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## On Freedom

“philosophy itself must not take itself for granted, in so far as it may have managed to say something true; that it is an ever-renewed experiment in making its own beginning; that it consists wholly in the description of this beginning, and finally, that radical reflection amounts to a consciousness of its own dependence on an unreflective life which is its initial situation, unchanging, once and for all.”

–Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

A common philosophical debate concerns the role of nature versus nurture in defining human behaviors. On the one hand people think that we are solely determined by biology and, on the other, that we are the product of our environment, namely society. The problem with this argument is that both sides consider this exhaustive, and fail to acknowledge any notions of freedom or free choice. I grant that most *thinking* beings do not see this as a clear cut dichotomy; however the group that believes in some combination, namely that actions are determined by portions of society and biology, too fails to give an account of free-will. The primary goal of this paper is not to deal with that argument, but rather to understand human freedom and the nature of free choice so my intuitions about nature versus nurture, namely that the ‘self’ executes the power of free choice and is at the very least a factor in determining ones own behavior, can be supported by some philosophical arguments. Is it not the case that I can choose my own destiny? I would like to be able to answer yes. In attempting this, it becomes necessary for the discussion to turn to primordial structures of human being-in-the-world, for the differing opinions on the nature of freedom depend on and follow from the individual philosopher’s understanding of the human situation. Although many philosophers have

dealt with like topics, I have centered the exposition on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose central work *Phenomenology of Perception (PP)* seeks to evoke and interpret primordial structures of the way we live, and our relationship to objects in the world, to persons, history and culture. Before developing an understanding of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, let me first discuss the nature of the problem of freedom and define terms that will be used later.

First, let me define the word 'free', because although it may seem obvious I found that there are indeed differing opinions as to its true nature. 'Free' in terms of action requires two things: first, that there is an absence of determination, and second, one only chooses freely if that choice in and of itself is owned by the choosing person (Oxford, 326). That is, the choice must be self-determined, by character, deeper self, higher values, or informed reason (Oxford, 327). In defining that I realize that I may have already set out the dichotomy among the arguments. Absolute freedom, or the belief that all choices are made independent of experience, has the consequence of total responsibility of action. That is, if we are free to do anything then we are dually responsible for the choices that we make. Determinism, on the other hand, eliminates moral or social responsibility by eliminating free-choice. Those that endorse determinism often believe that freedom is an illusion since behavior is created from environmental or genetic factors (Oxford, 327). If it is such that my decisions are made on the basis of cultural, habitual, or hereditary happenings, then I cannot be held responsible for my actions.

The debate over freedom cannot be broken down into just two categories due to the fact that all arguments do not exist as pure dichotomies. Incompatibilism or hard

determinism is the belief that “determinism precludes freedom” (Oxford, 327). In contrast, compatibilism, or soft determinism, maintains that practical freedom and responsibility are compatible with determinism. These issues will emerge again later, but let us now turn to the texts, and attempt to find a consistent understanding both Sartre’s and Merleau-Ponty’s views on freedom.

Monika M. Langer, in her commentary on Merleau-Ponty’s *PP*, states: “even for the professional philosopher, Merleau-Ponty’s text poses considerable problems because its phenomenological analyses are extremely convoluted and its style makes it difficult to distinguish the authors’ positions from those he is criticizing” (Langer, vii). I will deal with the difficulty by using his childhood schoolmate and fellow philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who advocates a form of absolute freedom in *Being and Nothingness*. Like other atheistic existentialists, Sartre believes that we are alone in our decision making because there is no god. The decisions we make are only up to us, and we, as humans, are free to make choices. Consequently, we are condemned in our freedom. Everything is choice. Knowing that you are alone in your decisions can raise some very interesting questions. People must look into themselves and make the choices based on their own interpretations and experiences. Since it is the case that much of Merleau-Ponty’s book is a calculated critique of Sartre, let us now turn to the Sartrean views of the human situation and freedom which are later rejected by Merleau-Ponty.

