

METAPHYSICAL FREEDOM FROM THE PRISM OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE: A REFLECTION

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Abstract

This work on “Metaphysical Freedom from the Prism of J.P Sartre: A Reflection” sets to reflect on Sartre’s notion of metaphysical freedom and authentic existence. Sartre's existentialist philosophy emphasizes the central role of metaphysical freedom in defining human existence. Metaphysical freedom is the inherent condition of human beings as radically free agents, unbound by any predetermined essence or nature. Sartre posits that inanimate objects or animals, unlike humans, are condemned to be free, meaning that they are thrust into the world without a given purpose and must define themselves through their actions and choices. This freedom, however, is both a source of empowerment and a burden, as it carries the responsibility of shaping one's own identity and values without recourse to any absolute, external moral framework. Using the method of critical reflection, it becomes apparent in this paper that there is a big difference in Sartre’s understanding of freedom as an authentic existence. Authentic existence emerges from the acceptance and full acknowledgement of freedom. To live authentically, according to Sartre, is to embrace the absence of any predefined essence and it involves taking full responsibility for one's choices, thereby creating oneself through acts of will. In contrast, inauthentic existence, or "bad faith" occurs when an individual denies or flees from this freedom, conforming to societal expectations or adopting false identities to escape the anxiety that comes with absolute freedom. Using method of critical reflection, this work investigates the philosophy of existentialism, which is a core philosophical tradition, in which Sartre understands his notion of freedom. This includes his notion of the selfsame subject. This work juxtaposes the same with metaphysical freedom and authentic existence and thus challenges individuals to live deliberately and intentionally, recognizing that their essence is not fixed but continually created through their decisions. This existentialist view invites a deep reflection on the nature of human freedom, responsibility, and the potential for living a life that is truly one's own. The tension between the burden of freedom and the pursuit of authenticity underpins much of Sartre's work, making his philosophy a compelling exploration of what it means to exist as a free and self-defining individual in a contingent world.

Keywords: Sartre, Existentialism, Metaphysical freedom, Authenticity, Bad faith, Responsibility.

Introduction

Freedom is a versatile and interesting subject in human history and assumes a significant meaning in different traditions of philosophy. It is always an issue that has generated many controversies in the world of philosophy and beyond. However, many people believe that freedom is a reality, as they assume that they are free when they are not under any kind of hindrance. In philosophy, freedom is a moral, social and existential concept which permeates

every aspect of human condition, because, for Sartre, existence is freedom. Every individual has a choice, and it is this choice that characterizes being. Being's very possibility has been argued against when certain things, like determinism, are brought into focus. Since metaphysical freedom exists we know this because we experience choosing and moral freedom is possible since some moral goals are objectively good, we need a worldview which allows both kinds of freedom. It must accept that human beings can transcend the confines of the material cosmos. It must also grant humans the ability to act concerning objective moral values.

Freedom Defined

The concept of human freedom is linked closely to the ideas of responsibility and autonomy and is of great interest to philosophers, despite the general tendency to gloss over it, as many of them, like Locke, Sartre, and others have delved into ramifications and entailment of freedom. As should be expected, the concept has been viewed within the varied philosophical positions and schools of thought. There are also interpretations and understandings about its treatment. While many individuals belong to the schools of thought that looks at the concepts of freedom generally, it is the wavelength of existentialism that the concept has become quite topical and forms the grounded leitmotif of their engagements. Being a philosophical tradition that takes the issues of concrete human existence seriously, as the existentialists generally maintain that human existence precedes any ontological consideration, man is seen as a being that is generally free and whose essence, if any, is freedom.

One of the most outstanding individuals within the existentialist school, arguably, Jean-Paul Sartre, nudges the idea of freedom to be a supreme pedestal as the essence of man. According to him, man is thrown into the world and confronted with a choice in the exercise of his freedom, to define oneself and one's subsequent essence. There are choices, according to the tenets of existentialism, which states unequivocally that man is free. Sartre's idea of freedom initially tended to be wholly that of the mind or will, which he equated with consciousness, but later extended it to include concrete situations where choice has been made. Sartre also holds that man is the sole author of his destiny, and determinism is non-existent and has no effect on man's self-actualization. For Sartre, authenticity involves the awareness that, because we are always free to transform our lives through our decisions, if we maintain a particular identity through time; this is because we are choosing that identity at each moment. Freedom, for Sartre, is not just the freedom to do something, but the type that confers on someone the unmitigated and inalienable right to always make a choice (Sartre, 1943: 673). This, however, creates anxiety and anguish, individuals flee in self-deception and continue leading in inauthenticity. Existence is the state of being alive or being real.

