Akademeia (2011) 1(1): ea108

Humanities

ESSAY

Exploring Sartrean Freedom

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In our everyday, personal lives, do we freely choose our actions and attitudes, or is our behaviour determined by factors outside our control? Freedom is an emotive concept relating to rights, entitlements, possibilities and limitations. It is a concept fraught with ambiguity and complexity, and is interpreted differently from a subjective and objective point of view. This paper explores human freedom against the backdrop of Sartre's existential position. It addresses the paradox inherent in Sartre's philosophy of freedom whereby responsibility and accountability foreground the individual's experience of freedom and choice. The strengths and weaknesses of Sartre's position as an existentialist thinker are discussed through an examination of their application and relevance to lived experience as opposed to theoretical abstraction.

KEYWORDS: Choice; Ethics; Freedom; Jean-Paul Sartre; Responsibility

As individuals and social beings we desire the freedom to think, choose and act according to our own point of view, conscience or moral code. Is personal autonomy a universal human right, or does it depend on social, cultural, legal and institutional precepts and moral codes? Does it apply to children, the elderly, those deemed 'mentally unfit' and in other situations where 'expert opinion' weighs in to decide what is best? Most individuals have been in situations where there are barriers to self-expression or dissent with the prevailing opinion. These can be situations of vulnerability resulting from a perceived or a real imbalance of power. A patient in a hospital is vulnerably dependent on the good-will of the caregivers, doctors and nurses who administer necessary medical and physical attention. In most cases, this care is tendered with empathy, kindness and sensitivity to the individual's dignity and vulnerability. However, most patients sense that behaviours such as gratitude and compliance are expected and failure to satisfy these expectations may have consequences. Similar situations prevail in prisons, orphanages, nursing homes and work or family constellations. Sometimes, it appears that 'human rights' do not extend to all humans.

The conflict between individual freedom and social constraint remains a contentious subject of philosophical and psychoanalytical debate. Freud's essay, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, explores the inevitable conflict between freedom, drives of the individual and the repression and curtailment imposed by civilized society: 'it is a conflict, then, between what the drive demands and what reality forbids' (Freud, 2006: 64). The protective and regulating authority of society places the well-being of the community above the instinctual strivings of the individual; therefore, according to Freud, 'individual liberty is not an asset of civilization' (Freud, 2002: 32). Scottish psychoanalyst, R.D. Laing, focused on the impact of environmental conditions on mental health and the culturally and socially based interpretations of sanity and insanity which are projected onto individuals. Laing describes 'normality' as a state of unwitting complicity in 'social phantasy systems', wherein shared assumptions about reality define the perspectives of a particular group, culture, or any powerful majority: 'We see the shadows, but take

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Received: 03 May 2011; **Accepted:** 30 May 2011

them for the substance' (Laing, 1999: 33). The social and cultural constraints which inevitably limit human freedom may be perceived as necessary and beneficial; however, their power can be sourced in subtle or hidden ideologies which assume an unquestioned acceptance in any given culture or time. The French theorist, Michel Foucault, in his critical studies of social institutions, explains how norms are defined by institutional exercise of power and control. His outline of the history of disciplinary institutions such as prisons, schools and mental hospitals, points to motivations and justifications for social and physical exclusion throughout the ages. The work of writers like Freud, Laing and Foucault raise important questions regarding the reality of individual freedom and autonomy, and the ambiguities that may arise from interpreting these concepts.

The contemporary psychiatrist and philosopher, Thomas Szasz introduced radical arguments pertaining to efforts by the state and in particular by the world of psychiatry to curtail and limit personal autonomy and responsibility. The titles of some of his books offer a glimpse of Szasz's ideas: In *The Medicalization of Everyday Life* Szasz points to the ever-increasing tendency to consider 'problems in living' such as sadness, anger, loneliness and others as medical problems needing medical and especially pharmaceutical solutions; the paradox of *Cruel Compassion: Psychiatric Control of Society's Unwanted* speaks for itself; and *The Myth of Mental Illness* provides a damning indictment of the labels and treatments imposed on individuals throughout the history of psychiatry. Underlying all of his work is Szasz's unwavering belief in the freedom of the individual to decide for him or herself; this interpretation of human freedom extends to the right to drugs, the right to suicide and the right to refuse medical or psychiatric treatment, and this stance has evoked responses ranging from theoretical disagreement to personal ridicule. The concept of freedom, as understood by Szasz, also refers to its intrinsic foundation which is personal responsibility for one's actions; thus, Szasz calls for the abolition of the insanity plea in legal proceedings. The other side of freedom is the impossibility of excuses or abdication of personal responsibility.

