



Freedom, For-Itself, and Nothingness

Dr. Uday Singh, Associate Professor, Philosophy
Government Girls' College, Chittorgarh, Rajasthan, India

Abstract: The Sartrean notion of freedom as absolute and as being consubstantial with for-itself (*pour-soi*) has seriously remained undiscussed—at least I feel so. I intend to capture it and attempt to fill the ostensible gap in understanding his concept of freedom. To understand Sartre's theory of freedom it is imperative to grasp the notion of for-itself (consciousness) which is the *sine quanon* of his concept of freedom. I will be analyzing the facets of freedom and *en route* revealing what has remained less obvious in Sartrean studies i.e., the for-itself (*pour-soi*) *qua* for-itself is free *in toto* and hence *wholly responsible* for its acts.

Key words: Determinism, Nothingness, Consciousness

The Sartrean notion of freedom as absolute and as being consubstantial with for-itself (*pour-soi*) has seriously remained undiscussed—at least I feel so. I intend to capture it and attempt to fill the ostensible gap in understanding his concept of freedom. To understand Sartre's theory of freedom it is imperative to grasp the notion of for-itself (consciousness) which is the *sine quanon* of his concept of freedom. I will be analyzing the facets of freedom and *en route* revealing what has remained less obvious in Sartrean studies i.e., the for-itself (*pour-soi*) *qua* for-itself is free *in toto* and hence *wholly responsible* for its acts. The Sartrean notion of absolute freedom may seem repugnant to determinism where actions and occurrences are determined by prior and antecedent chain of causes and conditions; where actions and events are unavoidable and hence not free; so the causal necessity of determinism implies that freedom or free human action cannot exist.

Contra determinism, I shall unpack the Sartrean configuration of for-itself which represents a promising as well as challenging option in the existentialist landscape because the structure of for-itself *per se* entails absolute freedom of human reality. In this paper I am not arguing for an ethical theory: consequentialism, deontology, or virtue ethics; rather I argue that the idea of freedom in Sartre is neither abstract nor hypothetical—instead it is concretely absolute. Incidentally, I reckon interpreters have somehow missed that the Sartrean notion of freedom proceeds from the structure of for-itself. As a matter of fact, the very structure of for-itself is such that it entails absolute freedom. I will explore that the notion of freedom is inextricably linked with for-itself. I feel readers of Sartre have not staged dedicatedly the Sartrean position of freedom as absolute, additionally, they have either confined themselves solely to the penalty box of for-itself or solely to the penalty box of freedom, making the two exist separately and as being totally isolated from each other. According to Sartre, the two—freedom, and for-itself—are not distinct, in fact, freedom is consubstantial with the notion of for-itself; and the for-itself which is free is just the opposite of in-itself which is completely unfree.

For-Itself and Nothingness

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes the Being-in-itself (*l'être-en-soi*) as what it *is*. He writes, “Being-in-itself is never either possible or impossible. It *is*” (Sartre 1992, 29). In fact, the for-itself is designated by Sartre as being what it is *not* and not being what it is. The for-itself is a being which is not what it is and which is what it is not, implying that the for-itself is always in the process of making itself. It is always in the mode *to-be-about-to-be*. Sartre writes, “The possible is a structure of the *for-itself*...” (Sartre 1992, 29). What Sartre means is that the being of consciousness, that is the for-itself, does not coincide with itself in a full equivalence. He reserves such equivalences or identity for the in-itself which he explicates by stating that the being-in-itself is what it is. The in-itself is solid, it has complete identicalness, it has no *within*. Since it has no within the in-itself is opposed to a *without* which is the for-itself. The in-itself is full positivity and can encompass no negation because it is full equivalence, full actuality. Interestingly Sartre notes:

In the in-itself there is not a particle of being which is not wholly within itself without distance. When being is thus conceived there is not the slightest suspicion of duality in it; this is what we mean when we say that the density of being of the in-itself is infinite. It is fullness. (Sartre 1992, 120)

He further states:

The in-itself is full of itself, and no more total plenitude can be imagined, no more perfect equivalence of content to container. There is not the slightest emptiness in being, not the tiniest crack through which nothingness might slip in. (Sartre 1992, 120-21)

