

# Jean-Paul Sartre's Existential Freedom: A Critical Analysis

Elijah Akinbode

Department of Philosophy, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

**Email address:**

[elijahakinbode@yahoo.com](mailto:elijahakinbode@yahoo.com)

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**Abstract:** Freedom is a necessary prerequisite for living, as most existentialists emphasized. A prominent existentialist, Sartre, fully appreciated the importance of freedom in helping humans lead authentic lives. In his philosophical magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*, he boldly contends that human beings possess absolute freedom, meaning they are not determined by external factors or pre-existing essence, and are therefore responsible for creating their 'own' meaning and purpose in life. Admittedly, Sartre claims that man's freedom is tied to responsibility. He proposed the notion of freedom and responsibility as a moral compass for leading an authentic existence. This critical analysis explores Sartre's notion of existential freedom, focusing on its philosophical conceptions, implications, and deficiencies. This paper will properly understand Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of freedom and responsibility, starting by defining freedom in the way Sartre wants us to conceive it. This paper will examine some of the objections raised by Alvin Plantinga against Sartre's philosophy of freedom. And finally, this paper will also analyze Sartre's notion of freedom and responsibility and reveal its incompatibilities with universal morality. By critically evaluating Sartre's concept of existential freedom, this analysis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of his existentialist philosophy and stimulate further dialogue on the nature and implications of human freedom.

**Keywords:** Freedom and Responsibility, Jean-Paul Sartre, Moral, Alvin Plantinga

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## 1. Introduction

The term freedom is a versatile and exciting subject in human history and assumes a significant meaning in different traditions of philosophy. In philosophy, freedom is a moral, social, and existential concept. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that seeks to study man and the nature of his existence. Existentialists, in general, and especially Jean-Paul Sartre, were concerned with man. They inquired into his existence, nature, the purpose for living, and his relationship with others. In Jean-Paul Sartre's inquiry, he proposed the notion of freedom as an essential ingredient for existence. The kind of freedom Sartre proposed should be distinct from what typical freedom is; freedom for Sartre assumes an ontological status. In his book *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does; that is, freedom is a default nature of man [1].

In Sartre's existentialism, he contends that existence precedes essence, and as a result, he maintains that there are

no deterministic factors, which leaves no room for freedom. Sartre believes that the universe is apparently devoid of direction, purpose, or meaning; consequently, he asserts that we are 'condemned' to be free. For Sartre, there is no God, no objective system of values, and no essence (except for the ones we create for ourselves) [2]. Sartre believes that man exists and must create his essence and values for himself because he has freedom. Sartre rejects objective morality and favors subjective morality. By this, Jean-Paul Sartre seems to advocate virtue-based ethics, not duty-based ethics.

In Sartre's analysis of freedom (which Alvin Plantinga calls the philosophy of freedom), he conceded that man's freedom is tied to responsibility. Sartre embraces freedom, a consequence of which is full responsibility. However, Sartre's ethical theory of freedom and responsibility is not free from some moral flaws. This paper will examine Sartre's concept of freedom and responsibility with its inconsistency with universal morality. This paper will support the objections raised by Alvin Plantinga on the very possibility of moral endeavor in Sartre's existentialism. Finally, this paper will highlight some negative implications of freedom and appraise the need for objective morality.

## 2. Existentialism and the Claim of Freedom

Existentialism emerged as a reasoned inquiry in philosophy that explores the problems of human existence, the purpose and meaning of life, and the value of human existence. The themes of existentialism include freedom, authenticity, facticity, the notion that existence precedes essence, absurdity, anguish, despair, and subjectivity, to mention a few [3]. However, there is a general notion that existence precedes essence is the first principle of existentialism. Existence comes first, and after then, man defines his essence through his choices (only because he is a free and conscious being). Sartre echoes this in Existentialism is a Humanism:

What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards [...] He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. [...] Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism [4].

Sartre was an eminent existentialist who explored what it means to be human. The most notable contribution of Jean-Paul Sartre to philosophy is how he uncompromisingly stressed the concept of an individual's freedom. Sartre, a renowned atheist, not surprisingly rejected the existence of God (and a deterministic world), and he believes that we have no alternatives but to choose and decide for ourselves. In that sense, we can create our essence [5]. Sartre's notion of freedom is intimately bound up with his conception of consciousness, being, choices, and responsibility. This paper will discuss Sartre's existential claim that man is free and how it pertains to responsibility: because it is only in Sartre that we would find a systematic articulation of existentialism as a philosophical technique.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre portrays *consciousness* as always consciousness of something, not an abstract substance [6]. Consciousness does not make sense by itself: it is always an awareness of objects. It can only exist as consciousness of something external, be it a person, a thing, a character, or an imaginary object. Consciousness is also the consciousness of itself, which is self-consciousness and consciousness of being.

Sartre describes a dualistic mode of being and defines human consciousness through the opposite nature of these two modes of being. These two modes of being are namely:

- 1) Being-in-itself: is identical to non-conscious objects in the external world and the contingent being of ordinary things. Sartre defined it as "what is it." Being-in-itself is the solid and inactive stuff that cannot give itself meaning. It is neither active nor passive and has no potential for becoming.
- 2) Being-for-itself: is the conscious subject and the mode of consciousness's existence, consisting of its own

activity and purposive nature. It is active and does not have a fixed essence. Sartre defines it as "what it is not."