In relatively 'normal' situations, in our private and personal lives, do we freely choose who we are and what we do? According to the French existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, this freedom is the chief characteristic of the human condition. Sartre rejects any idea that we, or our actions, are determined by forces outside our control; biology, biography, personality or situation cannot be called upon as excuses or explanations for our actions: 'there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom' (Sartre, 1987: 23). Here, we have a very different understanding of human nature or the human condition from that put forward by Freud. Indeed, Sartre rejects emphatically one of the corner-stones of Freudian psychoanalysis, the unconscious, arguing that, on some level, we exercise a choice regarding the material which is repressed out of conscious awareness. Thus, the unconscious cannot be called upon as an excuse for our actions or behaviour. This stance disavows the possibility that our choices may sometimes result from unconscious wishes or fears, early influences, learned behaviours, or the subtle dictates of the superego as defined by Freud. The impacts of past experiences or ideologically conditioned assumptions in the cultural and moral realms, do not, according to Sartre, dissipate our autonomy and our responsibility for our choices, decisions and behaviours.

Sartre, as an existentialist, rejects any notion of a pre-given meaning to life, either the individual life or life in general: 'Man makes himself. He isn't ready made at the start' (Sartre, 1987: 43). It may be argued that this proclamation of self-creation is a theoretical abstraction which fails to accommodate the conditions of dependency into which the individual is born. According to this argument, there is no tabula rasa onto which an individual may choose to sketch the essentials of his/her existence. The child enters a world which is already interpreted, a world which is already conditioned by rules of language, inter-relationships and conditions of survival. Thus, individual identity is closely dependent upon recognition and acceptance from others and the development of the self is a process involving self and others. Sartre's existentialism does not appear to adequately deal with the complexity of inter-dependence and inter-relationship.

Sartre claims that 'existence precedes essence' (Sartre, 1987: 13), whereby there are no pre-established conditions or essentials regarding human nature; each person creates his/her own essence or meaning in an ongoing process of choice, decision and action. This is Sartre's interpretation of the existential position resulting from philosophical assumptions regarding the death of God and the inadequacies of reason. From a Nietzschean perspective, the absence of God and the rejection of religious guidelines regarding morality and behaviour translate into a demand for the subjective creation of values and meaning. Nietzsche explains that he 'came to [his] truth by diverse paths and diverse ways', he insists that 'this – is now *my* way', and asks 'where is yours? ...for *the*

way – does not exist!' (Nietzsche: 2003: 213). The most important questions in life can never be answered by anyone except oneself. Nietzsche insists that moral values do not exist in themselves; they are not absolute or transcendent, and they can be modified according to changing situations and circumstances: 'Unchanging good and evil does not exist!' (Nietzsche, 2003a: 139). This appraisal would relinquish the possibility of fixed absolutes, in relation to truth, goodness, or the human being. In the words of Sartre's compatriot, Albert Camus, this is a world where life is without appeal to eternal values or pre-ordained purpose. In his essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus", Camus offers his reflections on the understanding of suicide and the absurdity or meaninglessness of life: 'I want to know whether, accepting a life *without appeal*, one can also agree to work and create *without appeal*' (Camus, 2005: 98). Sartre argues that 'Before you come alive, life is nothing; it's up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing else but the meaning that you choose' (Sartre, 1987: 49). There is no fixed, unchanging identity, no universal law, no external authority towards which we can turn for guidance or meaning: 'No general ethics can show you what is to be done' (Sartre, 1987: 28).

According to Sartre, even when we claim that we are guided by religious convictions and precepts, or that we are following orders or advice, we are still choosing to live our lives according to these guidelines. We make these choices at every moment and in every situation because there is no *a priori* meaning or value which may be applied to any particular situation. Each situation is encountered subjectively and freely, without recourse to previously established judgements or dictates, and it demands a choice on our part: 'every event in the world can be revealed to me only as an *opportunity* (an opportunity made use of, lacked, neglected, etc.)' (Sartre, 1987: 58). To illustrate his argument, Sartre offers the example of a young man who is torn between what he perceives to be his duty as a son to his mother who has suffered the betrayal of her husband and the death of her other son, and his duty as a fighter for the freedom of his country:

> The boy was faced with the choice of leaving for England and joining the Free French Forces – that is, leaving his mother behind – or remaining with his mother and helping her to carry on [...] As a result, he was faced with two very different kinds of action: one, concrete, immediate, but concerning only one individual; the other concerned an incomparably vaster group, a national collectivity, but for that very reason was dubious, and might be interrupted en route. And, at the same time, he was wavering between two kinds of ethics. On the one hand, an ethics of sympathy, of personal devotion; on the other, a broader ethics, but one whose efficacy was more dubious. He had to choose between the two (Sartre, 1987: 24).

