

Freedom

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Human freedom was Jean-Paul Sartre's central philosophical preoccupation throughout his career. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the cornerstone of his moral and political thought, *Being and Nothingness*, contains an extensive and subtle account of the metaphysical freedom that he considered fundamental to the kind of existence that humans have. Although rooted in phenomenology, Sartre's account of freedom draws very little on analysis of the experience of freedom itself. It is rather based on a general phenomenological account of perceptual experience and the motivation of action. The result is one of the most sophisticated portrayals of freedom in Western philosophical literature. It is certainly the most detailed account of freedom given by any of those philosophers who made the description of experience their central philosophical method. This claim is more usually made for Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of freedom, which he presents in critical dialogue with Sartre's, but as we will see his account stops short of a full phenomenology of agency and owes its plausibility and popularity in part to its author having asked one question too few.

The preference for Merleau-Ponty's theory is also partly due, however, to Sartre's account often being presented as far simpler and much less credible than it really is. Sartre must take some of the blame for this. He develops it across the whole of *Being and Nothingness*. Although he does devote a sizeable part of the book to this topic (1943: pt 4 ch 1 §§ 1-3), much of the groundwork he lays for this earlier in the text seems incautiously worded and can only be properly understood in the context of this later discussion. What is more, he does not seem to give a clearly indicated concise statement of the theory that whose fine details fill hundreds of pages. The result is that readers often formulate his theory on the basis of only part of his overall discussion.

One common misreading finds him proclaiming a kind of staccato voluntarism, each atomic moment in time finding us having to decide afresh how to respond to the world that confronts us (e.g. Smith 1970). In its bare form, this overlooks Sartre's careful account of action as responding to the invitations, demands, and proscriptions that we find already there in the world as we experience it (see esp. 1943: pt 4 ch 1 § 2). A richer form of this misreading emphasises Sartre's contention that these aspects of the world to which we respond are 'nothingnesses', which means that they do not exist independently of our consciousness of the world (see 1943: pt 1 ch 1 § 1). The central theme of the phenomenological movement is that the world we experience reflects the structures of experience itself and here we see part of the Sartrean version of this idea: action responds to aspects of the world that reflect the structures of our awareness of our surroundings. Sartre is thus sometimes taken to be making the obviously false claim that we can simply decide how the world appears to us (e.g. Føllesdal 1981).

While it is true that Sartre understands us to have freedom over the way we experience the world, and hence over the way the world appears, he does not locate this freedom in

voluntary decision. He makes this point concisely in his public lecture *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. 'What we usually understand by "will" is a conscious decision that most of us take only after we have made ourselves what we are', he says there, adding that such decision 'is only a manifestation of an earlier and more spontaneous choice' (1946: 23-4; tr. 23). Voluntary action, he explains in *Being and Nothingness*, is action resulting from deliberation, which in turn is nothing more than comparing the relative importance of the various reasons for different possible actions, where these each only have the importance that is conferred upon them by the projects I am already pursuing (1943: 527; tr. 472-3).

Part of the difficulty with understanding this thought lies in Sartre's omission of a clear presentation of precisely what he means by 'project'. Given that lack, it is quite natural to assume that he means the term in its ordinary sense and to think of writing a book or raising a child as paradigm cases. Such projects seem to be explicitly decided upon, pursued in clear knowledge of them, and easily abandoned on the basis of a further decision. Sartre seems to have a much broader idea in mind, however. I might accept a poorly paid job out of fear of starvation, but this is important to me, he argues, only because of my project of staying alive (1943: 512; tr. 459). I might never have deliberated and decided upon this project, but it is a project rather than simply a habit because it is teleological. What is more, pursuing a project does not require explicitly acknowledging that one is pursuing it. Indeed, according to Sartre, a project might require that one does not acknowledge it: 'if my initial project aims at choosing myself as inferior in the midst of others (what is called the inferiority complex)', he argues, then I need to set myself goals that I will not achieve but I also need to convince myself that I fully intend to achieve them, which in turn requires not being explicitly aware that I am pursuing them only in order to fail (1943: 549-53; tr. 493-6).

