

# A Critical Analysis of Sartre's Freedom Philosophy --A Study of "Why Write?"

HUANG Min<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> College of Foreign Languages, Zhongkai University of Agriculture and Engineering, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

Correspondence: HUANG Min, College of Foreign Languages, Zhongkai University of Agriculture and Engineering, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China. Tel: 86-137-6087-3274.

Received: September 28, 2022      Accepted: October 29, 2022      Online Published: November 10, 2022

doi:10.5539/ach.v14n2p189      URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ach.v14n2p189>

## Abstract

Jean-Paul Sartre is regarded as a leading figure in the 20th-century philosophy due to his great contributions to the theories on existentialism and freedom. One of Sartre's notable works—"Why Write?" sheds light on his philosophical contemplations on freedom and free will. On Sartre's upcoming 117 birthday, we make an in-depth analysis into "Why Write?" in an attempt to critically and better learn about Sartre's Freedom Philosophy. Sartre embraces absolute freedom, a consequence of which, according to Sartre, is full responsibility. However, his notion of freedom is still interspersed with contradictions if we take what he has said about absolute freedom and full responsibility into careful consideration.

**Keywords:** Jean-Paul Sartre, "Why Write?", absolute freedom, full responsibility, reading

## 1. Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the most well-known and influential Western philosophers in the 20th century, is an exponent of and a great contributor to Existentialism (Norris, 2018). From 1940 when he was imprisoned for nine months in Germany, he started reflecting on the meaning of freedom. Initially published in freestanding essays and later constituting one of the most significant chapters in the famous book *What Is Literature*, "Why Write?" is an essay in which Sartre addresses his theory on freedom.

## 2. A Summary on "Why Write?"

The text starts with the existentialist assumption that "human reality is a 'revealer'"; that is, the individual reveals being by introducing relationships and order into the natural arrangement and imposing unity on the diversified world. Upon such an "inner certainty of being 'revealers'" is also added the consciousness that the man is inessential to the thing revealed. To seek the essentiality, we turn to artistic creation. Consequently, we come to the dialect that in the perception, the object is essential and the subject inessential while in the creation it's quite the reverse. The operation of writing is used to further illustrate this dialect and an act named reading is necessarily involved as the dialectical correlative of writing, for only the reader, not the writer can reveal the sleeping words objectively through foreseeing and waiting. In other words, one doesn't write for oneself. Therefore, the fulfillment of a work requires the joint effort of both the author and the reader. The former services as a producer while the other a revealer. Hence there is no art except for and by others.

As for reading, in fact it engages both perception and creation. In the course of catching the connotation of words, the reader simultaneously makes reinvention from the originally inexpressible words. In brief, "reading is directed creation" and for the reader, "all is to do and all is already done".

To fulfill the creation and to seek essentiality, the author writes to address to the reader's freedom for the collaboration in completing the work. Unlike any other tools, the book requires the reader's freedom and obtains it through recognizing and showing confidence in it and finally "requiring of it an act in the name of the confidence". Being itself an end offered to the reader's freedom, the work requires the reader's full responsibility once he opens it though it's absolutely free to just leave it there. Besides, the writer should never seek to overwhelm. Meanwhile a certain aesthetic withdrawal is required of the reader. One creates the aesthetic object with sort of feelings originating from freedom. Yet, to achieve transcendence the reader chooses to situate his freedom in a position of passiveness though he knows for sure that his feelings are generous. Hence what the writer requires of the reader is, in fact, the

generous devotion of the whole person and in this way the reader “raises himself to the highest degree”. In this part the author emphasizes the absolute freedom and full responsibility of the readers.

Given that no natural spectacles can ever call forth human freedom, the writer projects the natural reality on their works by introducing relationships and order. Thus, the reader is well guaranteed to progress confidently and safely, and everything is a matter both of causality and of a deeper finality. Although in certain period of writing the writer may be impassioned, he is still generous once his emotions are transformed to be free. There we draw a conclusion “reading is a pact of generosity between author and reader”.

Be it the art of realism or formalism, each is the combination of causality as illusion and finality as reality due to the transposed relations. However, once taking the splendor of the creation into serious consideration, one comes to the epiphany that the finality is better realized through imagination, by which we experience human unfathomable freedom. Thus, evidently the final goal of art is a recovery of the world. Consequently, the aim of writing can be better expressed as follows: by addressing to the freedom of others the writer targets at a total renewal of the world and “enclosing the universe within men”. To go a step further, such a discovery brings about not only a sense of aesthetic pleasure but also a consciousness of responsibility. Both the author and the reader undertake the responsibility for a universe taking human freedom as its end. Thus, all works written and read by free men regard freedom as their only subject. Besides, personal freedom is the basic guarantee of the freedom of expression with fascism served as a negative example. Therefore, one is supposed to take up writing as an arm of wanting freedom once he is enslaved. But then another question arises: “For whom does one write?”.

