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The Actuality of Sartre's Free Will Conception

Abstract

The main Sartrean concepts and theses of freedom of will and unlimited responsibility, which seemed for many already outdated, are gaining actually interest in respect to the recent results in brain research. The main objective of the paper is to reevaluate Sartre's free will conception trying to answer the question: How would Sartre who, in the time of his existentialist phase during which his radical theory of freedom received its most pointed articulation, was familiar with psychological theories of determinism, have responded to statements of actually leading brain researchers such as "we are determined," "brain research liberates from illusions" or "I am my brain"?

Keywords: Jean-Paul Sartre, freedom, will, determinism, brain research, otherness, ontology, ethics

Although Sartre's theses on freedom as the very being of man and, consequently, on a near unlimited responsibility had encountered fierce resistance already more than fifty years ago, this situation has intensified because of the most recent results and theses in brain research. For brain research claims that freedom is an illusion. It is not I who is thinking, but rather my brain plays a game of neurons, and our selves are as much an illusion as our freedom.

Of course, these claims have provoked opposition by philosophers who oppose to this specter of determinism category mistakes (naturalist fallacy; hermeneutic naïvité), and who attempt to salvage human freedom by means of notions of the life-world. Or they speak, as most recently John Searle, of the experience of a gap located between causes preceding of our decisions and the execution of our actions. Even sharper is the opposition on the side of lawyers, in so far as the denial of free decisions challenges decisively ethics and existing law.

How would Sartre who, in the time of his existentialist phase during which his radical theory of freedom received its most pointed articulation, was familiar with psychological theories of determinism, have responded to statements of leading brain researchers such as "we are determined," "brain research liberates from illusions" or "I am my brain"?

It would of course be easy to completely separate Sartre's theory of freedom which is elaborated at an ontological level from the debate about determinism. However, Sartre dealt extensively with the problems of will, of freedom of choice, and of – psychological – determinism, and he attempted, within the framework of his thesis that there is freedom

only in situation and situation only through freedom – the facticity of freedom -, to refute possible objections.

At first glance, Sartre's thesis that freedom and being human coincide appears indeed radical, even absolutist. It is clear for Sartre that freedom, considered at an ontological level, is not a quality, not a capacity of man, not a matter of will, but rather a mode of being: "Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom. (...) Man does not exist *first* in order to be free *subsequently*; there is no difference between the being of man and his *being-free*." (Sartre 1984, 60)

Sartres ontological position derives this freedom from the structure of nihilation characterizing human existence, that is, of the being-for-itself that, for Sartre, is defined as a being "which is not what it is and which is what it is not." (ibid., 127)

This seemingly paradoxical claim depends on the fundamental ontological distinction marking Sartre's *Being and Nothingsness*: that between being-in-itself (*être-en-soi*) and being-for-itself (*être-pour-soi*). Sartre's point of departure is that, ontologically speaking, consciousness and the very phenomenon encountered by consciousness represent ultimately two heterogeneous, although mutually related forms of being. The structure of intentionality that, taken over from Husserl, fundamentally informs consciousness, is, so to speak, ontologized by Sartre. While, in Sartres's precise diction, beings of the mode of being of the being-in-itself are to be grasped as mere positivity and identity, without any otherness, the being-for-itself has to be regarded as something that always already includes a reference to something other than itself, that can never be identical with itself.

Here, Sartre provides essentially two arguments. The phenomenological argument has to do with the intentional structure of consciousness: there is no substantial inhabitant of consciousness (no empirical or transcendental Ego), but rather a being-directed of consciousness toward something other than itself. This is to be demonstrated by the prereflective cogito. At the same time, the structure of consciousness is ontologized at a second level. Since consciousness is always consciousness of something, it is always directed at something that is, precisely, not itself. It always has to "be outside of itself." This structure of intentionality leads not only to the insight that man cannot be determined by an essence or something like a human nature preceding him, but also to the recognition that man is first defined solely by means of his existence; reversing traditional ontological categories, one has to claim that his existence precedes his essence: "Consciousness is a being whose existence posits its essence." (ibid., 24) In other words: "*consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself*." (ibid.)

At the same time, an ontological act is required in order to ground this difference, that is, an act through which nothingness enters the being-for-itself; for it is this "Nothingness," this "hole in being," this fall of the in-itself into the itself, through which the for-itself is constituted, finds its central ontological definition: "The Being by which Nothingness arrives in the world is a being such that in its Being, the Nothingness of its Being is in question. *The being by which Nothingness comes to the world must be its own Nothingness*." (ibid., 58-59) Man, "*la realité humaine*," as Sartre calls this, is characterized in such a way that, in its being, a being is included that it is not itself. Man is never identical with

himself (he is presence to self); he is always separated from himself, that is, he has to be and is not because he is not what he is. And this is, for Sartre, the very foundation of freedom: the possibility to create Nothingness out of oneself.

