unthinkable, unrealizable, and non-existent, as no being can be the cause of its own existence.

In Sartre's view, the concept of God attempts to reconcile two irreconcilable concepts which are the being-in-itself and the being-for-itself. This, he claims, would result in a being that is both necessary and contingent, underived and derived, eternally immobile and temporarily active. Furthermore, such a being would possess both a complete comprehension of being and a consciousness that distances itself from being. For Sartre, this inherent contradiction demonstrates that God cannot exist. Humanity is left alone, abandoned to itself, without divine guidance or support. Sartre emphasizes thus "Man is totally condemned to his freedom," with only his freedom to guide him. However, the question remains whether

Sartre's philosophical rejection of God's existence actually negates the possibility of God's existence? While Sartre presents a compelling thesis on human freedom, it diverges significantly from the perspectives of other philosophers, particularly determinists.

However determinists argue that human nature is influenced by factors beyond individual control, such as genetic predispositions, familial and cultural conditioning, and environmental factors. These influences can shape our thoughts, moral values, and behaviors, suggesting that our freedom is not absolute. Furthermore, certain behaviors are generally considered to be outside the realm of free choice. These criticisms imply that human existence is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, leaving room for debate about the extent of human freedom. While Sartre's philosophy presents a compelling case for human freedom, it is not universally accepted, and the existence of God remains a subject of ongoing philosophical and theological debate.

In conclusion, the enigma of assessing the true voluntariness of our choices and actions becomes increasingly complex when considering the intricacies of human psychology. The debate surrounding free will, a longstanding metaphysical dilemma, revolves around reconciling our belief in human freedom with our understanding of the factors that influence our decisions. As we delve deeper into the human condition, it becomes apparent that our choices are shaped by a multitude of factors, including genetic predispositions, environmental influences, and past experiences. This raises questions about the extent to which our decisions are truly free from determinism. In this context, the concept of free will seems to oscillate between two extremes: complete determinism, where our choices are entirely predetermined, and absolute freedom, where our decisions are entirely unencumbered. However, it is likely that the truth lies somewhere in between, with our choices being influenced by a combination of factors, yet still allowing for some degree of freedom. Ultimately, the problem of free will challenges us to reexamine our assumptions about human agency, moral responsibility, and the nature of reality itself. As we continue to grapple with this metaphysical conundrum, we may uncover new insights that shed light on the complex interplay between freedom and determinism. Sartre's notion of freedom raises questions about the extent of human freedom and its consistency with human nature.

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