FREEDOM AND NOTHINGNESS

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Jean-Paul Sartre offers a "new" definition, or a "redefinition" in the strict sense, of the term "Freedom."[1] In order to understand this new meaning or definition of "freedom," it is necessary to compare it to its "old" or traditional meanings and to the definitions of its opposed or complementary term "determinism" and its variants. Otherwise, the proposed definition becomes not "new," but only "different," not in fact addressed to the same meaning, concept, or problem. An example of this misdefinition would be the use of the term "God" to refer to "the ultimate force of the universe," "my personal feelings of a transcendent being," or "the design (itself) of the universe." These definitions do not refer to the traditional concept of God as debated by theist and atheist in Western Civilization and thus do not resolve or clarify this problem. Instead they simply evade it.

That redefinition is at all possible, on the other hand, is illustrated in the problem of free will versus determinism by the redefinition of "freedom" proposed by the Hume-Mill theorists and expounded in the twentieth century by Moritz Schlick. As will be shown in this case, the redefinition must be one which still relates to one of the original positions of the problem, and it will in all probability be such as to make the redefined term synonymous with its supposed opposite, thereby attempting to reduce one position to the other, solving the problem rather than evading it.

To illustrate both this principle of redefinition and to state the terms by which the Sartrean meaning of "freedom" is to be explored, it is necessary to define the traditional meanings of the terms used in the dispute as to the existence of a metaphysical "freedom" or "free will." The process of definition is simplified if "determinism" is defined first. Determinism is the theory that everything in the universe is entirely governed by causal laws, that is, that *every* event has a cause—*every* event, whether mental or physical, natural or moral, etc. Every human action is utimately involuntary, determined by other events. This position, determinism or "hard" determinism, espousing the absence of any free occurrence or event in the universe, has been propounded by such people as Baron Holbach. As opposed to this definition, the theory of "free will" or "freedom" (sometimes "indeterminism") proposes that there is in fact at least one free event in the universe, metaphysically free, uncaused, "spontaneous." The most famous of recent defenders of this doctrine is William James.

A third position, which has been called a "reconciling" position, is that taken by the Hume-Mill theorists and most recently and famously proposed by Moritz Schlick. This theory redefined the term "freedom" so that it refers to those *determined* acts in which the causes or determinations are not obvious, and is opposed not to determinism but to the term "compulsion," used to refer to those acts in which the causes *are* obvious. The proponents of this redefinition hope thereby to resolve the supposed contradiction of the free willist and the determinist. Since it does reduce "freedom" to a type of determined action, it is considered a form of determinism and is frequently called "soft" determinism. As deterministic, it is itself opposed by some philosophers who contend that they do not mean merely uncompelled when they say "free" and who still cling to the original definition of freedom. One such philosopher is C. A. Campbell. Lastly, it should be noted that whether or not one accepts this definition the term *is* redefined in the same context, thereby being a legitimate redefinition.

More recently, existentialist philosophy in general and in particular its foremost proponent, Jean-Paul Sartre, have offered yet another definition of the term "freedom." The purpose in this latest redefinition is to expose clearly that which humans "feel" or to which they refer when speaking of freedom, in order to demonstrate in this case to the determinists that it is *their* faulty definition which causes the problem (even though the determinist definition had been accepted hitherto by both sides in the disagreement). That is, the redefinition will demonstrate that there is a metaphysical freedom and rather than defining "freedom" away instead may very well define "determinism" out of existence. Unfortunately, existentialists do not seem to spend much effort at linguistic analysis or definition in the normal synonymous or analytic senses. Rather, definition is ostensive or by analogy. Thus one must turn to the examples and arguments given to assert the existence of freedom in order to determine the meaning of the term, instead of beginning with a clear definition and then proceeding to argue the existence of its referent.

