CONCRETE HUMAN FREEDOM: RICOEUR ON SARTRE

ANTHONY P. CIPOLLONE

A major theme of any philosophy concerned primarily with man is freedom. This holds especially for contemporary French philosophy which has constantly in view the nature of human existence. Human freedom, therefore, proves to be an excellent touchstone for eliciting the philosophical perspectives of such eminent French thinkers as Jean-Paul Sartre and Paul Ricoeur.

It is not the case, however, that freedom is the ultimate foundation on which Sartre and Ricoeur build their philosophies; rather, their conflicting understandings of freedom are themselves founded in a prior understanding of being itself. Man and human existence may be the ultimate focus of their investigations but insofar as that existence is itself grounded in the nature of being, the field where the conflict between their opposed visions is most clear is ontology. In making this conflict explicit, therefore, I shall draw attention especially to the ontological foundations of Sartre's concept of freedom and Ricoeur's criticism of Sartre's ontology.

Sartre is, of course, well known for his espousal of an unlimited human freedom, a view which is commonly identified with existentialism in the mind of the general populace. Ricoeur, on the other hand, argues for a limited freedom on the basis of the inherently finite nature of human existence. In this paper, whose "center of gravity," as it were, is Ricoeur's critique of Sartre, I want primarily to bring forth the differing styles of these two philosophers, styles which color their visions of reality and give their philosophies as a whole a certain characteristic tone. These styles are reflected very clearly in their approaches to the question of freedom. Insight into these styles provides a point of departure for understanding their particular contributions to the philosophical enterprise as well as a perspective from which to evaluate their individual philosophical positions.

The first section of the paper is devoted to an exposition of Sartre's concept of freedom emphasizing the ontology underlying and giving rise to it. The second section details Ricoeur's critique of Sartre's ontological position, and a brief concluding section juxtaposes the two and offers some commentary on their views as related to each other.

ANTHONY P. CIPOLLONE is Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Saint Thomas Seminary. Denver.

I

In *Being and Nothingness,* Sartre posits a radical human freedom such that "(man) is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all."[1] For Sartre, man, as conscious being (being-for-itself), makes his own reality by transcending both his past and his present toward the future. Human existence is lived as a nihilation (*néantisation*) of the given in the act of fulfilling a project into the future. The world and the individual's situation thus appear with certain characteristics of instrumental utility or adversity (BN, 548) on the basis of the end freely posited by the conscious being. The freedom of man is complete insofar as he alone determines for himself what he shall be and in so doing orients the world around him.

For Sartre, the realm of being divides into two regions: being-in-itself and being-for-itself. Being-in-itself is, if we may say so, the originary meaning of being. This is the phenomenon of being (BN, xlviii-l), being as it is in itself. This being-in-itself is purely factual, that is to say, it simply is. What it is is itself but as completely opaque because completely filled with itself. "In fact being is opaque to itself precisely because it is filled with itself. This can be better expressed by saying that *being is what it is.*" (BN, lxv). Being-in-itself thus is solid and knows neither relation nor otherness—it is completely self-identical. (BN, lxvi)

Over against this inert mass of being, Sartre posits being-for-itself, which is the being of consciousness. The fundamental characteristic of consciousness is its intentionality, i.e., its character of always being directed toward an obect. "All consciousness, as Husserl has shown, is consciousness *of* something. This means that there is no consciousness which is not a *positing* of a transcendent object, or if you prefer, that consciousness has no 'content.'" (BN, li) But in knowing transcendent objects, consciousness also has an immediate relation to itself, a relation in which it knows itself as knowing.[2] The reality of consciousness therefore depends on its relation to transcendent being-in-itself.

Consciousness, i.e., being-for-itself, exists only in its relation to being-in-itself. We have seen that being-in-itself, as massive, is totally identical with itself, but being-for-itself is precisely *not* identical with itself—its being is to be oriented to what it is not. In fact, it is on the

[1]Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* trans. from the French by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1956), p. 441. All subsequent references to this work will be to this translation and will be incorporated in the text in parentheses, prefixed with the letters BN as follows: (BN, page no.).