### 3. Sartre's Freedom Philosophy

#### 3.1 Notion of Human Freedom---Absolute Freedom

For Sartre freedom is the only one subject in literary works. He contends that the aim of writing is to appeal to the absolute freedom of the readers to recover the world. Since freedom as a concept is so much emphasized by Sartre, the author of the paper tends to dig into and discusses briefly on the notion.

According to Sartre, there is nothing besides the existing individual, no God, no objective system of values, no built-in essence and no determinism since he embraces Nietzsche's announcement that “God is dead”. The individual is the only thing that exists in this world. One is absolutely free, no authoritative guide, no established value standards and no ethic and law requirements to abide by. Thus, nothing can force one to behave in any given way. No guideline is guaranteed to us in this world; so I am free to choose myself. Actually, we are what we make of ourselves. Thus, readers' absolute freedom in revealing the works is highlighted.

Such concept of freedom seems to indicate that there's no basis for any particular actions that I choose to become involved in; nor is there any basis for any particular choices I make at all. We are free to do whatever we like in a manner that is indeterminable and without basis. In other words, freedom might be understood as capricious by virtue of my arbitrariness to stand up or sit down or do this or that (Earnshaw, 2009).

Yet, we doubt if we're truly that free seeing that there're so many constraints on human beings. For example, despite the fact that one can better appreciate works through imagination, a point on which the author of the paper quite agrees with Sartre, we still can't deny that our imagination is still based upon the forms and structures of the working; that is, our imagination still works within set parameters and we're not absolutely free to imagine. Moreover, socially speaking we find we belong to a certain gender, class, race, etc., a kind of label we can't get rid of. One more thing is that we find ourselves sometimes caught in some situation over which we have no control and which substantially affect our existence, such as an accident. As a man living in groups, one even can't imagine what would happen if everyone practices his own rights of what Sartre advocates as absolute freedom and behaves in his own way regardless of others.

Given such social and physical constraints on every individual's freedom of choice as what we've listed above, we're puzzled by Sartre's statement that each agent is endowed with unlimited freedom. Let's see what Sartre says about this. Sartre counters this by saying that,

“This doesn't mean that I am free to get up or to sit down, to enter or to go out, to flee or to face danger---if one means by freedom here a pure capricious, unlawful, gratuitous, and incomprehensible contingency. To be sure, each one of my acts, even the most trivial, is entirely free in the sense which we have just defined; but this does not mean that my act can be anything whatsoever or even that it is unforeseeable” (Being, 1995).

We can see that Sartre seems to mean both, to say that we are absolutely free in terms of choices and yet also to say that each act is never absolutely free, since it can only take place in relation to “brute existents” (Sartre, 1995). It seems that Sartre himself is confused. According to him, to separate out something that is pure facticity from what

might be freely willed is out of the question; “These observations should show us that the situation, the common product of the contingency of the in-itself and of freedom, is an ambiguous phenomenon in which it is impossible for the for-itself to distinguish the contribution of freedom from that of the brute existents” (Sartre, 1995).

### *3.2 Consequence of Freedom---Full Responsibility*

“In a classic phrase, Sartre says that people are condemned to be free” (Stumpf & Fieser, 2006) since we find ourselves thrown into the world, forlorn and purposeless. Indeed, were God to exist, some of the problems of our own existence would thereby be alleviated. Since we’re what we make of ourselves with no prior standards to guide us, just as what we’ve said in the previous part, we have no one to blame for what we are except ourselves. Therefore there’s nothing in our life for which we’re not responsible. Moreover, Sartre contends that in the process of “[creating] our own values and thereby [creating] ourselves, we nevertheless create at the same time an image of our human nature” (Stumpf & Fieser, 2006). I am therefore responsible not only for my own individuality but also for all the people throughout the world since I can’t consider my own situation as a personal one at all.

However, if it’s true that every individual has the equal rights to make choices and to form one’s own sense of ethical outlook and values, then why is what I choose for myself, in fact, one for all human beings? Why will what I’ve done influence all human beings? And thus why do I have to be responsible for the whole human beings?