This condensed reminder of the fundamental ontological structure of human reality can form the basis for Sartre's further reflections on freedom.

One has to bear in mind that the radicality with which Sartre posits this notion of freedom emerges from the ontological basic structure rendering comprehensible formulations like the one mentioned at the beginning: "We are condemned to freedom"; "man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all." (ibid., 569)

It is well-known that Sartre defended this ontologically grounded conception against many objections: objections coming from determinism, from common sense, and from the metaphysical tradition. It is interesting that Sartre claims the need for a theory of action as necessary basis for a discussion of determinism by pointing to the need for the being-for-itself to do, instead of simply to be. He proceeds again from the idea of the intentionality of consciousness in order to demonstrate that nihilation is an essential part in the positing of the end of action. The "tedious discussions between determinists and the proponents of free will" miss the real issue. (ibid., 563) The failure of this debate (concerning here, however, psychological determinists) is that the chain "motive – intention – action – end" is not undermined. For the causal chain – affirmed by the determinists and remaining indifferent for the non-determinists – has to be replaced by a model of intentionality in which the act, the choice, decides itself the motives.

Unlike the debate regarding the results of brain research, in which advocates of freedom often advance the distinction between reasons and causes – "brains react on the basis of causes, human beings act on the basis of reasons" -, Sartre does not mention this distinction. The response given by brain researchers shows how little this distinction can contribute to the issue of freedom: for, as Gerhard Roth argues, reasons would then be the conscious form of experiencing brain processes, the "internal" lived aspect, while *causes* would be the "external, neurophysiological aspect" of those processes. (Roth 2004, 66-85, 82) Of course, here one could raise many objections; however one could at least debate, whether the old idealist-metaphysical distinction between an empirical and a transcendental level is really sufficient, especially since Kant's distinction between a causality of nature and a causality from freedom re-opens that dualism which, as *tema con variazioni*, has permeated the history of philosophy, for instance, in form of the body-soul problem.

Without being able to go through the whole spectrum of arguments and counter-arguments regarding freedom, what is essential is that they bear, essentially, similar metaphysical imprints; thus, they operate at a level that is fundamentally different from Sartre's conception of freedom and of human reality.

For Sartre, the whole issue of free will is at bottom obsolete. If one takes as one's point of departure his almost circular model of action in which the act or choice itself decides the motives, then the intentionality of the structure of consciousness is the decisive factor for my choice and my decision: "It is the act which decides its ends and its motives, and the act is the expression of freedom." (Sartre 1984, 127)

Sartre's argument lies here in the double aim of action. In intentionality, the being-directed towards an end reveals itself as world, and at the same time this defines my possibility as choice.

Moreover, the issue of free will is too reductionist for Sartre. According to him, the will as a kind of conscious state represents an idol of positive psychology; it presupposes the foundation of an original freedom in order to be able to constitute itself as will. (ibid., 571)

For the will does not create any ends; it defines itself via these ends since the human being, so Sartre, cannot receive ends: it cannot receive "external" or "internal" ones. Although Sartre does not define them in more detail, one can designate them with reference to brain research as those that are determined by physiological and neuronal brain processes. Due to the nihilating structure of the being-for-itself freedom remains the foundation of the very ends that I attempt to accomplish. Thus, Sartre draws the provocative conclusion that the will is determined in a transcendent project of itself towards its possibilities within the framework of motives and goals. (ibid.)

It is from this perspective that Sartre analyses the complex of motive and reasons. He is fundamentally convinced that the project of action remains decisive for *mobiles*, *motives*, *fins*: They all refer back to the relation between consciousness and the world. What is decisive for Sartre is that a voluntary deliberation is always a deception. It is worth pursuing his argument in detail: causes and motives receive their significance only via choice. They are not "transcendent things," they receive their weight only through my free project. Thus Sartre can claim: "When I deliberate, the chips are down." (ibid., 581)

Moreover: "When the will intervenes, the decision is taken, and it has no other value than that of making the announcement." (ibid.)

Surprisingly, this ontological foundation of the will going back to the fundamental structure of the being-for-itself corresponds to the arguments by brain researchers: decisions and actions are prepared by neuronal processes and are ultimately decided by the brain. When the will appears, everything is already decided.