The dilemma faced by the boy is an analogy for more general situations where a choice is demanded in the face of indeterminacy about goodness or evil, benefits or losses, and advantages or disadvantages of each element within the choice. The universality of the human condition is explained by Sartre: 'Man is always the same. The situation confronting him varies' (Sartre, 1987: 44). '[...] there does exist a universal human condition [...] what does not vary is the necessity for him to exist in the world, to be at work there, to be there in the midst of other people, and to be mortal there' (Sartre, 1987: 38). Sartre tells us that the boy cannot escape his own freedom in making a personal choice: 'He was obliged to devise his law himself' (Sartre, 1987: 43). There are no established criteria or absolute truths which might be addressed in an effort to make the 'right' choice. The boy may seek guidance and advice, he may listen to 'expert' opinion regarding the morality and the dangers implicit in either decision, but even in these actions, the boy is exercising choice regarding his selection of advisers and his interpretation of their words. Inevitably, he must make his own choice, act on his decision and accept responsibility for whatever consequences ensue: 'There is no abstract ethics. There is only an ethics in a situation and it is concrete' (Sartre, 1992: 17). The individual's ethical choice 'must result in action' to be an ethics (Sartre, 1992: 18). Theoretical ethics or abstract codes of morality are meaningless in Sartre's view: 'Give someone who is thirsty something to drink not in order to give him something to drink or in order to be good but in order to overcome his thirst' (Sartre, 1992: 3). This is the reality of the human situation, according to Sartre: 'man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does' (Sartre, 1987: 23). Thus, human freedom is paradoxical, according to Sartre's view, in that we do not have the freedom to refuse our freedom: 'what is not possible is not to choose. I can always choose, but I ought to know that if I do not choose, I am still choosing' (Sartre, 1987: 41).

The burden of responsibility and accountability resulting from Sartre's theory of human freedom may be debated and analyzed from different perspectives. If we accept Sartre's theory, then we accept that everything in our lives is the result of our own choices and decisions. Sartre insists that there are always alternatives from which we may

choose. Immediately, counter-arguments suggest themselves: surely, we do not choose illness, poverty, cruelty, betrayal or the many misfortunes which may be visited upon any individual at any time? Is it, then, a question of choosing one's attitude to circumstances outside our control? This is the central thesis of another existentialist philosopher, Victor Frankl, noted author of the best-selling book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. The arguments put forward here are the conclusions reached by Frankl after his personal experience in concentration camps in the 1940's. His observations of his fellow prisoners led him to believe that the people who had something to look forward to (being re-united with a loved one, a task to be completed), were the ones with the greatest chance of survival. Quoting Nietzsche's aphorism, 'he who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*', Frankl claimed that when one has a reason or a purpose to live for, one can endure almost anything. The individual is responsible for his/her attitude to all the circumstances of his/her life, and in this way, it is the individual's unique freedom and responsibility to create meaning in every situation. Like Sartre, Frankl dismisses the notion of a pre-ordained meaning or purpose in life: 'Man is not fully conditioned and determined but rather determines himself whether he gives in to conditions or stands up to them. Man is ultimately self-determining. He always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment' (Frankl, 2004: 119). In this sense, subjectivity is on-going and changing, with each moment and each situation demanding a response and a choice. We are not helpless victims and we are not determined by biology, circumstance or personality. We are self-determined and we have the power to create our own destiny. We have the freedom to choose our attitude in all situations. Regardless of material or physical conditions, our attitude and our corresponding behaviour is always a free choice. This human freedom survives even in the barely comprehensible conditions of the concentration camps: 'Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way' (Frankl, 2004: 11). In this sense, Frankl argues that meaning can be created in any situation; suffering of any kind may be infused with meaning if it is approached with an understanding attitude. He offers the example of a recently-bereaved elderly man who seeks his help; the man has lost his beloved wife of many years and he is so distraught by this loss that he can barely survive. Frankl discusses the situation with the grieving man, eventually asking how he would feel if he had been the one to die, leaving his wife to suffer the agony of such loss. The man recognizes the possibility of meaning in his suffering - his loss has ensured that his beloved has been spared the lonely suffering which he now accepts; his attitude has changed and he now sees meaning in his situation.