[2]"Every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself." BN, liii.

basis of this relation alone that objects, things, a world, can be said to exist—without consciousness there would be only undifferentiated Being. "In this sense *there is no thing* without consciousness, but there is not *nothing*. Consciousness causes *there to be* things because it is itself nothing. Only through consciousness is there differentiation, meaning, and plurality for Being."[3]

The being of consciousness is thus one of nihilating being-in-itself. This nihilating activity is accomplished not in general, but always with relation to a particular in-itself.[4] The for-itself is a rupture at the heart of Being which, in its essence, is Nothingness and which constantly maintains its own mode of being by placing the distance of nothing between itself and the in-itself—it is through this nihilating activity that it comes to know itself. "This consciousness perpetually negates the In-itself by realizing inwardly that it is *not* the In-itself; it nihilates the In-itself both as a whole and in terms of individual in-itselfs or objects. And it is by means of knowing what it is not that consciousness makes known to itself what it is."[5]

Sartre does not accept the possibility that Nothingness is independent of Being,[6] so there must be an existing being through whom Nothingness comes to the world—this being is man insofar as man can question, a process which presupposes just the distanciation and "decompression" of being that nihilation implies. "(T)he rise of man in the midst of the being which 'invests' him causes a world to be discovered. But the essential and primordial moment of this rise is the negation. . . .Man is the being through whom nothingness comes to the world." (BN, 24)

On the basis of this nothingness, this disengagement from being, we can now understand human freedom. Being-for-itself, as disengaged from being-in-itself through its nihilating activity, is always "cushioned" from being-in-itself and thus cannot be affected or determined by it. In the act of nihilation, being-for-itself secretes a layer of nothingness which protects it and separates it from any influence of what it is not. (BN, 24f) In the actual working-out of this process for human reality (Sartre's preferred term for "man"), we find that man always transcends himself toward the future and defines himself in terms of an ideal non-being. This transcending toward the future is based on the perception of a "lack" in being. The

[3]Hazel E. Barnes, Translator's Introduction to BN, p. xx.
[4]Cf. Translator's Introduction to BN, p. xxi.
[5]*Ibid.*
[6]"(I)f nothingness can be given, it is neither before nor after being, nor in a general way outside of being. Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being—like a worm." BN, 21.

ideal non-being is the value, goal, or possibility which does not now exist (thus, non-being) but which is pursued as needing-to-exist. Such future orientation involves necessarily the nihilation of his past and his present as having no determinative character insofar as they are separated from the future and from each other by layers of nothingness.

The concrete choices and actions of the for-itself are based on a "fundamental project," itself groundless, which is the original choice of the for-itself in the world. This choice is the very being of the for-itself (BN, 479) and provides the orientation within which all other choices are made. The fundamental project is the fulfillment or totality of the for-itself's choice of itself, its idealized (non-) being. The concrete existence of the for-itself is a continuing effort to bring this fundamental project to full realization. Even the project itself is not determinative, however, insofar as it can always and at any time be changed—this is what Sartre calls the radical conversion. (BN, 475f, 479ff)

Freedom thus is founded in nothingness, i.e., the specific nothingness of the nihilation and definitive separation by being-for-itself from any form of being-in-itself. Any contact with being-in-itself would totally destroy the reality of human freedom.

> Man is free because he is not himself but presence to himself. . . .Freedom is precisely the nothingness which *is made-to-be* at the heart of man and which forces human-reality *to make itself* instead of *to be*. . . .(F)or human reality, to be is *to choose oneself;* nothing comes to it either from the outside or from within which it can *receive or accept.* Without any help whatsoever, it is entirely abandoned to the intolerable necessity of making itself be—down to the slightest detail. Thus freedom is not *a* being; it is *the being* of man—i.e., his nothingness of being. . . .Man can not be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all." (BN, 440-41)

Even though Sartre maintains that man is totally free, this does not imply that man can accomplish anything he wishes—a concrete human freedom is found as related to a complex of givens not of its own making which it nihilates in determining itself.[7] This situation is, however, not a brute given but is constituted in its meaning for the for-itself by the fundamental project, i.e., its free choice of itself. Thus, the situation is itself subsumed under the absolute freedom of