Sartre calls the empirical world of things and bodies *being-in-itself*, and the world of human consciousness *being-for-itself*. According to Sartre, the *in-itself* is a density or plenitude of being, totally coincident and identical with itself (*BN*, 74). The *for-itself*,

however, is non-identical, a consciousness which can never coincide with itself. The particular being which it reflects upon is never itself, and in this way it is its own nothingness and brings nothingness to the world (BN,23,77-79). Sartre states, “Consciousness is a consciousness *of* something. This means that transcendence is the constitutive structure of consciousness; that is, that consciousness is born *supported* by a being which is not itself” (BN, 23). The existence of the *for-itself* precedes its essence and this existence is freedom—man’s relation with essence is that he always modifies or confirms it through choice. Since choice is unavoidable, moreover, each of us is condemned to be free. What is meant by freedom is autonomy of choice, or choosing to choose. Even a refusal of choice, for Sartre, is a choice, a choosing not to choose. “Sartre’s account rejects the transcendental ego in favour of a non-coinciding, situated, temporalizing subjectivity which has a body and finds itself engaged with others ‘in an already meaningful world’” (Langer, 133). Furthermore, “the Sartrean subject is an *absolute* freedom *confronting* others in a situation of inevitable and inescapable *alienation*” (Langer, 133). It is no surprise then, because of such a depressing notion of freedom, that Merleau-Ponty rejects much of this as we will see later.

Sartre also contests the idea that I am unable to alter my situation in very many cases, and merely dreaming or conceiving will never change it. However my situatedness or facticity does not make me *exist* as any one of these - I do choose its *meaning* for me, either confirming it or modifying it, and the latter choice can constitute of itself a radical conversion. Freedom is the fundamental choice as to what I *make* of my situation, even if the latter is inescapable. To give a relevant example, think of people who do not think highly of themselves. Perhaps they are afflicted with an inferiority complex. For Sartre, I

think, this is something they chose from the very start, a projection of themselves as inferior to others.

An objection to all this is that many of our situations offer resistance to us, not just physically limiting us, but colouring any meaning we might give them. In answer, Sartre gives the example of a crag, which shows a profound resistance if one tries to climb it. It is only revealed as such within a more original project of climbing, for one who wants to climb it and is discouraged. There is a brute sense of resistance, but only for a subject who grasps it in a certain manner, who endows the brute being with meaning according to the choice it has made. Everywhere we encounter resistances we have not created, but they only emerge through such choices. Resistance, far from endangering freedom, allows it to arise and vice-versa. “There is freedom only in a situation, but there is a situation only through freedom. Human-reality everywhere encounters resistance and obstacles which it has not created, but these resistances and obstacles have meaning only in and through free choice which humanity really is” (*BN*, 489). A traveller on the road whose project is a purely aesthetic ordering of the landscape will not regard the crag as climbable or un-climbable, merely as beautiful or ugly (*BN*, 488-489).

In Sartre’s view, even the point at which resistance overcomes us is a product of our choice. The crag will be easier for a trained, athletic climber than for someone untrained with a weak body. It was his or her choice not to train and not to build up the body—the condition of the body is in its turn a product of choice. I assume Sartre would say the same about a person being tortured. This person is there through a choice (say for his political or religious activities) and has chosen to have a certain resistance to pain. And beyond these factors, claims Sartre, the victim himself chooses the moment in which

he breaks, telling all and begging for mercy. He could have lasted one minute or even one second longer, the proof being his later remorse and shame. Even the torturer is unable to take away my freedom on this account (*BN*, 488-489).