An authentic life is one where our needs are met, we feel fulfilled, we experience self-actualization, and we flourish in it. Authenticity is a concept of personality, in existentialism, authenticity is the degree to which a person's actions are congruent with their values and desires, despite external pressures to social conformity. Laslie Stevenson explores various philosophical perspectives on human nature, including existentialism, where he discusses the significance of individual freedom in leading an authentic life. "The only authentic and genuine way of life is that which is freely chosen by everyone for himself" (Stevenson, 1974: 8). Authenticity as a philosophical concept denotes the genuine, original and true state of human existence. Put it simply, authenticity means you are true to your

personality, values and spirit, regardless of the pressure that you are under to act otherwise. Authenticity involves the awareness that we are always free to transform our lives through our decisions, if we maintain a particular identity through time, this is because we are choosing that identity at each moment. Authenticity has always been associated with freedom. If we are free to express our true selves and feelings, then we are also initiating an act of emancipation.

Sartre's Metaphysical Freedom

Sartre famously asserts that "humans are condemned to be free", emphasizing that freedom is both an opportunity and a heavy responsibility. Unlike objects designed for a specific function, people must shape their own identities and values without relying on external structures. Sartre's exploration of freedom is prominently displayed in his work, *Being and Nothingness*, where he gives an ontological subtlety of the idea. In his discourse on freedom, Sartre argues that every act is driven by a cause or motive. He asserts that it is impossible to find an act without a motive but clarifies that this does not, in any way, imply that the motive directly causes the act. Rather, the motive is an essential component of the act itself. This viewpoint is expressed in his book, *Being and Nothingness* (1943:465). Clearly, Sartre aims to establish a connection between cause and effect to emphasize that freedom is not caused or determined, as determinists believe. According to him, though the definition of a thing implies making explicit the structures of such a thing's essence, the problem that comes with the definition of freedom, however, is that it has no essence: "Now freedom has no essence. It is not subject to any logical necessity; we must say of it what Heidegger said of *Dasein* in general. In its existence commands essence" (Sartre, 1943: 486).

Walter T. Stace, in his work entitled *The Problem of Free Will*, argues that the confusion stems from a faulty definition of freewill, according to him, freedom should not be defined as the ability to act without any cause or as the ability to have done otherwise in an absolute sense. Instead, free will should be understood as the ability to act according to one's desires. While there is determinism, there is also the reality of free will (Stace, 2012). He (Stace) distinguishes between free and unfree acts, that is, between free acts and those that are determined: free acts are all caused by desires, motives or some sort of internal psychological states of the agent's mind; unfree acts, on the other hand, are all caused by physical forces or physical conditions outside the agent. In Sartre's work, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1948). Sartre argues that existentialists reject the notion that passion has a significant impact on our acts; instead, they think that individuals are accountable for their passions:

For-itself manifests as the autonomous basis for both its emotions and its volition. I have a sense of liberation via my fear, as it allows me to exercise my freedom. I willingly subject myself to dread and consciously select to be scared in specific situations. In different situations, I will be intentionally and bravely present, and I will have invested all my freedom in my courage (1948: p.22).

In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre asserts that existentialists hold the belief that individuals are not shaped by inherited, environmental, sociological, biological or psychological circumstances, but rather by their conscious choice to be who they are. According to him, a person is considered a coward only on the basis of their acts of cowardice, and they should be responsible for their actions or lack thereof. In addition, he

states that the individual's cowardice is not attributed to any physical or psychological factors, but rather to their own actions and choices. Consequently, everyone has responsibility for their condition of existence and behavior.