Sartre provides an impressive example that undermines common *doxa*, according to which being free means that a choice could have been otherwise. He mentions here the situation of a human being who is on a hiking trip with other friends. If I am overwhelmed by fatigue and refuse to continue walking, I can be admonished to get my act together and walk with the others to the next resting place. Sartre claims that the possibility to overcome my fatigue or to give in to it obscures the real issue: for the real issue is that I cannot act otherwise without changing my entire being-in-the-world. This means, however, that I am referred back to the original nihilation that constitutes the being-in-the-world of being-for-itself. And precisely this nihilation renders it impossible to proceed from something given, factual. According to Sartre, this is already ruled out by the structure of intentionality that cannot be explained by means of a given. Rather, the act is a break with the given, a break that, at the same time, causes this given: that is, it causes that this given is revealed in the light of that which is not yet.

Certainly, Sartre's elaborations do not refer here to the interplay of brain and consciousness; however, the fundamental structure of intentionality with its nihilating character is then further elaborated in the context of freedom and facticity of situation. The main task

is here to defend the notion of freedom against a series of objections. The "enemy" is a certain common sense or a notion of freedom that conceives freedom as mental or internal freedom. Let us recall the following statement: "there is freedom only in a *situation*, and there is a situation only through freedom." (ibid., 629)

With this, the interplay of freedom and alleged limits of freedom are elevated to a different level. The seemingly determining givenness is revealed only through our choice, and our ends as possible limitations of our freedom:

> Far from being able to modify our situation at our whim, we seem to be unable to change ourselves. I am not 'free' either to escape the lot of my class, of my nation, of my family, or even to build up my own power or my fortune or to conquer my most significant appetites or habits. I am born a worker, a Frenchman, a hereditary syphilitic, or a tubercular. The history of a life, whatever it may be, is the history of a failure. (...) Much more than he appears 'to make himself', man seems 'to be made' by climate and the earth, race and class, language, the history of the collectivity of which he is a part, heredity, the individual circumstances of his childhood, acquired habits, the small and great events of his life. (ibid)

For Sartre, these do not constitute any objections against freedom; due to intentionality and its nihilating character, we never encounter a brute fact, but rather always already a given interpreted in the light of our free projects. In other words: "Thus freedom can be truly free only by constituting facticity as its own restriction." (ibid., 636) Sartre attempts to illustrate this via the reference to certain phenomena such as my place, my past, my environment, my death and, finally, my fellowman.

This attempt succeeds relatively well and convincingly regarding the first phenomena. Obstacles and adversities, as they emerge through my place (which is, by and large, for Sartre, the spatial facticity of my existence assigned to me by the contingency of my birth) do not restrict freedom at all. But this can be revealed only through the end posited by my freedom. Thus, my place is defined as obstacle or as spring-board. According to Sartre, this is further proof for the "inextricable connection of freedom and facticity in the situation." (ibid.) Something similar applies to my environment (*mes environs)* that Sartre conceives as the coefficients of adversity and of *Zeug* on the side of things that, due to the place, form my respective environment. Not even they – from the obstacle of a mountain that I cannot climb to accidents preventing me from achieving my goal – do represent restrictions of my freedom.

Sartre argues in a similar manner regarding the past. On the one hand, the past is facticity, that is, it is, in a way, unalterable; however, it receives its meaning only from the future towards which I project myself. Just as freedom is the choice of an end via a dependence on the past, the past is only that which it is regarding the chosen end. No more than the meaning of previous dates can be changed by me arbitrarily, the past can receive its meaning only in the light of a project directed towards the future. The future decides whether the past is alive or dead; "human reality" has a "*memorial* past *in suspense*." (ibid., 643) Historization of the being-for-itself is a perpetual affirmation of its freedom. The past exists, but it exists in terms of a being that I no longer am, but rather have to be.

The argument regarding the being-for-others that is, for Sartre, a decisive dimension of being-for-itself is, however, more difficult. The problematic of the relation to the other which is interlocked with the dimension of our embodiment that, in the context of the question concerning the interplay of brain and freedom, plays a special role, is of course a principal item of the ontological investigations in *Being and Nothingness*.