Here as ever, we can add, others are understood by Sartre in almost exclusively negative terms. The other always attempts to objectify me, most notably in the look or stare. He or she tries to reduce me to a bare object within his or her project or situation, passing over my absolute subjectivity and freedom. It is the other, for example, who constitutes me from the outside as French or Jewish or superior or base or vulgar or sophisticated. I can prevent objectification by reducing the other to an object of mine - a sort of dialectic of master and slave with a winner each time, however ongoing and unsure of success this struggle might be. One's freedom, in conclusion, is a radical, solitary and centrifugal affair in which one goes out and constitutes the meaning of the given. Freedom is a being-without-support and without-a-springboard where choice is perpetually renewed by choice from moment to moment, always haunted by the spectre of the instant (*BN*, 480). Let us now turn to Merleau-Ponty; first developing some key ideas in his own phenomenology and then returning to Sartre for a bit of criticism.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty sets about exposing the problematic nature of traditional philosophical dichotomies and, in particular the dualism involving the mind and the body. It is no accident that consideration of this dualism plays such an important role in all of his work, since the constitution of the body as an 'object' is also a pivotal moment in the construction of the idea of an objective world which exists 'out there'. "And since the genesis of the objective body is only a moment in the constitution of the object, the body, by withdrawing from the objective world, will carry

with it the intentional threads linking it to its surrounding and finally reveal us the perceiving subject as the perceived world”(PP, 72). Once the conception of the body is problematised, so too, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the whole idea of an outside world that is entirely distinguishable from the thinking subject (PP, 72-74). For John Compton, Merleau-Ponty’s “most formative insight was that human being-in-the-world forms a unifying structure *within* which individual self-consciousness arises and *within* which the perceptive and active encounter with others” (Compton, 578). Compton continues, “Dialectical reciprocity among the elements of a ‘synergic system,’ self-others-world, is the fundamental reality to be evoked” (Compton, 578). In short, for Merleau-Ponty, consciousness has a self, contrasted to Sartre’s notion of a self-consciousness that is found lacking a self, rather it is outside it.

Merleau-Ponty situates consciousness in the body. His notion of "perception" as the situated, embodied, unreflected knowledge of the world rejects splitting the mind off from the body or treating the body mechanistically as a mere object. Consciousness is always incarnate, he argues, or else it would lack a situation through which to engage the world, and this awareness of the necessary situatedness of existence emphasizes the inescapability of social and political entanglements in the constitution of subjects. Consciousness, the world, and the human body as a perceiving thing are intricately intertwined and mutually `engaged'. The phenomenal thing is not the unchanging object of the natural sciences, but a correlation of our body and its sensory functions. The experience of embodied consciousness is also inherently obscure and ambiguous, he finds, and he consequently rejects the philosopher's dream of fully transparent understanding. The transparent understanding that he rejects is, in my mind, specifically

Sartre's notion that "consciousness must exist 'as a presence to itself'" (Langer, 133). By this Sartre means that consciousness must be self-conscious prior to experience, on a pre-reflective level (Langer, 133). Reflection cannot hope for a complete, certain knowledge that transcends the confusion and indeterminacy of unreflective experience. For Merleau-Ponty, the primacy of perception makes philosophy an endless endeavor to clarify the meaning of experience without denying its density and obscurity. Now that some of Merleau-Ponty's more significant aspects of phenomenology are better understood let us now turn to his views of freedom. First, he will reject determinism, and later, he will reject some and alter other Sartrean notions of freedom.

The final chapter of *PP* is entitled "Freedom", which Merleau-Ponty does not see as a problem, as does Sartre, but as a set of positive phenomena for descriptive elucidation (Langer), with the latter providing the basis of his conclusions. As in earlier chapters, he will argue that the relevant phenomena point to a middle way or 'in-between' two extremes, in this case determinism and absolute freedom. The bulk of the chapter is an attack on the latter, but he begins by rejecting the determinist position. Merleau-Ponty sees the world as indeterminate in two ways—it cannot be made completely clear-cut, that is, purged of ambiguity, nor can it be seen as mechanically or causally determined. His main objection is that determinism cannot adequately account for certain types of phenomena. He would not even opt for soft determinism, seeing any variant of determinism as untrue for humans. The main thrust of Merleau-Ponty's argument is that determinism is incapable of explaining certain phenomena. Merleau-Ponty stresses that, even when taken together, all these elements cannot adequately explain one's proletarian position and why this would lead one to revolution.



“I am never in my heart of hearts a worker or a bourgeois, but a consciousness which freely evaluates itself as a middle class or proletarian consciousness. And indeed, it is never the case that my objective position in the production process is sufficient to awaken class consciousness. There was exploitation long before there were revolutionaries” (PP, 442-443).