In Sartre's opinion, human beings always try to run away from the reality of their freedom, even though their very existence speaks of the preponderance of it. Thus, some humans believe that they are fated or determined through being. But Sartre maintains that human reality may be defined as a being that in its being its freedom is at stake because human reality perpetually tries to refuse to recognize freedom. Accordingly, he declares that "Man is free because he exists as a presence to himself, rather than being confined to a fixed identity" (Sartre, 1946: 29). Furthermore, Sartre observes that man's freedom comes from his ability to choose and his existence as a conscious being. He emphasizes that man does not have a predetermined nature, as this would support determinism. Instead, man has the potential to become something different from what he currently is. Sartre defines being as the act of consciously choosing to be oneself, without any external influence. This explains why Sartre rejects Descartes' dualism, which posits the coexistence of free choice and determined human desires, a concept previously explored by the ancient stoics. As expected, Sartre argues that this duality is riddled with several difficulties. He maintains that such a division is unimaginable inside the core unity of the psyche. He queries: "How can we conceptualize a being that is both interconnected and dependent on other entities, but exists independently, and is self-revealing?" (Sartre, 1943: 186).

In *Ethics of Authenticity* (1991: 721-2), Charles Taylor illustrates the disparity between choice and freedom. He describes a destitute individual who reluctantly agrees to undertake demeaning, poorly paid work just to fulfill their fundamental needs. According to Taylor, while the person does have the option to either accept the poorly paid job or face starvation, but in this situation, the available choice is lacking in humanity. This demonstrates that choice and freedom are not always interchangeable, but there are situations where they may be. The degree of their synonym would be contingent upon the level of compassion inherent in the alternatives from which decisions are to be made. In this scenario, although freedom pertains to an act of making choices, true freedom does not exist when the available options are not genuine and beneficial.

Authentic Existence Vs Bad Faith

The word "authentic" comes from the Greek *authentikos* meaning "genuine", "original", or "principal". This in turn, derives from the Latin *authentēs*, meaning "one who acts with authority" or "one who does something by his own hand". Sartre contrasts authentic existence with bad faith (*mauvaise foi*), a form of self-deception, where individuals deny their freedom to avoid responsibility. In *Being and Nothingness*, he provides the famous example of a waiter who performs his duties with exaggerated precision, acting as though he is merely a waiter and nothing more (Sartre, 1943:102). This illustrates bad faith: the attempt to reduce oneself to a fixed identity rather than embracing the openness of existence.

Soren Kierkegaard, often regarded as the father of existentialism, profoundly explores the concept of authenticity, emphasizing that living authentically requires individual to confront their inner fears, doubt, and anxieties, making choices based on their true convictions rather than simply conforming to societal expectations. In his book, *The Sickness Unto Death* (1980), Kierkegaard introduces the notion of despair, which he defines as the condition that arises when a person is disconnected from their true self. This misalignment

can take different forms, such as failing to embrace one's real identity or realizing that one's existence lacks true meaning. His idea about authenticity focuses on the struggle individuals face in living in accordance with their true nature, as opposed to succumbing to external pressures. Kierkegaard believes that each person has a unique inner purpose, often called "subjective truth", which can only be discovered through personal reflection, faith, and a deep commitment to one's existence. Although Kierkegaard does not explicitly use the term "bad faith", his analysis of authenticity provides a foundation for later discussions on self-deception and inauthenticity. He argues that by confronting despair and embracing one's genuine self, individuals can achieve a more meaningful and truthful existence. In the novel, *Nausea* (1966), Sartre argues that the existence of man is enigmatic and contradictory and cannot be easily defined or explained by any concise formula. Human beings do not just exist in a state of pure existence, but they have the potential to recognize and understand their existence as such through the phenomenon of nausea. According to Heidegger, in his work, *Being and Time* (1943), with terms like ontology, being, existence and phenomenology are attributed to human beings, but the question arises: what is it to be oneself, at one with oneself, or truly representing oneself? In Heidegger's view, we exist for the sake of ourselves: enacting roles and expressing character traits which contribute to realizing a certain image of what it is to humans in our cases.

Charles Taylor, in his work, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991), successfully articulates the sources of the self. Taylor makes a case for retaining the concept of authenticity and the practices associated with it because the original and undistorted idea of authenticity contains an important element of self-transcendence. Unsatisfied with the widespread criticism of authenticity as an adequate ethical orientation, Taylor sets out to prove that authenticity does not necessarily lead to asceticism or self-indulgence, but the justified criticism of self-indulgent form of the idea does not justify the complete condemnation of the idea itself. In Taylor's opinion, restoring an undistorted version, could guard against meaninglessness, which is one of the malaise of modernity which Taylor regards as something tied to trivialized form of the culture of authenticity.