It is no coincidence that Sartre's analyses proceed from phenomena such as shame or look: that is, from phenomena of our embodiment. Being-looked-at, being ashamed are not only phenomena of embodiment, but they also reveal that the being-for-itself has constituted itself towards a new type of being: being-for-others. The highly detailed and convoluted analyses that Sartre devotes to being-for-others cannot be reconstructed here in full detail. (see Kampits 1975)

Sartre depicts the phenomena which the being-for-itself encounters in being-looked-at in a drastic manner: The look of the other objectifies me, it transcends my transcendence, it makes me part of the world and deprives me of my possibilities – and, finally, it alienates me from my freedom by petrifying me in my projects. But this story about my relation to the other has, of course, another side: for I have the possibility to objectify the other, to petrify his possibility, to alienate him from his freedom. Fundamentally, Sartre repeats the interplay of negation and project also at the level of the relation to the other, which means recognition of the other as well as his negation. I have to tear myself away from the other in a movement that is simultaneously recognition of the other and his negation. Precisely this negation means, however, at once negation and positing of the other: tearing myself away from and negating that which the other has reduced me to gives rise to the existence of the other. I recognize the other by negating and denying my Ego that has been attributed to me by him.

Put more graphically and simpler: The Ego that constantly eludes me because of the structure of freedom and consciousness is objectified and fixed by the other. At the same time, I tear myself away from this objectified Ego, I reject my Ego, and I determine myself in the very rejection of my Ego. Thus the conflict with the other is inevitable: my self-realization requires both the recognition and the annihilation of the other, the other that I must find in my inmost depths "as not being me." (Sartre 1984, 338)

At the same time, I experience myself as being thrown into the freedom of the other – and now I can either deny the very being attributed to me by the other by objectifying the other, or take hold of his freedom and transcendence without taking away its transcendent character. (ibid., 473-474)

The concrete relations to the other that Sartre sketches (love; language; masochism; indifference; desire; hatred; sadism) illustrate eloquently the mutual story of these relations. However, nowhere is the freedom of the other actually attained and recognized. It is either appropriated as freedom – and loses its character of freedom – or it remains freedom, unattainable for me in all eternity; thus the being-for-itself is constantly exposed to the risk of losing its own freedom.

Sartre pays special attention to the problem of the other as a possible restriction of my freedom, and what is central to his analyses is a world that is already populated by the other, already marked by meanings and givens. We exist in the world in the presence of others. Can this mean, especially with regard to the explication of the ontological structure

of being-for-others, a restriction of my freedom? Sartre's answer can be told at once. Of course, the existence of the other posits a factual limit for my freedom. I experience myself as something that I have not chosen to be; I encounter a mode of being that I have not chosen. Ultimately, this is no restriction of my freedom, for I can grasp the other - and that which happens to me because of him – only in light of my own freedom. According to Sartre, this means "that my freedom by freely choosing itself chooses its limits." (ibid., 678)

It is for this reason that the freedom of the other cannot be a restriction of my freedom. That is, it can never encounter these limits, it can never realize them.

This fundamental position remains authoritative also for Sartre's investigations regarding embodiment. Roughly speaking, the very body that is of interest to physiologists and brain researchers cannot be designated "my body," but rather "body for others." For according to Sartre, the body as it is accessible to the surgeon or brain researcher is "*in the midst of the world* and as it is for others." (ibid., 402)

The resulting problems of the dualism of consciousness and body, of body and soul, characteristic of the entire philosophical tradition are resolved, as soon as the body is for me not experienced and comprehended as an external body-thing, but rather as lived body (*corps vécu*).

The body as body for me is part of the structure of the being of consciousness; it cannot be perceived as object, similar to the impossibility of seeing my own seeing. I do not have my body, as I have and possess certain things, but rather I am my body. It is for this very reason that the problem of brain researchers does not exist for Sartre: without denying that I "have," of course, a brain, a lung, a liver etc., the body remains thoroughly psychical: "First of all, it is evident that consciousness can exist its body only as consciousness. Therefore *my* body is a conscious structure of my consciousness." (ibid., 434)

While I am incapable of assuming an objectifying viewpoint regarding my own body, I can do so regarding the body as it appears for others. However, even the body of the other is not merely – and certainly not primordially – the body of physiology or anatomy, but rather "the facticity of the transcendence-transcended." (ibid., 457)

The mere body-thing would be, for Sartre, the corpse, that form of the body that becomes clear also in my being-for-others and its implied form of freedom: for Sartre, being dead means "to be a prey for the living." (ibid., 695) For death transforms us as a contingent fact into some "outside," ultimately into a "thing in the world," construed by the other, that is: into an in-itself. For this reason, there is no place for death within the being-for-itself. Sartre's attempt at fending off even death as a possible limitation of the freedom of the being-for-itself may not be entirely convincing or consistent in itself; his thesis regarding freedom is, however, as terse as debatable: like birth, death is a mere fact; it happens to us from outside, it transforms us into some outside; it has nothing to do with our finitude, it can neither be anticipated nor expected – even if we were immortal, we would remain finite being. We render ourselves finite by choosing ourselves: in freedom. Thus Sartre can claim regarding the structure of freedom of human existence that "our death is always *thrown into the bargain*." (ibid., 700)