Therefore, what makes me a proletarian is not economics or society as impersonal forces, but these institutions as I carry them within me, and as I experience them. Determinism misses the first-person perspective, which is not that of a bare object ( PP, 434,443).

Determinism, in summation, is based on a world of fixed mechanical causes, a world ‘in-itself’. Now what is interesting once again about intellectualists, who include the most famous theorists of absolute freedom opposing determinism, is that they accept the determinist view of the natural world. They posit a subject who both constitutes this world and lies outside it, (impossible and almost nonsensical to discuss, if you ask me) enjoying a freedom that is in no way bound to causality or determination. The main contemporary theorist of absolute freedom is Sartre, who is Merleau-Ponty’s target for the bulk of the chapter. The first and greatest theorist of absolute freedom is of course Kant. As phenomenal beings or empirical subjects we are causally determined by our emotions, but as noumenal beings or rational agents we are utterly free or autonomous, such freedom being a property of all rational beings. Each human being occupies both standpoints, and ought to act for the sake of duty, following a rational moral law of universality and consistency which it freely gives to itself.

By contrast Merleau-Ponty defines freedom as a mode of consciousness in which personal actions and commitments can be chosen within a situation or field of possibility. Freedom is *always* within a given field of possibility. Freedom is always present in a situation, unless we lose our belonging to the situation. Freedom is a mode of being-in-the-world which enables us to transcend ourselves.

On Merleau-Ponty's account, the significances of things are not *all* chosen: there is a level of 'spontaneous evaluation'. This is contrary to Sartre's notion that we are thrown into a world which already has meaning. The bestowal of significance on things at the foundation of consciousness is thus not personal but *anonymous*—the self that groups the dots in pairs is not individualised but merely a perceiving human body as such. At this pre-objective level, where significances are first established, it is impossible to say whether I confer meaning *on* things or receive it *from* them. Merleau-Ponty states, "it is indeed true that perceptual structures do not always force themselves upon the observer; there are some which are ambiguous" (*PP*, 440). The same holds for our personal characteristics and socio-historical identities: there is for each of us sedimentation of consciousness, a layer of accrued significances stretching into the past and pointing us in some particular direction in the future. Freedom is thus essentially *conditioned*. The conditions on freedom, and freedom itself, require and create one another. In addition, freedom may be ambiguous: it may not be possible to determine what is 'the share contributed by the situation' and what is 'the share contributed by freedom'. Because at the pre-personal level, being-for-myself is always at the same time being-for-others and vice versa, freedom cannot be isolated from intersubjectivity, as in Sartre, because freedom exists in a world which is already partly constituted and cannot be made wholly explicit in the way required for Sartreian freedom; we are involved in it as in an 'inextricable tangle'. There is 'never determinism' and 'never absolute choice'(Langer).

For Merleau-Ponty, because significance is brought to the world by us, freedom is never limited. This is not absolute freedom as in Sartre, although it appears so at first

glance. He means this in a different way. When Sartre gives the example of the rock face that is deemed unclimable, it is to be considered an object impeding the freedom of us all. Merleau-Ponty thinks of the rock in a different way, which will shed some light on the relationship between object and person, in addition to showing how this distinction applies to the arguments about freedom. He states,

“Even what are called obstacles to freedom are in reality deployed by it. An unclimable rock face, a large or small, vertical or slanting rock, are things which have no meaning for anyone who is not intending to surmount them, for a subject whose projects do not carve out such determinate forms from the uniform mass of the *in itself* and cause an oriented world to arise—a significance of things” (*PP*, 436).

For Sartre, the rock face has meaning, let’s call it ‘unclimable’, prior to, in some sense, to any human experience of the rock. For Merleau-Ponty the rock has no meaning until the presence of human experience, thus it is then a free choice whether or not the rock is deemed ‘unclimable’.