[7]See Joseph S. Catalano, *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's "Being and Nothingness,"* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 203ff.

the for-itself insofar as the situation takes on a relatively hostile or friendly appearance in the light of the freely projected ends of the for-itself. "Freedom, in the light of its freely chosen ends, makes the brute in-itself to be an obstacle; and the brute in-itself, as the origin of the for-itself's projections, makes an otherwise abstract freedom to be the for-itself's concrete freedom. . . . .The world and the for-itself reciprocally come to be, and this reciprocity is facticity."[8]

Sartre divides the factical situation into five areas: my place, my past, my environment, my fellowman, my death. In every case, the for-itself in realizing its freedom must take its point of departure from an unavoidable given reality not of its own making. Sartre maintains that in no case are these factors limits to freedom for it is the reality of freedom precisely to transcend and surpass the given toward its own projects.[9] As we have seen, the for-itself is essentially related to the in-itself as nihilating it. Without a specific in-itself to nihilate and so separate itself from, the for-itself could not exercise its free projection into its future, nor would that future be concrete. There must be a given to transcend, and the mode of that transcendence, while not *necessitated* by the given, is nevertheless "directed" or "oriented" by it. "Thus, although we do not freely choose the brute givens of our freedom, we freely choose our reality in relation to them. Freedom is always in relation to certain givens, but these brute givens are never external obstacles to freedom. Rather, they are the very context and ground from which freedom arises as a nihilation."[10]

For Sartre, freedom consists in the autonomy of choice, but this is not an idle choosing. Choice is identified with action, so that to choose is to do—the distinction between the intention and the act is done away with.[11] It is not necessary that the end actually be achieved, for the essential is only that the choice be made and steps be taken toward the full realization of the end (BN, 483)—choosing is identified with *acting*, not with *obtaining*. Because the choice is made in light of a particular situation, freedom is not a simple undetermined power of choice—rather, it determines itself by its very upsurge as a "doing" which is a nihilation of the situation as given. (BN, 485) Concrete freedom is freedom in a particular situation. The free act is posited and carried out in the face of a given state of things. "I will be said to be free in relation to this state of things when it does not

[8]*Ibid*, pp. 203-4.
[9]See Catalano, p. 207.
[10]*Ibid.*, p. 210. See also BN, p. 483.
[11]"Our description of freedom, since it does not distinguish between choosing and doing, compels us to abandon at once the distinction between the intention and the act. The intention can no more be separated from the act than thought can be separated from the language which expresses it." BN, p. 484.

constrain me. . . .One might even say that this situation conditions my freedom in this sense, that the situation *is there in order not to constrain me.*" (BN, 486) The paradox of Sartrean freedom is thus fully explicit: "There is freedom only in a *situation,* and 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 the free choice which human reality *is.*" (BN, 489) The world may be the arena within which freedom must operate, but it is only a condition *sine qua non*—freedom always surpasses the conditions within which it finds itself and molds them to its own purpose.

> But if consciousness exists in terms of the given, this does not mean that the given conditions consciousness; consciousness is a pure and simple negation of the given, and it exists as the disengagement from a certain existing given and as an engagement toward a certain not yet existing end. (BN, 478)

II.

Ricoeur's critique of Sartre is founded ultimately on Sartre's philosophy of being, which Ricoeur holds to be inadequate. What Ricoeur wants to show, in contrast to Sartre, is that a true understanding of human reality reveals that affirmation, not negation, is primary and that the negativity of human existence cannot be banished from the realm of Being into Nothingness. We will follow the development of this critique in "Negativity and Primary Affirmation"[12] which contains Ricoeur's most extended commentary on Sartre.

In this article, Ricoeur seeks to answer a single question: "Does being have priority over the nothingness within the very core of man, that is, this being which manifests itself by a singular power of negation?" (HT, 305) This question recognizes the negativity that in a number of ways constitutes human reality but it also seeks to orient that negativity with respect to being. In his attempt not only to answer this question but also to pose it in its full force, Ricoeur undertakes a step-by-step analysis of human reality. This analysis begins from the experience of finitude and proceeds through transcendence to primary affirmation.