There seem to be three major interpretations of "freedom" exemplified in existentialist or Sartrean writings. The first of these can be argued hardly to be metaphysical freedom, but instead to be "political" in nature. When Sartre speaks of Marxism or free men, he often means freedom in this sense.[2] This meaning is even more clearly involved in Simone de Beauvoir's paraphrasing of Sartre's ethics in her book, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.[3] When either she or Sartre imply that no man is free unless all are free or when they discuss the relative freedom of the worker under Marxist or capitalist systems, this "freedom" can easily be interpreted as merely political or economic in nature. It is freedom *from* political

tyranny or *from* poverty; at best it may be psychological in nature and be freedom *from* fear or other internal tyrannies. Man may be "free" *from* all of these and yet still be completely metaphysically unfree or determined. It may be possible for one to vote for his leaders, even vote for one of several contenders, yet his "vote" is completely caused by hereditary, historical, and environmental factors. One may be free from poverty or free from fear but this simply means that his time is not completely taken up in providing necessities or in obsessively avoiding certain situations. It is still the case that all the events in his lifetime are determined, caused.

This interpretation is usually not considered at all by traditional determinists or free willists. It is concerned with practical distinctions in everyday life and not the matter of choice that constitutes metaphysical freedom. It does, however, demonstrate at a superficial level the same sort of problem involved in the second interpretation of freedom as used by the existentialists. The traditional question is whether man is truly psychologically free, and not whether he is politically or economically free, or even free from what are abnormal obvious compulsions (as opposed to "determinations"). The existentialists and Sartre argue this second psychological interpretation of freedom in several examples also. Sartre's analyses of the act and of the project and why within the project one sees things as obstacles or aids are all concerned with arguing or demonstrating that one acts freely in these instances and/or at certain levels of human endeavor.[4]

There is nothing really new or convincing in these arguments. They are the same arguments advanced by the more traditional proponents of free will for some time, though perhaps now stated in more sophisticated and "existential" terms. As such they may be simply denied by hard determinists as untrue or misleading, or redefined by soft determinists as inaccurate or unsophisticated. The stalemate in the problem of free will and determinism remains, and the differences are those of attitudes toward "facts," not of correctible "mistakes" about the facts. The existentialists add nothing new here.

It is finally the third interpretation which constitutes a new definition which can be of some use in clarifying the nature of freedom. The best synonym for this usage of the term "freedom" by Sartre seems to be "subjectivity." In this most heavily relied upon interpretation Sartre apparently means by subjectivity the general self-awareness of the human being as opposed to the more specific, rationalistic, systematized "consciousness," although one might argue that he does refer to it as "Consciousness."[5] Sartre does use the term "consciousness" when discussing a freedom that ranges over the world. Still, it seems also true that he means

something other or more than the traditional or normal sense of consciousness as "thinking process," something more precisely described as "awareness" or subjectivity. Even in ranging over the world consciousness is free not in the sense that the terms have a common referent, but rather consciousness is described as free due to its element of subjectivity, not as consciousness *per se*. The use of "subjectivity" rather than "consciousness" may also avoid the dangers of falling prey to a superficial distinction between physical and psychological determinism, with consciousness being different only in its being non-physical, not in its lack of causality.

Subjectivity seems appropriate as the proposed definition of freedom because it is "non-thingness" that allows any meaning at all to freedom. "Things" are not free, but stand in material and causal relation to each other. They are dead, inert objects moved by forces external to themselves; they are totally manipulated. Thus it is the non-objective and subjective nature of consciousness which allows us to call it free. Indeed, it is subjectivity itself which *is* freedom, the sense which consciousness has of itself as not being a thing, of being *opposed* to the thingness of the world. Hence it is indeed the "no-thingness," the *nothingness* of consciousness which is its freedom. While it is true that freedom consists in this opposition to objects and in the feeling of standing over and against objectivity, it is also true that freedom is buttressed by this "thingness." It is only by "being" in such opposition that subjectivity has its reality, a reality in limits.