The for-itself if it was full positivity, complete plenitude like the in-itself then it would never be conscious of anything. Since the for-itself is nothingness or a lack it *becomes* conscious of objects. For Sartre, the for-itself is a *without*. It is *not* therefore it is made-to-be. The in-itself is full plenitude hence it does not contain nothingness as its structure, “it is solid (*massif*).” (Sartre 1992, 28) On the other hand, the for-itself is perpetually haunted by nothingness. Sartre declares, “Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being—like a worm.” (Sartre 1992, 56) As the for-itself is nothingness, therefore it exists as consciousness of objects. Consciousness or for-itself according to Sartre is always consciousness of something that is consciousness produces itself as a revealed-revelation of a being which is not it and which gives itself as already existing when consciousness reveals it. The for-itself that is consciousness, writes Sartre “*is a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself.*” (Sartre 1992, 24) The for-itself is a lack. It is a being of distances. The for-itself or consciousness is always separated from what it is by the being which it is not. This lack appears in the human world or in the for-itself only. Sartre expounds that human reality is not something which exists first in order afterwards to lack this or that, but it exists first as lack and in immediate, synthetic connection with what it lacks. He declares:

This lack does not belong to the nature of the in-itself, which is full positivity. It appears in the world only with the upsurge of human reality. It is only in the human world that there can be lacks. (Sartre 1992, 135)

Human reality or for-itself lacks something for something; human reality is a lack which it is. The presence of lack haunts the for-itself and it tries to coincide with that which it lacks in order to be itself. This lack or negation of the for-itself is a presence-to-itself which is not. The for-itself inasmuch as it is not *itself*, is a presence-to-itself that lacks a certain presence-to-itself, and it is as a lack of this presence that it is a presence-to-itself. In other words, the making of human reality is not possible if it does not lack; each for-itself or consciousness lacks something for something. Since it is a lack there is no established Ego in the consciousness. There is no *my* consciousness but consciousness of me. Sartre dislodged the ego from consciousness so that one does not refrain from the responsibility of freedom by seeking shelter in the ego. “The ego is not the owner of consciousness; it is the object of consciousness” (Sartre 1957,97). To lodge an ego into the nothingness of consciousness would mean making consciousness a thing, and a thing for Sartre is intrinsically opaque, determined and fixed. The opaqueness of the ego destroys the spontaneity and lucidity of consciousness which amounts to the destruction of consciousness. Sartre, therefore, eliminated the ego from consciousness to preserve the purity, freedom and spontaneity of consciousness. Sartre asserts, “The ego is neither formally nor materially *in* consciousness: it is outside, *in the world*” (Sartre 1957,31). For Husserl the ‘I’ or transcendental ego was always a formal structure of consciousness but never for Sartre. At heart for Husserl, the issue at play was to establish foundation of knowledge by taking in the opposite direction any transcendent object to the immanence of consciousness which is purified of psychological and empirical attachments. This process of reversion Husserl addresses as reduction which was from beings to being. For Sartre what appears is *for* consciousness, despite the fact that consciousness does not contain it, because it is nothingness. Husserl’s concern was essential intuition, Sartre prioritized intentionality. Sartre writes:

When I run after a streetcar, when I look at the time, when I am absorbed in contemplating a portrait, there is no *I*. There is consciousness *of the streetcar-having-to-be-overtaken*, etc.... There is no place for *me* on this level. (Sartre 1957, 48-49)

He further adds:

The transcendental *I* is the death of consciousness. Indeed, the existence of consciousness is an absolute because consciousness is consciousness of itself. This is to say that the type of existence of consciousness is to be consciousness of itself. And consciousness is aware of itself *in so far as it is unconsciousness of a transcendent object*. All is therefore clear and lucid in consciousness: the object with its characteristic opacity is before consciousness, but consciousness is purely and simply consciousness of being consciousness of that object. This is the law of its existence.” (Sartre 1957, 40)

Sartre draws attention to the fact that every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself. But this non-positional consciousness of self is not a new consciousness but it is only mode of existence which is possible for a consciousness of something, thus each conscious existence exists as consciousness of existing. Table cannot exist before consciousness of table; not even in the form of potentiality. A potential table can exist only as consciousness (of) being potential. Potencies of consciousness can exist merely as consciousness of potencies. If the for-itself or consciousness is not consciousness of being consciousness of the table, then it would be consciousness of the table without being consciousness of the table. Thus, it would be a consciousness or for-itself ignorant of itself, that is consciousness which is unconsciousness, which would be absurd. The point is, there is no duality in consciousness or preferably consciousness has no contents. A table is not in consciousness because consciousness is nothingness and it is intentional that is directed towards the outside, *ergo* there is consciousness of table rather than a table *in* consciousness. Similarly, as for the ego, it is an object in the world and not *in* consciousness which accounts for the absolute freedom of the for-itself as there is no determined or pre-established ego within consciousness.