Sartre conceded that man is thrown into the world and lacks an essence (a state of nothingness), and man is constantly at the task of becoming or defining himself [7]. Sartre identifies human reality with consciousness calling it the being-for-itself. Being-for-itself is conscious of its consciousness, but it does not end at self-consciousness. For Sartre, this unfixed, indeterministic essence is what defines a man. Since the being-for-itself lacks a predetermined nature, it is plagued with creating itself (values and essence) from nothingness. For Sartre, nothingness is the defining characteristic of the being-for-itself: that is, the being-for-itself becomes what it is: nothingness, wholly free in the world, with a blank canvas on which to create its being. The essence of being-for-itself is to negate what is given. Man, an object-for-itself, must purposely evolve his own being. Therefore, man (being-for-itself) has potentiality, and it can become what it is not, which Sartre describes as the being-for-itself as "being what it is not and not being what it is [8]." On the premise of the potentiality of being-for-itself becoming what it is not, the strength of man's claim to absolute freedom is built. Absolute freedom is the default nature of man, and that man is condemned to freedom.

The notion of freedom, for Sartre, assumes an ontological foundation in the ability of the man (being-for-itself) to define his values and essence within the context of his liberty. Man is condemned to be free, and there are no limits to his freedom. According to Sartre, we can authorize man's freedom to be absolute because man's existence precedes essence. Freedom is given to every individual at birth, and it helps a man (being-for-itself) in determining his course of action, and it is not in any way different from existence.

In *Existentialism & Humanism*, Sartre believes that freedom and responsibility are inseparable. Freedom is associated with responsibility; we have unlimited freedom to choose while simultaneously being held responsible for the repercussions of everything we choose, which is explained in Sartre's maxim, "*Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does* [1]." Responsibility for freedom makes individuals responsible for all their decisions, including their choice to be non-committal; "We are left alone, without excuse." To buttress this claim, Sartre illustrates soldiers participating in a war. When we consider soldiers involved in a war, we assume they lack freedom of choice regarding individual circumstances. However, the actual scenario is that soldiers who are engaged in a war still have the liberty to exercise their choices; they can either run away or commit suicide as a choice to protest their scenario and thereby exercise interest. Sartre argues that we are condemned to freedom, and any attempt to avoid the realities of our freedom by making excuses would result in bad faith. In Sartre's perspective, authentic existential living lies in our freedom to make choices and take responsibility.

### 3. Assessing Alvin Plantinga's Objections

In 1958, Alvin Plantinga, a foremost American Philosopher, raised some objections to Sartre's theory of freedom in his brilliant book, *An Existentialist's Ethics*. He argues that Sartre's philosophy (or theory) of freedom is not consistent with morality and challenges the very possibility of morality [9]. He further argues that Sartre's denial of absolute values makes his ethics vulnerable to some objections. Plantinga believes it is impossible to distinguish between right and wrong from Sartre's philosophy of freedom. At the very essence, this impossibility challenges the possibility of moral action.

Plantinga revealed that Sartre's theory of freedom denies the possibility of moral mistake, which seems apparent in Sartre's analysis of freedom and choices. He noted:

Every choice defines both value and rationality. But if that is so, then it is impossible to make a wrong choice. As we have seen, and as Sartre constantly repeats, my choice defines value; prior to my choice, there is no right or wrong. But then my choice, in defining the right, can never be mistaken. Whatever I choose is right by definition [10].

Sartre's analysis of freedom and choices eliminates the possibility of moral mistakes. He says that man must create his values for himself because there are no prior values. He must accept responsibility for everything he does. Man's fundamental choices constitute his moral standards, which are neither wrong nor right. Sartre fails to pay attention to the rightness or wrongness of human actions; instead, he tries to restrict human actions with his concept of responsibility and authenticity, which seems to eliminate the possibility of moral mistakes.

Plantinga's objection that Sartre's existentialism undercuts the possibility of morality becomes clear when we consider sincere killers or Nazis. For instance, historical dictators like Idi Amin and Adolf Hitler believe they are doing the right thing—justifying that they have their reasons for killing—and do it without hypocrisy and in good faith then, and accept full responsibility for their actions, according to Sartre, they act morally. It does not matter what they do as long as it is done in good faith. With the premise that there are no values except those we create, we would encounter the same problems plaguing other theories of subjective value. Sartre's proposal of good and bad faith will not be sufficient to settle and differentiate between what we assume are right and wrong actions. This suggests that more is needed to understand the nature of morality than mere commitment. Sartre seems not to have considered these worries.

As observed by Plantinga that Sartre's philosophy of freedom cannot distinguish between right and wrong action seems to be true [10]. Sartre never suggested that our actions could be right or wrong; instead, he claims that we might end up in good or bad faith. Sartre fails to realize that some actions are necessarily condemnable, for instance, killing newborn babies. We may condemn such acts as wrong, not because they are done in bad faith, but because they are

immoral. This suggests that it does not matter whether actions are done in good or bad faith but whether they are good or bad.