The projects that structure the world to which my actions respond, therefore, need not result from deliberation or decision and need not be sufficiently clear to me that I could simply decide to abandon them. The very purpose of existential psychoanalysis is to uncover the projects that ultimately drive the patient's behaviour (1943: pt IV ch 2 § 1). Since the patterns we discern in an individual's behaviour reflect the set of projects that individual pursues, it seems mistaken to claim that for Sartre the language of character traits can refer only to patterns of past actions (e.g. Morris 1976: ch 4). We should rather see him as holding the view that character consists in projects (see Webber 2009: ch 2). This means that it is also mistaken to claim that his theory of freedom is opposed to the idea that thought, feeling, and action are regulated by character traits (e.g. Harman 2009).

Instead we should understand Sartre as claiming that freedom consists in the ability to change one's character, and in turn to change the way the world appears to one, the invitations it gives and the demands it makes, and thereby to change the ways in which one behaves in response to the world. One can change one's character precisely because it consists in one's projects: one can choose to abandon the pursuit of any goal, so long as one is aware of pursuing it, and one can adopt new goals. 'There is no doubt that I could have done otherwise', Sartre claims, but the interesting question is: 'at what price?' (1943: 531; tr. 476). The answer to this question, he eventually concludes, is that the cost of doing otherwise is 'a fundamental modification of my original choice of myself', 'another choice of myself and my ends' (1943: 542; tr. 486).

Merleau-Ponty recognises this role of character in Sartre's theory, which he describes as holding that 'our freedom is not to be sought in spurious discussion on the conflict between a style of life which we have no wish to reappraise and circumstances suggestive

of another', since such discussions could only reflect the reasons and values one finds in the world as a result of one's existing projects; 'the real choice is that of whole character and our manner of being in the world' (1945: 501; tr. 438). But he does not accept this as a theory of freedom. It is not entirely clear what his objection is, however, since he presents his critique rather obliquely in the final chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, which begins with a dialectical discussion taking Sartre as a sparring partner then moves on to present an alternative picture. The nature of the dialectical discussion, moreover, makes it difficult to distinguish points made in Merleau-Ponty's own voice from aspects of his reconstruction of his dialectical opponent. As a result, different commentators present diverging accounts of this critique.

What is clear is that Merleau-Ponty considers Sartre's account of freedom inconsistent with the idea that character consists in projects. The very idea of a project, indeed even of an action, he writes, requires that 'I must benefit from my impetus, I must be inclined to carry on, and there must be a propensity or bent of mind' (1945: 500; tr. 437). What is more, 'we must recognize a sort of sedimentation of our life: an attitude towards the world, when it has received frequent confirmation, acquires a favoured status for us' (1945: 504; tr. 441). Sartre agrees with this, as we have seen: our reasons for action reflect our projects on his picture, and these projects can be not merely deeply held but entirely hidden from view, buried under layers of lesser projects pursued as modes of that deeper project, as in the case of the inferiority complex.

Merleau-Ponty argues that this aspect of Sartre cannot affirm this while also holding a theory of freedom that has the consequence that 'my habitual being in the world is at each moment equally precarious', that however deeply sedimented my projects are 'the free act can always blow them sky high' (1945: 504; tr. 441-2). There seem to be two

ways of understanding this point, both of which echo David Hume's influential critique of libertarian theories of freedom (1748, ch 8). One is that such a radical conversion would have to be unmotivated, since on Sartre's picture one can be motivated only by reasons that issue from the projects in question, and that such an unmotivated occurrence is not an expression of freedom (compare Merleau-Ponty 1945: 501; tr. 438-9). The other is that if such abrupt changes in projects need not be motivated by reasons, then it would seem impossible to be genuinely committed to any course of action. Indeed, we should expect people to be abandoning projects and beginning fresh ones rather frequently, yet 'having built our life on an inferiority complex which has been operative for twenty years, it is not probable (*il est peu probable*) that we shall change' (1945: 504; tr. 442; see also McInerney 1979).

Sartre does indeed subscribe to the libertarian conception of freedom, according to which we are free because we are not part of the ordinary deterministic causal network of the world. He bases this claim on a scattered set of transcendental arguments to the effect that our exemption from deterministic causation is necessary for the experiences of imagination, questioning, judging, and valuing to be the way that careful phenomenological analysis reveals them to be (see Eshleman 2010: 31-4; Gardner 2010: 51-54, 64-9). But it is far from clear that Sartre really needs to make this metaphysical claim in order to secure the kind of freedom that he thinks we have. For his primary claim is simply that psychological determinism is false, that our judgments and actions are not simply necessary results of our prior states of mind. Indeed, he considers the belief in psychological determinism to be 'the basis of all attitudes of excuse' (1943: 78; tr. 64). To put it another way, he considers the belief that my actions are necessitated by my psychological make-up to be at the heart of bad faith.

