

Sartres theory of the
radical freedom of
consciousness
philosophy essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Among the many controversial and interesting claims Sartre is able to draw from his phenomenological approach his conclusion regarding the radical freedom of consciousness can be seen as being of far reaching importance. Not only does this account of human freedom impart on debates about determinism and politics but also the nature of the human condition and how we as conscious beings are able to experience our own decisions. In this essay I would like to critically discuss Sartre's conclusion regarding the radical freedom of consciousness by taking a journey through how he is able to arrive at this conclusion and critically assess whether this conclusion and its results are adequately justified by Sartre.

Sartre's concepts of nothingness and of action play a key role in his definition of human freedom. Sartre defines consciousness as existing simply by nihilating or separating itself from its past, so this central nihilating characteristic of consciousness is its mode of being, and Sartre calls this mode of being 'Freedom' (B&N 52). Hence why Sartre proclaims that consciousness is condemned to be free, as consciousness can only exist if it is free and this is what leads Sartre to the conclusion that all actions must consequently be free actions. Furthermore his notorious examples demonstrate the extent to which Sartre does truly want to claim that all human actions are taken freely, the soldier fleeing in panic, the exhausted mountain-hiker giving up or the prisoner betraying his comrades under torture are all actions which the agent commits to freely. The most important and significant aspect of Sartre's argument that all actions are free is the fact that freedom simply is the mode of being of consciousness. If we are conscious then we are necessarily free and because of this there is no way to

separate our concept of freedom from reality for there can't be any difference between the being of man and his being free (B&N: 25). So Sartre must resist defining freedom as any faculty of a human being and or even as it being an essential property of a human.

Sartre instead helps us to understand our own freedom through the negativity of the for-itself, this nihilation allows Sartre to bring Freedom into the world through nothingness. A conscious being is separated from its past by this nothingness, this negation of the past is essentially Sartre's definition of freedom. By Phenomenological means Sartre believes we are necessarily conscious of this gap between being and our past as consciousness continually experiences itself as nihilation of its past being. As freedom is the being of consciousness consciousness ought to exist as consciousness of freedom, Sartre believes this takes the form of seeing ourselves as being both our past and future and as not being them. Awareness of this fact causes us to experience anguish and it is in these feelings of anguish that man gets his consciousness of freedom.

Sartre uses this emotion of anguish before my own freedom as further proof of the radical freedom of consciousness. As he says the man suffering from vertigo is not so much afraid of falling but of his unknown future, knowing that he cannot be determined he imagines the possibilities of his freedom playing out in his mind's eye and it is the anguish caused by the thought that he is free to throw himself over the ledge that causes anguish, it is mans knowledge that he is free to choose his actions and that his freedom can be limited by nothing other than itself (B&N 39-32). Furthermore it is the radical freedom of consciousness that causes this anguish when I apprehend myself

<https://assignbuster.com/sartres-theory-of-the-radical-freedom-of-consciousness-philosophy-essay/>

knowing that I am not the self which I will be, I am separated from it by Nothingness and consequently I am free.

Sartre's definition of action is one of the key features that allow him to place all these examples no matter how controversial within the same definition of freedom. Action is defined by Sartre as having 3 features and in understanding these we can gain a better appreciation of how Sartre understands freedom and how this definition can be reconciled with potential conflicts with regards to personal human characteristics or with determinism.

All actions essentially have a motif, which can be translated as reason, but these reasons only come to light in virtue of a project or comprehensive end (fin) an agent has. All ends have a nested structure with each end leading to another so in order to fully and completely understand an action we need to look beyond the apparent ends implied by the act until we discover that end which does not imply another end but refers only to itself - this final end is a person's fundamental project which is manifested directly or indirectly by all our specific ends. The third essential feature is an actions mobile or decision this is the deciding moment when an agent chooses to act upon the reason in light of their own ends. As all consciousness involves nothingness and reference to what is currently not the case what is now the case must be lacking in something that the end would make complete so to be conscious of an end, therefore, is to desire it (McInerney, 1979 p. 665).

As the process outlined above is part of non-thetic consciousness we are only aware of it pre-reflectively and so all actions including those done non-deliberately have this same structure. So in the case of the example of the

soldier fleeing in panic his emotion (fear) is a consciousness of preserving his own life and avoiding enemy attacks becomes his reason and in light of this his end, which was revealed to him through his fear, his decision to run away is his effective motive. As we can see the soldiers situation has meaning for him only through his project (B&N 574). The question that I will focus upon for the remainder of this essay is whether or not there is genuine reason for Sartre to declare that actions such as these which are often not deliberate or rationally considered but instead done from emotion are free choices that we make.

There is a fourth feature of freedom which is essential to it is the undetermined or unforeseeable nature of our projects. We cannot be aware of our future projects from our own perspective as only reflectively we know that no matter how firm our commitment to an end or project has been in the past it is always possible that it could change due to the fact that this end is chosen by consciousness and our consciousness is necessarily free. Whilst we might think that desiring the means to an end is derivable from desiring that end as we are free to change our projects having an end does not secure or imply that an agent will continue to pursue that end, for everything that we take for granted and work towards may change tomorrow in the light of something happening that overthrows our current commitments. If we take Sartre's theory of freedom to be absolutely denying that our actions and importantly our fundamental projects cannot be given a complete and deterministic causal explanation then we need to explain how we come to ever change our fundamental projects or even acquire the ends that we have.