Sartre points out that every positional consciousness of an object is immediate, instantaneous and spontaneous and at the same time it is a non-positional or non-thetic consciousness of itself. Clarifying by an example, Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness* that for instance, if I count the cigarettes which are in a packet, I am disclosing an objective property of the collection of cigarettes that is they are a *dozen*. This objective property of *dozen* appears to

my consciousness as a property existing in the world, all that is there of intention in my actual consciousness is directed towards the outside, towards the world. He says but if anyone asks, “What are you doing there?” I should reply immediately, “*I am counting.*” Here, the reflecting consciousness posits the consciousness reflected-on, as its object. It is in the act of reflecting I pass judgment on the consciousness reflected-on; ‘*I am counting*’, ‘*I am playing*’ etc. These responses point out that by reflection, one can instantly posit the consciousness reflected-on i.e. the ego, which is in the world. The ego or ‘I’ is consciousness reflected-on and the ego or ‘I’ is outside in the world and something that emerges while reflecting. So the consciousness of consciousness is not positional that is it is non-thetic consciousness or non-positional consciousness of itself whenever consciousness is consciousness of something, besides, consciousness is one with the consciousness of which it is consciousness. In other words, “Every conscious existence exists as consciousness of existing” (Sartre 1992, 13).

Thus, to say ‘*I am sorry I can’t help it, because I am such a type of person*’ would make no sense in the philosophy of Sartre, because there is no determined or established ego; that is to say there is no given human nature, as consciousness is nothingness. Consciousness or human reality is a lack and it is always positing of a transcendent object, that is, the intention which is all that is there in the actual consciousness and which is directed towards the outside, towards the world, thus one can make totally new choice. Sartre maintains that there is no difference between table that is when we say ‘table’ and consciousness of table. When we say table we do not have to say ‘I am conscious of table’. Nothing can separate the consciousness (of) table from table, since table is nothing other than consciousness (of) table. Consciousness or for-itself, if it was a plenitude it would never be conscious of the table or any other objects. The for-itself becomes conscious of something because it is not a plenitude but it is *nothingness*. And this nothingness, maintains Sartre, is nothing but freedom: possibility.

References

1. Brée, Germaine. 1972. *Camus and Sartre: Crisis and Commitment*. New York: Delta Press.
2. Caws, Peter. 1979. *Sartre*. London: Routledge and Keagan Paul.
3. Gruene, S. (2003), “Sartre on Mistaken Sincerity.” *European Journal of Philosophy* 11:145-160.
4. Kaufmann, Walter. 1962. *Existentialism from Dostevsky to Sartre*. New York: Dover Publications.

5. LaCapra, Dominick. 1979. *A Preface to Sartre : A Critical Introduction to Sartre's Literary and Philosophical Writings*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd.
6. Levy, L. (2014). "Sartre and Ricoeur on Productive Imagination." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 52:43-60. Accessed March 07, 2014. Doi:10.1111/sjp.12049
7. Murdoch, Iris. 1967. *Sartre—Romantic Rationalist*. London: Collins Fontana.
8. Olafson, F.A. (2006). "Freedom and Responsibility" in *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism* Edited by H.L. Dreyfus and M.A. Wrathall. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
9. Parker, E.A. (2015). "Singularity in Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 53:1-16. Accessed July 7, 2015. doi:10 1111/sjp. 12093
10. Santoni, Ronald E. 1995. *Bad Faith, Good Faith, and Authenticity in Sartre's Early Philosophy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
11. Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1957. *The Transcendence of the Ego. An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*. Translated and Annotated with an Introduction by Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick. New York: The Noonday Press, Inc.
12. — 1962. *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*. Translated by Philip Mairet. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.
13. — 1964. *Essays in Aesthetics*. Selected and Translated by Wade Baskin. London: Peter Owen Ltd.
14. — 1965. *Nausea*. Translated by Robert Baldick. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.
15. — 1966. *Existentialism and Humanism*. Translation and Introduction by Philip Mairet. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd.
16. — 1974. *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. Translated by John Matthews. London: NLB.
17. — 1992. *Being and Nothingness : A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. Translated and with an Introduction by Hazel E. Barnes, University of Colorado. New York: Washington Square Press.
18. Warnock, Mary. 1965. *The Philosophy of Sartre*. London: Hutchinson University Library.
19. Wild, John. 1966. *The Challenge of Existentialism*. Bloomington Press.
20. Zaborowski,H.(2000), "On Freedom and Responsibility: Remarks on Sartre, Levinas and Derrida." *The Heythrop Journal*, 41:47-65