But even this does not seem essential for his overall picture of freedom. He considers 'the clearest and most moving image of our freedom' to be provided by 'extraordinary and marvellous instants when the prior project collapses into the past in the light of a new project that rises on its ruins and which as yet exists only in outline' (1943: 555; tr. 497-8). Sartre describes such events as entirely unmotivated, but it is not at all clear why they could not be motivated by reasons rooted in other projects, perhaps ones of which the agent is not explicitly aware, or even by reasons rooted in the project that is thereby abandoned. In order to claim that we can abandon any project whatsoever, that is, Sartre does not need to claim that we can do so on the basis of no motivation at all. We will see shortly just why Sartre wants to maintain an opposition to psychological determinism within his phenomenology of agency. But it seems that his view of the metaphysics of action, as manifesting a character that consists in freely maintained and revisable projects, is itself compatible with psychological determinism (see Webber 2009: ch 5).

If the commitment to metaphysical libertarianism is dropped in this way, then the Humean objection that Merleau-Ponty raises against Sartre is avoided. But it seems clear that this would not satisfy Merleau-Ponty, for his disagreement is not really with the denial of determinism as such. His critique essentially concerns Sartre's belief that freedom is absolute and prior to the constitution of the world that we experience. Merleau-Ponty argues that we are born into a world already constituted with meaning and our freedom only develops, to a greater or lesser extent, against this backdrop. This is not a question of temporal priority, but of ontological dependence. Sartre is clear that he thinks there can be no freedom except in situations articulated some particular way (1943: 559; tr. 501-2), but holds nevertheless that the articulation is dependent on the freedom. Merleau-Ponty thinks that such freedom is ultimately dependent on already articulated situations.

This is why Merleau-Ponty places such emphasis on the bodily and social construction of situations in his account of freedom. Picking up on a passage of *Being and Nothingness* in which Sartre points out that whether a rock appears as a climbing challenge, a beautiful object, or an obstacle in my path depends entirely on my projects, Merleau-Ponty adds that ‘one and the same project being given, one rock will appear as an obstacle, and another, being more negotiable, as a means’ depending on their size and shape in relation to my body (1945: 502; tr. 439-40). Similarly, I find myself born into a world filled with objects, languages, customs, opportunities, and limitations inscribed there by generations of people and an economic situation dependent on the activities of the people I lived alongside (1945: 505-13; tr. 442-450). Our free engagement with the world, according to Merleau-Ponty, is dependent upon this ontologically prior ‘field’ of meanings in which we find ourselves (1945: 500; tr. 438).

Although this aspect of his discussion in *Phenomenology of Perception* is not directed against Sartre, his later discussion of freedom in *Adventures of the Dialectic* directly accuses Sartre of overlooking the fact that the world as we experience it is already replete with these meanings (1955: ch 5). Simone de Beauvoir responded by citing the extensive passages of *Being and Nothingness* and other works in which Sartre discusses the meanings the world contains independently of our projects and accusing Merleau-Ponty of ignoring Sartre’s actual writings in order to discuss a fictitious ‘pseudo-Sartreanism’ (Beauvoir 1955, § 1). This seems an appropriate response to the letter, and indeed the tone, of Merleau-Ponty’s later polemic against Sartre. But it would be wrong to conclude that Merleau-Ponty is merely insisting on something to which Sartre has already agreed.

For the deep difference between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty on the structure of the world

concerns not the origins of the meanings we find in experience, but the origin of motivation for action. Sartre's language is misleading in places, but it is clear from his writing overall that he considers *reasons*, not merely meanings in general, to be ultimately dependent on our projects. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, holds our projects to be ultimately dependent on the structure of meaning the world has independently of our existence.

Both agree that in our natural attitude towards the world we seem to be merely responding to reasons as we find them already there: 'in so far as he has committed himself to this action, formed a bond with his comrades or adopted this morality', writes Merleau-Ponty, 'it is because the historical situation, the comrades, the world around him seemed to him to expect that conduct from him' (1945: 518; tr. 454). 'The immediate is the world with its urgency', writes Sartre; '[v]alues are sown on my path like thousands of little real demands, like the signs which order us to keep off the grass' (1943: 76; tr. 62). Both agree, moreover, that phenomenology reveals that these reasons are dependent on the structures of our experience: 'in this world where I engage myself my acts cause values to spring up like partridges', writes Sartre (1943: 76; tr. 62); 'it is certain that this attribute' of being unclimbable 'can be conferred upon [a rock] only by the project of climbing it', writes Merleau-Ponty (1945: 501; tr. 439).