On the next step, Sartre directly points out that those, who ascribe their failure or their faults to the external environment or who shield themselves by pretending that people have a fixed nature that limits them, in fact slide into various forms of self-deception. This is because human beings fear the inescapable freedom which actually equals to a lack of direction, lack of certainty and a lack of there being some way that things have to be or must be. He continues to claim that although admittedly the physical and social constraints do exist, people still can’t get rid of their responsibility since whether to be determined to change the situation or to accept just as what it is is still up to them. This is another point the author of the paper doubts.

According to Freud’s doctrine, the human mind is a continuity and unity of both the conscious and the unconscious. Since the unconsciousness occupies a governing position in one’s life, human behavior is mechanically determined by unconscious and irrational desires, and above all “the ‘I’ is not even master in its own home, but is dependent upon the most scanty information concerning all that goes on unconsciously in its psychic life” (Freud, 2006). In his theory of the unconscious, Freud asserts that one should face up to and admit the instincts and desires of the unconscious which is always negated and rejected by many people. Obviously among those people is Sartre since when talking about the responsibility he just focuses on the rational side of human beings, neglecting the fact that the irrational side and unconsciousness also play a crucial part in human lives. Thus, from the point of view of the author of the paper, Sartre’s proposal of absolute responsibility is inappropriate, for one’s certain actions sometimes can definitely be explained by his instincts or his unconsciousness.

Thus goes Sartre’s saying that freedom is appalling. It’s a full responsibility---kind of responsibility we can’t get rid of, a price for our absolute freedom. Such an act of choice is one that must be accomplished with a deep sense of anguish, terrors and helplessness, rather than a sense of comfort or consolation because we are responsible not only for ourselves but also for each other. Sartre reiterates the argument that “Anguish is the experience of my freedom” (Myerson, 2008).

Here comes the problem. One of Sartre’s most famous claims is that “existence is prior to essence” (Sartre, “Why Write?”, 2001), by which he means that no antecedent idea of human nature exists; we first exist, and then by our free choices and actions we make ourselves into something. There’s no given purpose to life, no value standards and no authoritative guide since human beings without any guidelines are free to do anything we’re willing to and there’s no good or bad for us since it’s we ourselves that create such things. If so, how can we have the feeling of anguish or agony? What’s more, it really doesn’t make any sense to be upset and annoyed by what we’ve chosen to do at a certain moment considering that one’s certain choices are based on some particular time and situation; in other words, such choices do have the possibilities to be totally replaced by other choices when they occur at other moments. So it’s really of no necessity to be upset by a choice made at a specific moment now that we are in a continuity of choosing ourselves.

## **4. Conclusion**

As one of the leading philosophers on Existentialism in the 20th century, Sartre is an advocate of absolute freedom. According to Sartre, there is nothing besides the existing individual, which is the only thing that exists in this world; that is, one is absolutely free, with no external laws, value standards and public order to observe. However, considering various non-negligible social and physical constraints on humanity, we put a question mark on Sartre’s statement that individuals are endowed with unlimited freedom. Besides, Sartre’s proposal of

full responsibility, to some extent, is also open to doubt, since he simply concentrates on the rational side of individuals while ignores the fact that, according to Freud, the unconsciousness also exerts enormous influence on one's acts. Therefore, taking what Sartre has said about absolute freedom and full responsibility, a consequence of absolute freedom, into consideration, we can see that his notion of freedom is interspersed with contradictions in spite of its merits.

### **Acknowledgments**

This work was supported by the Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform Project of Guangdong Province in 2020 under Grant Yue Jiao Gao Letter 2020 No.20, Guangdong Higher Education Association under Grant 20QN05, College English Teaching and Research Office (key project) of Zhongkai University of Agriculture and Engineering in 2021 under Grant Zhong Teaching Document 2021 No. 56.

### **References**

- Earnshaw, S. (2009). *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Freud, S. (2006). *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (Fang Huawen, Ed.). Xi'an: Shanxi People's Publishing House.
- Myerson, G. (2008). *Sartre's Existentialism and Humanism*. Dalian: Dalian University of Technology Press.
- Norris, M. A. (2018). Existential choice as repressed theism: Jean-Paul Sartre and Giorgio Agamben in conversation. *Religions*, 9(4), 106. <https://doi.org/10.3390/re19040106>
- Sartre, J. P. (1995). *Being and Nothingness*. London: Routledge.
- Sartre, J. P. (2001). "Why Write?" In V. B. Leitch et al. (Eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (pp. 1333-1349). New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Stumpf, S. E., & James, F. (2006). *A History of Philosophy: Socrates to Sartre and beyond*. Beijing: Peking University Press.

### **Copyrights**

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).