Despite having these fundamental projects which we commit to and continually work towards we are not constrained by them, the radical freedom of consciousness permits us to change these ends at any time and so change our actions and reactions to situations. However the extent to which we actually experience ourselves as choosing our fundamental projects is scarce. Even Sartre discusses our change of end as a ' sudden metamorphosis' (B&N 497) and these are events that are usually taken as happening to me rather than of my choosing. Sartre is committed to this claim that we must choose our fundamental projects if his conception of freedom is to remain as all our actions which are considered free necessarily aim at our fundamental projects. But in a world where we are free to change our ends how do we even have a concept of the future, our fundamental projects do naturally endure through time and whilst Sartre does not explicitly talk of two distinct types of projection of ends unlike our fundamental projects our ordinary ends and actions are not permanent or enduring (B&N 440) Sartre does seem to presuppose talk of our fundamental projects as not being at stake at every moment and we are not constantly in a state of recreating it, this is the only way we can have any justifiable understand of what the future will be like(McInerney p668).

For Sartre, as our motives manifest our freely chosen projects those motives themselves must already be freely chosen however this structure seems susceptible to David Hume criticism of the liberty of indifference, that the indeterministic nature of our fundamental projects is ' the very same thing with chance' (Treatise, book 2 part 3 1). If this is true we would have no control over the choice of our projects, but this is certainly not the way we

experience our goals, ambitions or projects in life. Whilst Hume's original criticism may traditionally focus upon the causal relation between motives and actions and Sartre's radical freedom does not require unmotivated actions, Hume's objection instead can be used to target Sartre's idea that the motives for an action do not necessitate that action (B&N 492) and in this way we can be said to 'choose' our projects.

Perhaps if we took all an agents projects as a totality whose effective synthesis amounts to their fundamental project (B&N 469) collectively they would determine the way in which any given project is pursued however the central problem lies in the fact that my earliest projects must have been chosen without motivations (so it is a matter of chance whether I pursue these projects) but also that it is down to chance at any given moment whether my motives are acted upon or abandoned. It now seems incoherent to talk of us choosing our projects if the commitment of projects is entirely unmotivated and Sartre agrees that an action must be motivated but this is impossible in choosing your earliest projects (Follesdal 1981, 'Sartre on Freedom', p. 402)

// The very structure of projects involves nothingness or some thing which does not have being (B&N 435) and since casual determination is only a way in which being can be affected by one another the presence of nothingness in our projects shows they can not be casually determined (B&N 46-9).

In opposing common philosophical views such as determinism Sartre holds that by the very nature of the freedom of consciousness as far as it is concerned nothing outside of my awareness is capable of determining me.

This also includes my genetic background or brain processes that I am unaware of, according to Sartre I can only be determined by things that appear to my consciousness, there is no way I could feel determined by these unknown forces as if I was then they would register in my consciousness.

This would mean we are free in all situations even those where we are physically unable to will or commit to actions that we choose, the prisoner for example cannot escape even if he wills it but he is free to choose how to consciously react to the situation and he is free to choose his fundamental project; if he freely makes it his fundamental project to escape his freedom may be limited, but only by itself with reference to this freely chosen end (B&N 487). Your situation, or facticity, rather than a limit is instead a condition of your freedom, in order for us to be able to act at all the facticity of our situation and of the world must pose some resistance, only then does an agent see the world as threatening or favourable and consequently motivating. This resistance then provides something to transcend and without it we would be unable to act freely, as Sartre says: "there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom" (B&N 489).

Whilst Sartre's account of our own freedom from a phenomenological and first person perspective may seem true this account of freedom seems to be in tension with determinism. As Sartre's concept of freedom is so radical at first glance it often seems that Sartre is denying determinism but this isn't necessarily true. There may be a third way where we are able to read

Sartre's account of freedom as a form of compatibilism. Whilst we have seen <https://assignbuster.com/sartres-theory-of-the-radical-freedom-of-consciousness-philosophy-essay/>

that from a third person perspective, or will all the relevant causal information we may be entirely predictable this is not a perspective we can adopt when we act pre-reflectively. Instead we are acting in response to reasons and ends, only reflectively would it ever be possible to see ourselves as completely determined irrespective of our ends.

I would support a stronger interpretation of Sartre and believe an almost non-compatibilist account is justifiable. Sartre's claim that as long as I am an agent and a 'self' determinism is in all practicality an illusion to me this is because to think of myself as causally determined is an incoherent description of myself as it forces me to consider myself as something other than a 'self'. Trying to somehow experience myself as determined denies what it is to be a conscious being, namely to be free, instead determinism considers us as organisms, rather than as selves. If the mode of being of consciousness simply is freedom and a deterministic approach to ourselves is incoherent it leads to the only conclusion that Sartre's radical freedom of consciousness is justifiable even in the face of a physicalist-determinist worldview.

In discussing Sartre's account of the radical freedom of consciousness we have seen how he is able to bind the for-itself of being so closely with freedom that it remains impossible for one to exist without the other and this is adequately justified through his concept of Nothingness. Furthermore we have seen how this conception of freedom is able to be defended against common conceptions of traditional freedom; such as to be free is to be able to do or achieve what one wants and to be free is to be able to act differently

from how one chooses act, even if everything leading up to the action remains unchanged.

In the first case Sartre effectively rejects this conception of freedom in the case of the prisoner who is unable to escape. The prisoner is still radically free as his inability to escape only impinges on his freedom if his fundamental project is such that he desires to escape. Our consciousness remains wholly free to change how we react to these situations and paradoxically we are free to limit our freedom. With respect to determinism both readings of Sartre including his incompatibilist account allow his account of freedom to survive. In conjunction with this his analysis of anguish and of bad faith provides a convincing account of the radical freedom of consciousness as we experience it in everyday life. With the exception of our fundamental projects which are seemingly vague and often unknowable to us this does add some tension in to his theory yet I believe his account survives as a convincing account of the freedom of consciousness.