According to Emmanuel I. Archibong in his work entitled: *Beautiful Metaphysics: A Western and African Tapestry*, the problem stems from deep question about the relationship and potential disconnect between the essential properties of an entity and its actual existence. This issue has roots in Platonic forms as well as medieval scholasticism. In the Middle Ages, philosophers and theologians wrestled with whether "essence precedes existence" or vice versa in trying to reconcile faith and reason (Etim and Archibong, 22). Questions arose around contingent versus necessary beings and between actual and possible beings. For Kierkegaard, the subjective thinker is an existing individual, for whom the question of one's existence is most important. Against Hegelian rationalism, Kierkegaard positions lived existence as more fundamental than abstract essences. Sartre further popularizes existentialist themes around the primacy of "existence before essence" (Sartre, 1948: 26). This suggests that for human beings, no predefined essence or design dictates identity, rather radical freedom leaves individuals to determine their essence. For Sartre, subjectivity and contingency take priority over conceptual or divine essence that would limit self-determined existence (Archibong, 2024:64).

Reading through Elijah John's *Man and Knowledge: Issues in Contemporary Philosophy* (2024), it can be discovered that Sartre's observation concerning human freedom and responsibility cannot be overemphasized. Accordingly, John submits that since men are without nature, Sartre maintains that man's essence is nothing without

existence. That is, man is nothingness or that man is in a state of not beingness, or of no beingness. Sahakian understands this concept of nothingness of being when he declares: "Nothingness enters the world through human existence. Nothingness is dependent upon being for its very existence" (1969:345). Furthermore, it is also observed that the character of nothingness is what Sartre refers to as freedom or free consciousness. This implies that man is fundamentally free. Thus, man is condemned to be free, a fate which he cannot escape (John, 2024:73). In Sartre's opinion, man is a being whose existence precedes essence that is, man does not have any essence before existence; rather man exists first of all and then creates his own essence. In his very words, John submits that "man exists and later becomes his essential self by what he is" (John, 2024:49).

Freedom, Choice and Responsibility

Freedom and responsibility are two concepts that are so dear to the heart of Sartre. In fact, freedom is regarded as the very structure of man. In his *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1969:444), maintains that freedom is identical with one's existence. Hence, freedom cannot be acquired as Hegel suggested, since it is inseparable from man's basic condition of existence. And it is this freedom that is the permanent capacity for self-determination, self-orientation and self-detachment (John, 2024:51). Closely associated with the concept of freedom is responsibility. In other words, man's freedom is inseparable from responsibility. A person is free to engage himself in any activity of his choice or to make himself what he wants to be, but he must be responsible for whatever comes out of his freely chosen actions. This shows that there is nothing like objective values, for it is man who confers values and meaning on things and into existence by reason of his free choices (John, 2024:52). According to Sartre, freedom is always equivalent to responsibility, and this is not limited to one's own actions and choices but across all humanity. As for the relation between freedom and responsibility, Sartre claims that it is such a relationship that makes human beings fall into bad-faith. The beings that are conscious of their freedom are also conscious of their responsibility; that means, it is man who must struggle for the results and consequences of his conscious and free actions. The idea of abandonment is a prominent element within the existentialist school of thinking.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus (2013), examines the absurd clash between humanity's search for the meaning and the universe's silence. Rather than leading to despair, this awareness provides a deeper understanding of personal freedom, decision making, and accountability. Accepting that life has no inherent purpose frees individuals from societal expectations and imposed meaning. This recognition enables true autonomy, allowing one to live authentically without seeking external approval or conforming to predefined roles. In an absurd world, individuals must determine their own path rather than relying on external guidance or divine intervention. Personal values and decision-making, reinforcing the necessity of activity shaping one's life. In support of Sartre, Camus states that freedom comes accountability. Since there is no predetermined fate or higher power dictating life's events, individuals must take full responsibility for their actions and their consequences, fully embracing the weight of their choices. These ideas are conveyed through the figure of Sisyphus, depicting him as the ultimate absurd who finds fulfillment in consciously accepting his endless struggle. In essence, someone who lives with the absurd in full view wins for themselves a kind of freedom that is, freedom from false hope and beliefs. Skepticism stems back to previous rationalist philosophy but is distinguished by maintaining that there is only one truth: the absurd (Camus, 2013:192)