In the eyes of some critics Merleau-Ponty owes Sartre a great deal of gratitude for his investigations into the nature of the human situation; for others the two differ in the most fundamental ways. John Compton, in an article for the *Journal of Philosophy* states, “it is arguable that the conceptual framework—the ontology—of Merleau-Ponty differs so fundamentally from that of Sartre that, at virtually every point, the nuance given to common phenomenological themes is distinctive to him” (Compton, 578). Let me return to the rock face and discuss further the similarities and differences within the two arguments. Sartre states,

“The given in itself as *resisting* or as *aid* is revealed only in the light of the projecting freedom... The rock will not be an obstacle if I wish at any cost to arrive at the top of the mountain. On the other hand, it will discourage me if I have freely fixed limits to my desire of making the projected climb” (*BN*, 488).

Sartre and Merleau-Ponty agree in so far as the presence of a human is what confers meaning to the rock face, however, Merleau-Ponty understands us to be “systems of body intentions before we are persons”(Compton, 582). This is to say that for Merleau-Ponty, vital interests and skills allow us to realize the preliminary resistances and cooperations of things, disposing to us the prototypes of behavior, and composing the backdrop against which we make deliberate, free, choices. This means that if I deem the rock ‘unclimbable’, it is not necessarily limiting my freedom or acting as an obstacle as Sartre puts it, but rather the understanding of limits allows us to use free-choice by simply eliminating the impossible. For Sartre it is unthinkable that a person lives so passively as to let objects influence his freedom. That is, he rejects such notions as: being forced to choose, or prevented from doing an alternative, or being inclined to make certain decisions.

Another rather significant difference in the beliefs of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, as Compton points out, is the way in which they define ‘embodied’. “For Sartre, to be embodied is simply to exist as situated, to occupy a place and time” (Compton, 583). For Merleau-Ponty, “to be embodied is to find the meanings of situations and our responses to them already generally shaped as well” (Compton, 583). For Merleau-Ponty, “the body is our general medium for having a world” (*PP*, 146).

In terms of freedom, both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty agree that in the making of one choice there is a ‘cost’ or giving up of alternative choices, however, again there is a difference in the way in which that ‘cost’ is defined. Compton thinks that for Sartre, the option of doing something else as an alternative to a choice is a modification that is always possible, while for Merleau-Ponty, we must recognize the way in which life

builds, as previously stated, a layer of accrued significances stretching into the past and pointing us in some particular direction in the future.

An attitude towards the world, when it has received frequent confirmation, acquires a favored status for us...having built our life upon an inferiority complex which has been operative for twenty years, it is not probable that we shall change" (*PP*, 441-2).

Now we can see the 'middle ground' which Merleau-Ponty has situated himself in respect to absolute freedom and determinism. In placing some weight in historical choices made there is a hint of determinism, although Merleau-Ponty would shiver at the thought of placing all relevance in past choices, he nonetheless allows for such factors to influence the free choices we continue to make.

I return now to the question of responsibility, which I find to be the most significant consequence of solving the issue of freedom. If it is the case that we are purely free in a Sartrean sense, then as he admits we are condemned to be free and subsequently absolutely responsible for our actions. This seems too harsh for me and so I endorse a more subtle version of freedom, closer to that of Merleau-Ponty. In addition, I am more apt to believe that the meaning in the world is brought to it by our experience. In my mind, it is the case that we can only know the world through our perspective, thus I conclude that we are the creator of meaning for ourselves. I also believe that Sartre made a fundamental error when he failed to allow for the possibility of influence. Although we are free beings it is obviously the case that others and objects can hold considerable weight in the decision making process. Thirdly, I endorse the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty because of the mind-body separation. This stems from a view that the mind is more powerful than we might think, in fact it is so powerful it gives meaning to an otherwise meaningless world. I, having become equipped to make such judgments,

now define freedom as a state of being, and while constantly and inherently in this state, I can make free choices from among a range of possibilities, or as Merleau-Ponty calls it, a field of possibility. Thus for Merleau-Ponty and myself, freedom is a mode of being-in-the-world which enables us to transcend ourselves. In giving myself power over choices I have given myself the ability to alter my being and thus refute the arguments that I am a creation of my society, and claims that mom and dad created who I am, rather than me. So is it the case that I can choose my own destiny? Well... yes.

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