Sartre's philosophy of existentialism is often criticized for its apparent nihilism, negativity and ultimate despair. Its emphasis on the isolation and the autonomy of the individual seems to be one-sided in its dismissal of the human need for connection and transcendence; the need for and the experience of love, mutuality and care is not addressed. Sartre's insistence on the essential meaninglessness of life, the absurdity of the human condition, is sometimes interpreted as defeatist and hopeless. Some existentialists argue, however, that the absence of a pre-ordained meaning or purpose does not preclude the individual's freedom and responsibility to create his/her own meaning, values and purpose; rather, it insists on this necessity.[i] Sartre insists that his existentialist philosophy is essentially demanding and ethical. His focus on individual freedom and responsibility is intrinsically related to subjective interpretation and subjective choice. However, the ethical demand of this philosophy involves a simultaneous awareness of the freedom and responsibility of others, leading Sartre to describe its focus as 'intersubjectivity' (Sartre, 1987: 38). This may appear to contradict Sartre's emphasis on the autonomous individual and his apparent dismissal of our equally powerful desire for union and relatedness. Sartre's famous remark that 'hell is other people' may be interpreted as a rejection of the necessity and the desire for the transcending power of relationship and inter-connectedness. Within this world view, Sartre insists that the individual lives in a world inhabited by others, and that the choices and actions of one individual inevitably have an impact on others, in particular as they contribute to an image of the human being at any particular moment. All choices affect others, physically and emotionally. Because the self is in the world, one's acts are never simply one's own. What I decide and what I do in each moment reflects the values, desires and convictions of the human being in general. Therefore, if I accept the existentialist premise of my own freedom and my own responsibility by virtue of the fact that I am a human being, then I also extend this conviction to all human beings: 'We want freedom for freedom's sake and in every particular circumstance. And in wanting freedom we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of others' (Sartre, 1987: 46). My freedom to choose, to make decisions and to act in accordance with my own judgement and my own values implies a similar freedom for others. In this

sense, existentialist philosophy is opposed to tyranny of any kind, political, economic, moral or personal; there is no room here for the tyranny of the expert, the law-giver or the do-gooder. The dignity of the human being entails the freedom to think and to act for oneself while it simultaneously inscribes responsibility in the individual agent.

Sartre's discussion of the intersubjective nature of the self explores the concept of the 'look' or the 'gaze' whereby the individual's identity and sense of self is impacted to a considerable extent by the condition of being seen or perceived by others.[ii] One of the examples of this phenomenon offered by Sartre is his understanding of the feeling of shame. An individual may participate in a certain behaviour, such as eaves-dropping on a private conversation, but it is only when he/she is 'caught in the act', seen by another, that a feeling of shame ensues: 'I am ashamed of *myself* before the *other*' (Sartre, 2008: 313). It is evident from this example that self-knowledge involves a mediation between self and others: 'In order to get any truth about myself, I must have contact with another person' (Sartre, 1987: 38). 'The other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me. I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other' (Sartre, 2008: 246). Sometimes, one's identity may be distorted to fit the perceived image held by the other. Sartre would consider this an example of 'bad faith', wherein one relinquishes the possibility of self-creation and self-expression.

The poet T.S. Eliot vividly captures the constriction and limitation of this inauthentic mode of being in the *persona* of his poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Prufrock's experience of life is diminished by his cowardly (though understandable and recognizable) adherence to a social identity and a habitual image which maintains a conception of a fixed, unchanging self. The following lines poignantly portray the private torment inherent in this experience:

> And I have known the eyes already, known them all-
> The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
> And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
> When I am pinned and wriggling and wriggling on the wall,
> Then how should I begin
> To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
> And how should I presume?
> (Eliot, 2004: 15)