### 4. Existential Freedom: A Moral Outlook

Existentialism, a rich and diverse philosophical study of man, has been primarily acclaimed for offering some ethical insight in its quest to explain the ontology of man. Sartre's notion of freedom and responsibility provides a conceptual framework for ethics: this is not to advocate existential ethics but rather to make the point that Sartre's insight on freedom and responsibility is nothing less than ethical subjectivism (morality is simply a question of individual preferences) - man is free to choose, and his choices represent his values.

In Sartre and the Myth of Natural Scarcity, Deborah Bergoffen contends that praxis "freedom is the absolute source of violence [11]." Sartre's theory of freedom undermines that people can commit terrible and violent acts under the guise of exhibiting their absolute freedom. Sartre forgot that people could abuse their limitless freedom, using it to the detriment of others since there are no social values, moral codes, and existing laws that can hinder such possibilities. Man's freedom can be wrongly exploited to commit terrible acts, and the fact that they are responsible for their actions does not curtail these possibilities.

It could be argued that Sartre's existentialism promotes responsibility-based and not conformity-based ethics. Sartre's existentialism sees man as evolving into everything he wishes to be. Sartre claims that nothing exists except what man creates for himself, and in consequence, he denies any ethical compass, such as societal values, pre-existing moral codes, and religious values. According to Sartre, it is our human duty to develop new ethical structures. Sartre believes that an ethical life can be promoted when people use their freedom to develop their own moral codes rather than conforming to a system of predetermined ethics. Sartre's preference for the individualized ethical system would lead to moral deadlock because people have different and conflicting interpretations of "right" and "wrong" on the same subject, which could create tension. Sartre would undoubtedly need to suggest how to resolve this likely tension.

Sartre's analysis of freedom reminds us of a kind of (Aristotle's) virtue ethics, not duty-based ethics. Sartre did not recommend that man's action emanates from the quest to perform a duty. He alluded that man is the result of all his choices. This perspective is in line with Aristotle's assertion of the primacy of character building and creating a person and disposition who, from themselves, will act ethically. While Aristotle's ethical maxim is "You are what you continually do," Sartre's ethical maxim might be summed up as "You are what you decide." Both philosophies emphasize the individual intending to "cultivate" a person who lacks external moral guidance. Within Sartre's worldview, a "creative individualized morality" is possible. It is "creative" in that the person is compelled (condemned) to exercise their own free will and develop a personal morality through which

they view the world and which guides their behavior without outside ethical guidance. Following Sartre's ethics entails acting as an extension of one's authentic self, which is the self that is unconstrained by moral obligations. Sartre viewed acts that limit others' freedom as acts of "bad faith" because if humans act in a way that is contrary to another person's freedom, then they are limiting freedom, even if it is another's [12]. Sartrean ethics is virtue ethics because to act ethically requires the individual to live their "authentic life." This way, authenticity is treated like an existential virtue cultivated through consistent habitual practice. To Sartre, cultivating this virtue is key to living an ethical existence [13].

Sartre's theory of freedom favors subjective morality over objective morality [14]. He recommends that man create or invent his values, dismissing objective moral codes. Objective morality is more instrumental than Sartre thought. Objective morality does not outrightly rule out a man from exhibiting his freedom, as it is clear that people choose whether to obey moral codes or disobey them in the real world. If they obey them, they choose which ones and how to prioritize sometimes-conflicting directives. It could be argued that even if objective morality exists and is often useful in a prescriptive sense, people are ultimately free to choose their actions. Objective morality is indispensable in maximizing human happiness and bettering human life, as some proponents of consequentialism and deontology have observed [15]. If we consider what Sartre recommends, for instance, responsibility and authenticity, it is vague to understand if our mere acceptance of responsibility would satisfy or promote happiness or a better human life. Responsibility, in common parlance, suggests commitment, not obligation, to promote happiness or a better life.

## 5. Conclusion

Freedom is indeed a thing to be desired by all, and values of freedom are indispensable to human life, but we also need to be mindful of how we define freedom. Sartre's definition of existential freedom as absolute in his theory of freedom is thought-provoking. Sartre claims that we have limitless freedom because the world is empty and that we have absolute freedom to choose our values and create the kind of world we desire. In this context, Sartre argues that there is no objective morality, moral codes, or laws, and no God determines the essence of man.

Sartre's submission places men as gods by challenging them to create their values, morality, and essence; in other words, he approves of subjective morality. Sartre also tries to restrict man's absolute freedom by proposing the concept of responsibility. He contends that man is absolutely free but must accept responsibility for whatever he does. This proposal of absolute freedom and total responsibility does not eliminate our worries. I argued just like Alvin Plantinga argues that Sartre's theory of freedom threatens the possibility of a moral endeavour. Moreso, it is worth noting that Sartre never considered the implications of ascribing

absolute freedom to man. This paper considers some of the negative consequences Sartre's claim to absolute freedom and subjective morality would create. Going forward, Sartre would need to consider these worries and revise his suggestions to eliminate these challenges.

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