If one chooses freedom with its responsibility, then that becomes the virtuous side of freedom and consciousness because it is an affirmation of life and realization of individual consciousness. However, if one escapes from such a struggle for responsibility, this means one does not choose to be free and falls in bad faith. What if one accepts bad faith as something good? As Sartre pointed out, on choice for freedom, such a question can be raised to challenge the existentialist conception of freedom. However, this question is irrelevant and a product of a misunderstanding of Sartre because he conceives freedom as a value. Sartre thinks that bad faith is the opposite of freedom, an act of consciousness. But even at that, it cannot be claimed that a man who is in bad faith is not free. For Sartre, man is condemned to freedom; therefore, anyone in bad faith is also free in principle. However, when a man lie to oneself and does not choose to act in the way of freedom, that means he does not realize or perform his freedom that he is conscious of. In that sense, the issue is not goodness or badness.

Sartre values freedom and theorizes about its existence and the possibility of its realization and the way to live by it. A man only escapes the realization or actualization of freedom by escaping the action to realize freedom and existence. Since the action for freedom is always related to responsibility, bad faith entails escaping from responsibility but also staying in the first-degree consciousness and always lying to oneself. In addition, Sartre states that first-degree consciousness does not give us pride of being human because it differentiates us from animals and thus, the being-in-itself arises only in second-degree consciousness. Bad faith refers to acceptance of living in self-deception in that he is free and he is responsible for the world and himself as a way of being. If one's life is composed of one's choices or actions that are freely projected by oneself, then freedom refers to the fact that man is the author of his own life, and he is responsible for the consequences or situations of freedom. It must be stated that Sartre's concept of responsibility is closely linked to his philosophy of freedom. In Sartre's view, human beings possess radical freedom and the power to shape their existence through their choices and actions – total freedom brings total responsibility. However, individuals often engage in 'bad faith' as a means of escaping the anxiety and responsibility that accompany this freedom. With no higher tribunal for evaluating reasons for acting, we are entirely responsible for what we do: we have no excuses behind us nor justifications before us.

It requires us to be honest with ourselves. We must live in accordance with our values and beliefs. This means, acknowledging desires, ambitions and taking action to fulfill them. Sartre believes that acting in good faith is a way of embracing one's freedom and taking control of one's own life, rather than simply allowing life to happen to us. Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. This provides a powerful framework for understanding the human condition and offers a compelling argument for the importance of embracing one's freedom and responsibility. Whether one is a student, a worker, an artist, or a parent, the principles of good faith can be applied to every aspect of life and can help individuals to live a more meaningful, fulfilling, and authentic life. Sartre's ideas about good faith are closely linked to his views on the creation of values.

Conclusion

Throughout the discussions, the notion of freedom encompasses more than meets the eye. A deeper examination reveals that it includes the potential for its absence, particularly when considered against the backdrop of determinism. While existentialists, notably, Sartre, may amplify the extent of human freedom, they correctly assert that individuals are a collection

of possibilities capable of navigating their paths within the constraints imposed by external factors. But on a serious note, human freedom is inherently limited rather than absolute. We are influenced by various elements, including our inherent nature, which shape how we exercise our will. Nonetheless, we retain the ability to shape our lives and surroundings within the parameters of our freedom. Absolute freedom is not a prerequisite for experiencing freedom, as we are inherently complete beings. Hence, Sartre's concept of metaphysical freedom urges us to embrace authenticity by acknowledging the full implications of our freedom. Living authentically involves not adhering to a preordained route but rather continuously shaping and reshaping our essence through our choices. The challenge posed by Sartre's philosophy is to live without justification, fully cognizant of our freedom, and to construct a life that embodies our genuine values, even amidst the inherent meaninglessness of existence. In examining Sartre's concepts of metaphysical freedom and authentic existence, analyzing their implications and critiques, this work reflects on the tension between freedom and determinism, the burden of responsibility, and the practicality of living authentically. This reflection highlighted the relevance of Sartre's philosophy to contemporary issues in our societies, particularly in the African context of emphasizing the importance of agency, identity and responsibility in navigating social and existential challenges.

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