Where the two theories diverge is in the ultimate explanation of the projects that confer upon reasons for action their status as reasons for action. Sartre holds that nothing can explain this, since no reasons can be prior to the projects that confer that status. Merleau-Ponty argues that 'consciousness attributes this power of universal constitution to itself only if it ignores the event which provides its infrastructure and which is its birth' (1945: 517; tr. 453). 'I am a psychological and historical structure, and have

received, with existence, a manner of existing, a style', he concludes, and my freedom consists in the fact that the situation motivates me only as a result of the articulations it receives from my structure (1945: 519; tr. 455). Freedom is a therefore just a matter of the degree to which my body and the world as they are articulated in themselves tolerate my pursuit of the projects that structure my existence. 'My actual freedom is not on the hither side of my being, but before me, in things', writes Merleau-Ponty (1945: 516; tr. 452); 'freedom is always a meeting of the inner and the outer ... and it shrinks without ever disappearing altogether in direct proportion to the lessening of the *tolerance* allowed by the bodily and institutional data of our lives' (1945: 518; tr. 454).

Whereas freedom is an ever-present metaphysical absolute for Sartre, therefore, it is a matter of varying degree for Merleau-Ponty, who hints that this fits better with our ordinary understanding of freedom: 'if the slave displays freedom as much by living in fear as by breaking his chains', he writes, 'then it cannot be held that there is such a thing as *free action*', since this is a comparative term (1945: 499; tr. 437). It is commonplace to distinguish, however, between metaphysical freedom as a purported aspect of human existence and the latitude one's situation affords for the formulation and pursuit of novel goals. Sartre clearly recognises this distinction when he argues that we should promote freedom of the latter kind, and should do so because we possess absolute freedom of the former kind (see Sartre 1946). Perhaps it would be better to read Merleau-Ponty as claiming here that by reducing metaphysical (or ontological) freedom to this situated (or political) freedom, his theory dispels the air of mystery that often clouds discussions of the former.

Given this point, what can be said in favour of Sartre's insistence on an absolute freedom that is ontologically prior to our projects and hence to the constitution of reasons? What,

after all, is the point of such a claim? We can begin to see its advantage if we consider an aspect of Sartre's phenomenology of action that Merleau-Ponty does not discuss. This concerns the difference between the way in which an action seems to the agent, as a response to reasons presented in the situation, and the way in which the same action can appear to someone other than the agent or to the agent on later reflection, as an expression of a persisting character trait. Where you might see my need as a reason to reach out and help me, for example, that help might seem to me (or to you later) as a manifestation of your general kindness or generosity.

It is this distinction between the way an action is lived and the way it appears to observation that lies behind Sartre's claim, mentioned earlier, that 'psychological determinism' is at the root of bad faith. Misunderstanding of this distinction, moreover, is part of why some philosophers have taken Sartre to claim that freedom requires that action does not express character traits, also mentioned earlier. 'It should be noted in fact', Sartre writes, 'that character has a distinct existence only in the capacity of an object of knowledge for the Other' (1943: 416; tr. 372). This does not mean that it is unreal or imaginary, existing only in the eye of the beholder. 'Consciousness does not know its own character' in ordinary unreflective engagement with the world, to be sure, but 'it exists its character in pure indistinction non-thematically and non-thetically' (1943: 416; tr. 372).

What this means is that one's character, or more precisely the projects in which one's character consists, influences the structures of one's experience of the world, which show up in one's unreflective experience only as a way the world is presented. The invitations, demands, and proscriptions one finds are reasons only because of the projects one is pursuing. Since one's character consists in one's projects, they are the

image of one's character in the world. Nevertheless, they are presented simply *as reasons* inviting one to respond. To treat one's own actions as probable or necessary outcomes of one's character is to fail to engage with those reasons as reasons; it is to treat them simply as causes of behaviour. To do so is to falsify the experience of action from the inside, since the reasons one is treating as causes are not presented to the agent as mere brute causes. They are presented as reasons, to be recognised as such, questioned, measured, compared, and then affirmed, reassessed, rejected, or overridden in action. Action thereby confirms, alters, or ends one's commitment to the value enshrined in that reason.