What is essential to the question of the interplay of embodiment and freedom is, perhaps, not the so-called third dimension of our embodiment – that is, to exist for myself as body recognized by the other or, put simply, the consciousness of my body as it is for the other, or how it is alienated from me without, however, existing this alienation as final objectification -, but rather the very status that reveals to me this facticity through death. The corpse as "the *pure past of a life*, as simply the *remains*," (ibid., 402) presents itself as loss, as no longer in situation, as pure facticity. Sartre remarks ironically that not only anatomy, but also physiology finds here its starting point: Physiology appears as a synthetic reconstruction of the living person from the standpoint of corpses:

> From the outset physiology is condemned to understand nothing of life since it conceives life simply as a particular modality of death. (...) Even the study of life in the living person, even vivisection, even the study of protoplasm, even embryology or the study of the egg can not rediscover life; the organ which is observed is living but it is not established in the synthetic unity of *a particular* life; it is understood in terms of anatomy – i.e., in terms of death. (ibid., 457)

All these arguments make clear that human freedom cannot be affected by conditionalities of a physical or psychical nature. Sartre's ontological-existential argument is light years apart from that of brain researchers.

Yet, a certain parallel creeps in unexpectedly precisely in the context of the question of being-for-others. For the argument of brain researchers concedes something like a social context: in order to explain the "illusion of the self," educational and experiential processes are summoned stressing communicative, social-cultural influences based upon the symbolically oriented evolution of language. (Singer 2004, 52) Certainly, this is also designated as a condition enabling us to experience ourselves as autonomous, freely deciding beings. In other words: it is, according to Wolf Singer, "social interaction" (ibid., 49) that shows an ontological status that differs from that of the contents of the perception of the world of objects. Linguistic communication and so-called iterative processes of mirroring can account not only for our ability to distinguish between free and unfree decisions, but also for the fact that other human beings ascribe this freedom and responsibility to us already during early childhood.

This is reminiscent, albeit in a different dimension, of Sartre's being-for-others and of its situation of conflict that, however, does not relieve me of my responsibility. For being free means in this context a continuous conflict with the freedom of the other; it also means, however, that through this authorship one "carries the weight of the whole world on one's shoulders." (Sartre 1984, 402) Man, "condemned to be free (…) is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being." (ibid., 707) In this sense, there is no destiny, neither because of my genes nor through a kind of social or historical situation, even if I am neither the ground of my being nor of the world, nor of the other. There are no excuses, not even those of certain structures of my brain and of neuronal processes: man "is no longer anything but a freedom which perfectly reveals itself and whose being resides in this very revelation." (ibid., 711)

It is the very question of responsibility that leads us far beyond the problematic of free will versus determination. Of course, Sartre demanded it with such force that the importance of free action seems almost exaggerated. Certainly, to tie responsibility back to one's own decision and choice renders it somewhat plausible, but can this responsibility – that, in the context of debates concerning brain research, contains not only implications for ethics, but also for law and, above all, criminal law – be expanded as far as Sartre demanded? Sartre charges not only the individual structure of freedom with this responsibility, in so far as the being-for-itself is the author of that into which it makes itself, and at the same time it is the one "by whom it happens that *there is* a world." (ibid., 707) With this – and this seems to be fully consistent – I have decided in the actions – the acts – of my freedom: "What happens to me happens through me" (ibid., 708) – however, can I expand this onto others? Here one encounters a shortcoming that, particularly with regard to the responsibility towards the other as problem, will push Sartre's thought into that social dimension that is also constitutive for brain research and its account of our assumption of freedom for social reasons, for reasons of assignment through the other.

> It seems that true freedom can only consist in a radical new beginning, in beginning again from anew – without any external constraints, but also independent of all needs, wishes and convictions that one usually attributes to oneself, but that are, in reality, only the products of dispositions and the environment. If one decides in such a situation for a particular option, then true freedom seems to assume that, under the very same conditions, one could have decided for a different option. (Pauen 2004, 8)

"Nobody can be different from who one is." (Singer 2004, 68) "Man is condemned to be free." (Sartre 2001, 32) One could ask the question whether there is an essential difference between these two statements, irrespective of the profound difference regarding the argumentative levels, the approaches, and the points of departure. Condemned to follow the neuronal play of my brain processes, or condemned to a freedom whose foundation I cannot be – do not both ultimately end up with more questions and challenges that put to the test anew the fragmentations of our life-world?

(Translated from German by Erik M. Vogt)

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