Prufrock's situation may appear extreme and generally at variance with common experience. However, at some level, we can all hear a whisper of recognition in the phrase, 'And how should I presume?' There are aspects of every life which remain hidden and incommunicable, and Sartre, in "An Interview at Seventy", acknowledges this darkness: 'I think that what spoils relations among people is that each keeps something hidden from the other […] things which refuse to be said, which I can only say to myself, but which resist saying them to another. As with other people, there is a depth of darkness within me that does not allow itself to be said' (Sartre, 1975: e-text). Of course, the awareness of the other's 'look' may also prompt an inauthentic performance on the part of the individual in an attempt to convey a more favourable impression. In his analysis of human motivation and behaviour Friedrich Nietzsche looks behind the physical and verbal expression of an array of familiarly understood emotions – compassion, sympathy, outrage, grief - and suggests that behind the outward show of expected response lurks an ever-present concern with audience, image and impression: 'Ultimately, not even the deepest pain can keep the actor from thinking of the impression of his part and the overall theatrical effect' (Nietzsche, 1984: 50). The 'look' may elucidate self-knowledge and self-understanding, but it may also provide the motivation for subterfuge and pretence.

Is Sartre's conception of human freedom compatible with our personal experience of life? Is it extreme in its demands and its responsibilities? Does it remain a theory or can we actually live up to it? In opposition to Sartre's conception, and to the philosophical work of Szasz, the contemporary philosopher, Susan Wolf, insists that freedom and responsibility are conditional on sanity: 'In order to be responsible, an agent must be sane' (Wolf, 1988: 55). This assertion leads Wolf to explore the complexities and ambiguities pertaining to individual responsibility, culpability and autonomy. Her admission that 'it is not ordinarily in our power to determine whether we are or are not sane' raises other questions relating to the power and 'expertise' of others when it comes to judgement and diagnoses (Wolf, 1988: 55). Another contemporary theorist, Slavoj Žižek, argues that the notion of free choice is wrought with ambiguity and contradiction in that many of our 'free choices' are, in fact, forced upon us. Žižek claims that the contemporary individual is still locked into subtle ideologies and the censorship of the superego or the 'Big Other'. An example of the subtle, unspoken limitation of freedom in the postmodern world is, according to Žižek, the pervasive, unconditional injunction to enjoy, the command that the subject must experience pleasure in all aspects of experience, and must especially be seen to do so: it is 'the official ideology of our postmodern society as bent on instant gratification and pleasure-seeking' (Žižek, 1997: e-text). Guilt accompanies any failure to fulfill this demand:

'Superego is the reversal of the permissive "You May!" into the prescriptive "You Must!", the point in which permitted enjoyment turns into ordained enjoyment' (Žižek, 1999: e-text). Žižek also maintains that freedom of choice is often an illusion. He looks to the literature of Kafka, Kundera, James and others to highlight the subject's inscription within conscious and unconscious laws, and in William's Styron's fictional account of Nazi brutality, *Sophie's Choice*, he outlines the traumatic experience of the forced choice (Žižek, 2001: 70). As a prisoner of the war camps, Sophie is given the choice to save the life of one of her two children; if she does not choose, they will both die. Hence she is given an impossible choice, but nevertheless she is forced to choose. The situation resounds with the failure of universally applicable ethical solutions or guidelines portrayed in mythology and literature throughout history; Sophocles' *Antigone*, Coetzee's *Disgrace*, McEwan's *Atonement*, and Greene's *The End of the Affair*, explore variations of a similar dilemma: 'the paradox of the forced choice that marks our most fundamental relationship to the society to which we belong: at a certain point, society impels us to choose freely what is already necessarily imposed upon us' (Žižek, 2006a: 275). The psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm, regards this paradox as 'one of the most significant mechanisms of society: that any given society tends to form the character-structure of its members in such a way as *to make them desire to do what they have to do in order to fulfil their social function'* (Fromm, 2003: 147). Would Sartre's assertion that there are always options available to us offer a sustainable argument against this analysis?

Sartre's conception of human freedom and responsibility raises important questions regarding the human experience. It provides an interesting, and perhaps an extreme perspective, on perennial philosophical discourse on issues which are pertinent and significant beyond the particularities of time and space: Who am I? How am I to live? Sartre's exploration of the nature of truth and knowledge and particularly self-knowledge and understanding is limited and debatable, but may provide a stating-point for a more comprehensive and on-going investigation into the nature of human being and human experience.

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[i] For an insightful analysis of this position see the work of the existentialist psychotherapist Emmy van Deurzen.

[ii] The concept of identity as dependent on recognition by others is a perennial theme of philosophical discourse. Hegel's "Master-Slave Dialectic", Lacan's "Mirror-Stage" and Ricoeur's *Conquest of Recognition* offer some examples of diverse interpretations. Susan Sontag offers an interesting analysis of the 'gaze' in her work, *Regarding the Pain of Others.*