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3/28/18

An Interview with Jean-Paul Sartre

I chose to interview Jean-Paul Sartre because of his views on personal freedom, which is a view I deeply agree with. I have always resented the way society tries to condition us to only accept the way of the establishment as our only true options for life. I find his views on personal responsibility and freedom to be more pragmatic then most of the other philosophers that we have read so far. Throughout this paper I will attempt to get at the heart of Sartre’s ideology around these ideals and explore the nature of freedom as told by Sartre.

Me: A theme I’ve noticed in your writings is an idea of intentional freedom versus successful freedom. Could you explain in further detail?

Sartre: Certainly, freedom is an idea and not an actual thing. Try to imagine for a moment how you would give someone freedom. Would it be an object you pass over like a glass of wine? More than likely if a person would be asking for freedom, then they themselves wouldn’t know what freedom was even if they had it. Freedom is a state on consciousness and not so easily understood or even to some degree can be understood by some. This means that a person must understand that they are always free if they can achieve this state of consciousness. If you participate in society, you do so willingly, and the constructs of that society can only constrain you if you let them. Therefore, if you are free in your mind then your actions have no bearing on your freedom.

Me: When you say that freedom as a state of consciousness is not so easily or can be understood, what exactly are you driving at? Are you saying that some people are incapable of realizing they are free?

Sartre: Not exactly, I’m alluding to the idea that some people may be too heavily imprinted upon by their society to realize that they are free. The church is a great example to illustrate my point, so ask a Christian who has spent their entire life in the church if God exists. The Christian would be unable to accept any reality in which there is no God, because they have been fully indoctrinated by their social construct. They are unable to comprehend that they are choosing to believe in God because there is no scenario in their mind in which God is able to be non-existent. This brings me to the point that they are unable to understand their freedom and thus unable to realize their freedom. There are those of course who are mentally unable to grasp any concept, but they are closer to nothingness since they can create but do so with a limited understanding.

Me: What would you say about biological freedom? Am I truly free or genetically predisposed to certain proclivities? Also, what about biological factors that we have no freedom from like urination, etc.?

Sartre: To some degree we don’t have direct control over something like urination, but it’s a byproduct of choosing to eat and drink. I say that by imbibing sustenance you are also agreeing to later expel the waste generated by you body. It may on the surface seem like you don’t have a choice, but it’s more obfuscated than you might assume. As for biological freedom I do believe we still have freedom, but some people will have a harder time realizing their freedom. If you imagine life as a hallway with doors of possibility, then having a predisposition for something will make that door of possibility seem far more attractive than it would to either of us. The person still must make a conscious decision to open that door, and past that they fall into a psychological constraint of their freedom. There is no chain to the bottle for an alcoholic or to the needle for a heroine addict, but they would say that they are powerless over their choice to use. Although, I would say that person could choose to not walk down that hallway by committing suicide. A person could use that as a way of not continuing to suffer from their addictions or disorders and in some cases, they use drugs to kill themselves.

Me: Could a psychological constraint bar someone from freedom, since some conditions would make a person in capable of even caring for themselves? I hear you when you say someone must make the first choice in an addiction but what about every choice after? Could you say their freedom becomes further and further from them each time they use?

Sartre: Some conditions have the potential to bar someone from realizing anything about their lives, while some can be treated. For treatment you would have to stay in the social construct but could choose that path or choose to return to madness and full relinquish your freedom. I suppose if a person were not able to reach a state of sanity then they would never be truly free. As for an addict, maybe instead of the enticing door I mentioned earlier it is a trap door that falls out from under you. It’s hard to not know if you have a predisposition for addiction as you would grow up suffering from the addiction of a family member. Unless of course you were adopted, but most addicts know they are walking a fine line. Maybe like the madman we talked about earlier they are at the state of recovery where they can choose to remain free or descend back into madness. They would have a true choice of freedom or madness where the madman would only have a limited choice since their sanity is predicated upon submission to society. I think the more an addict uses the greater the incentive becomes to continue their behavior, so it could be possible that the incentive could eventually be so great it could limit your capacity for freedom. Then again, they would also have the choice of living that life or not.

Me: How could an incentive limit your capacity for freedom? An incentive isn’t an applied force or even a construct of society, so how does that make sense?

Sartre: That’s the whole idea, that the incentive to give away the incentives of society can overwhelm your freedom. Therefore, the intention is much more important than the actions, because you could try to rebel as much as you want and get nowhere. The continued choice of trying to be free is what matters not the result. This is where society will crush freedom by making the incentive to give away your freedom so great that you might not even contemplate that you have a choice. Much like children when their parents tell them something the incentive to do what their parent said seems so powerful that they have no other options. At least until they reach their teenage years and begin to understand their freedom.