The famous example of the manacled slave would seem to support the contention that the existentialists actually mean subjectivity when speaking of freedom. Though his body is so chained as to be immovable, and though he is subjected to torture and humiliation, he still can remain "free" because no one can touch his inner self, his true being. In *The Flies*[6] Orestes tells Zeus, "You have no power to make me atone for an act I don't regard as a crime." Zeus replies, "If you *can* brag of freedom, why not praise the freedom of a prisoner languishing in fetters, a slave nailed to the cross?" Orestes answers, "Certainly. Why not?"

This is not simply a *conscious* defiance of one's situation, for one's consciousness obviously can be manipulated. One's consciousness can be touched, and torture experts can institute psychological tortures such as to make an individual atone for acts he doesn't consider crimes, or worse, make him consider them crimes after all. Thus there must be something deeper, more fundamental involved here than consciousness in the usual psychological sense. It is then one's awareness, his lack of being, his subjectivity which cannot be touched or manipulated because its structure is fluid. In consciousness there is no *thing* to be worked upon, either physically or psychologically.

It is probably the case that many people, concerned with the problem of their choices and responsibilities and unhappy with the traditional philosophical positions on freedom, will say after having freedom described to them as subjectivity, "At last! Yes, *that is* what I mean when I speak of my freedom, *that is* the sense in which I feel free." They will feel Sartre has done them and philosophy a great service. For a philosopher, however, that a description arouses an emotional response, even one of a "feeling" of rightness, surely is not enough. The description must also be explainable rationally, in the context of some system of thought. One way that a philosopher may do this in this case is to put this new descriptive definition in the context of the previously accepted ones.

If subjectivity is to be accepted as a legitimate redefinition of "freedom," possibly one which will resolve or dissipate the fundamental philosophical problem, then it must make reference to the original definitional positions and terminology. In this case, Sartre must be doing one of two things. He may be saying that his definition of freedom is one which will clarify the original free willist position in such a manner as to demonstrate an actual metaphysical free choice, thus declaring subjectivity to be free in the traditional sense. This probably is his intention, at least to some degree. If he is not doing this, then the only other legitimate alternative is to intend to show how and why men think they are free when they are not, i.e., a new version of soft determinism. Rather clearly, this is not Sartre's intention.

It may be, however, that Sartre is not attempting *either* of these "legitimate" alternatives. Patricia Sanborn, in her book *Existentialism*, says, "When Sartre redefines freedom . . . he is not merely changing the language used by his predecessors. Nor is he taking their views and tacking on a few additions. He offers a new definition, one which would be meaningful to a twentieth-century European."[7] This aptly worded passage illustrates the crux of the problem of Sartre's use of the word "freedom." In offering a "new definition . . . meaningful to a twentieth-century European," Sartre has apparently supposed the entire free willist controversy to be already settled (or perhaps meaningless) and is talking about something else, in which case his continued use of the word "freedom" is strange and confusing. For instance, if this is the case, Sartre could perfectly well be a determinist in the traditional sense and still be "free" in his own meaning of the term. He is not necessarily an anti-determinist, but rather the existence or non-existence of determinism is irrelevant to his argument. This also seems to be the Sartrean position to some degree.

Unfortunately, in defining freedom as subjectivity Sartre does not seem to hold either the position that this definition is a clarification of the traditional term "freedom" or the position that the free willist controversy

is irrelevant to this definition in such a manner that each position is held to some degree. Rather, he apparently wishes to hold both positions completely and exclusively (which may be just as well, as they probably are logically mutually exclusive). If he held only the position that subjectivity was a clarification of metaphysical freedom, his redefinition is legitimate, though perhaps wrong. He won't convince a determinist by these arguments. If he holds that subjectivity is a new definition, to which the old controversy is irrelevant, he is probably accurate in his description of the nature of man, but his redefinition of freedom is illegitimate. In trying to hold both positions simultaneously, he equivocates and negates them both.

NOTES

[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* trans. and with intro. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), pp. 433-56, *passim*.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 434-36.

[3] Simone de Beauvior, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1964), pp. 148-49.

[4] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 433-52, 481-89.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 439-40, 483-85.

[6] Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Flies," *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 116.

[7] Patricia F. Sanborn, *Existentialism*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., Publishers, 1968), p. 33.

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