Observing the behaviour of another person, or later considering one's own behaviour, allows one to view the action as reflecting the agent's character via their construal of the situation, even though the experience of agency from the inside does not allow for this. Hence the claim that character is only lived and not known in unreflective engagement with the world, but can be known from an external perspective on that action (see Thomas 2010; compare Eshleman 2010). This is also why Sartre considers it bad faith to treat one's own actions as simply flowing from one's character or from the reasons one is faced with; he thinks such 'psychological determinism' is contrary to our experience of reasons and therefore must be motivated by a desire to be excused responsibility for the actions one chooses in response to reasons.

Now we are in a position to see why Sartre will not rest his analysis of freedom where Merleau-Ponty argues it should rest, but instead goes further and argues for the metaphysical freedom of consciousness as ontologically prior to and independent of any projects one pursues, any reasons one finds in the world, any motivations one has. Without such absolute freedom, he thinks, we could not reassess or reject the reasons

that confront us, in which case they could not figure in our experience as reasons, and therefore could not even *be* reasons. Notice that Merleau-Ponty's position cannot be defended from this criticism by claiming that some reasons could be rejected in favour of other reasons that reflect more deeply held, perhaps core or essential, projects. Such a move would tacitly admit that the deeper reasons could not be revised and hence are no reasons at all.

This argument concludes that it must be possible for any given reason to be revised, either by reassessing its importance or by rejecting it altogether, but it does not follow that one must be able to reject them all at once. It does not follow, therefore, that such revision must be possible in the absence of any reason or motivation for doing so. As a result, the conclusion of this argument is not vulnerable to the Humean objections to libertarian, indeterminist conceptions of freedom. If we agree with Merleau-Ponty's claim that, for such Humean reasons, Sartre's theory that character consists in projects is incompatible with his indeterminist conception of freedom, we can simply drop the latter and preserve the former wholly intact. The result of doing so is no less a radical theory of freedom: the account still proclaims that one has freedom over the very roots of one's actions, the projects that underwrite the reasons one is faced with.

Quite why Sartre felt the need to argue for a libertarian form of this freedom, however, remains unexplained. Perhaps he thought that the phenomenology of reason-responsive agency genuinely requires or reveals indeterminism. While it is not at all clear why this should be so, it is probably worth pointing out that Immanuel Kant had influentially argued for a similar claim: that rational deliberation implicitly presupposes indeterminist freedom, since it presupposes that the conclusion one reaches is genuinely the result of that deliberation (1785: ch 3). The error here is to assume that determinism would entail

that one would have reached the same conclusion even if one's reasoning did not rationally support it. Perhaps there is a parallel error in Sartre's thought, to the effect that one can genuinely affirm or revise a reason only if the action that does so would not have happened in the absence of one's choice to do so.

Sartre has drawn his theory of freedom, as indeed Merleau-Ponty has drawn his, not from a phenomenological analysis of some particular kind of experience in which freedom is clearly felt, but from consideration of the phenomenology of action more generally. Both have considered what it is for the world to be structured as a field of reasons. Sartre has gone further and considered more carefully what it is to respond to reasons. Neither has restricted their phenomenology to a description of *what it feels like* to be an agent, though this dimension is present in both discussions. They are rather concerned with *what it is* to experience a world of invitations, demands, and proscriptions. Contemporary anglophone philosophical debate concerning the phenomenology of freedom would perhaps do well to employ this broader understanding of the subject matter rather than continuing to restrict itself to what purported particular experiences of freedom are purportedly like.

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Further Reading

Jon Stewart (ed), *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998) contains the passage of Merleau-Ponty's *Adventures of the Dialectic* in which he rehearses his critique of Sartre's philosophy of freedom, Beauvoir's response article "Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism", and a number of interesting papers on this topic that take views rather different from that presented here. Jonathan Webber (ed), *Reading Sartre: on Phenomenology and Existentialism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010) contains recent scholarly discussions of Sartre's philosophy of freedom, including those by Matthew Eshleman, Sebastian Gardner, and Alan Thomas mentioned above. Jonathan Webber, *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Routledge, 2009) argues for an interpretation of Sartre's philosophy as a theory of character in which freedom is central but to which the libertarian indeterminist construal of that freedom is dispensable.