A first reflection on the experience of finitude reveals that it includes both limitation and transgression of limitation. (HT, 306ff) I

[12]Found in *History and Truth,* trans. from the French by Charles A. Kelbley, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), pp. 305-328. All subsequent references to this article will be to this translation and will be incorporated in the text in parentheses, prefixed with the letters HT as follows: (HT, page no.).

find that I am open to the world through my body and that my body provides me with a unique perspective on the world. My first experience of myself as body is thus one of openness, but a finite openness. The perspectival character of my openness is an inherent limitation of it—there is a closure within the openness. The finitude of perception (point of view), which is always perspectival, is supplemented by other possible perspectives. But to recognize this finitude is itself to transcend it, for it is only in the movement of transcending that it can be experienced as a limit. The transcendence of partial perspectives toward the totality of what is present is found in the power of expression, signification, *meaning*, which is precisely a going beyond partial perspectives to the fullness of knowledge, a fullness which nevertheless is not "seen." (HT, 308f) In every case, to experience finitude is at the same time to transcend it in an act which reveals my being as limited. Thus, the notion of limitation "designates my *limited being-there* as perspective; on the other hand, it designates my *limiting act* as an intention of signifying and willing." (HT, 310)

In turning to a consideration of transcendence itself, Ricoeur finds that the act of transcending is the first negativity in the experience of finitude, for it can be expressed only negatively: "as transcendence, I am not what I am as point of view." (HT, 311) Transcendence is also seen in the process of evaluation which implies the possibility of refusal. (HT, 312) Even the recognition of the Other is a negative act, for by imagining the Other, I imaginatively represent another point of view—this limits me from outside myself. "Another is the not-I *par excellence*" (HT, 313) and is quite capable of transgressing all of my transgressions.[13]

At this point we are very close to Sartre (HT, 314) who holds human existence to be essentially a nothingness, but this is precisely the issue. Can these various nihilating acts through which man exists be hypostatized and taken as a nothingness or is it possible to find at the very heart of negation an affirmation of being as existence rather than essence, act rather than fact? Ricoeur here begins to take his distance from Sartre.

A second reflection on transcendence shows that transcendence, while negative, is in fact the negation of a prior negation—that of finitude itself. Concrete reflection discloses the priority of the totality such that finitude is recognized precisely as a *limitation*. (HT, 315) The experience of finitude, now seen to be the primal negation, is a carry-over to the existential sphere from the realm of objectivity where

[13]Ricoeur uses the words "transgression" and "transcendence" more or less synonymously.

negation is found only in terms of otherness–distinguishing this from that. (HT, 316f) The conjunction of this purely formal otherness with affectivity accounts for the negative experience of finitude.

> The negation of finitude is born of the conjunction between a relation and an affect, that is between the category of the distinct, of the other, and certain affects by which finitude is suffered like a wound and no longer merely perceived as the limitation of point of view, or. . .as the closure inherent to our openness to the world. (HT, 317)

The negative is lived in certain moods such as "sadness" which denotes a lessening of existence. A note of contingency, lack of subsistence, is thus the ontological characteristic of my existence as finite. "I am the living non-necessity of existing." (HT, 318) Transcendence, as going beyond finite perspective and aiming at meaning, is therefore a second-order negation–it is the negation of negation experienced as an "in spite of. . . ." "I think, I want, *in spite of* my finitude. *In spite of*. . . , such seems to me to be the most concrete relation between negation as finitude." (HT, 318)

There remains now the task of retrieving from within this double negation an affirmation. The gist of Ricoeur's position is that negation cannot be primary. Rather, refusal of one state of affairs is based on affirmation of a contrary state of affairs. The negativity of value, for example, experienced as a "lack" in being, hence as non-being, is in fact an affirmation of being. The situation in which I find myself is experienced as lacking, so I rebel. But rebellion itself invokes a value, affirms a state of being which *is* not but *ought to be*. Ricoeur quotes Camus: "Not every value leads to rebellion, but every rebellion tacitly invokes a value." (HT, 323) The invocation of value is a positive rather than negative phenomenon. The factual situation is seen in a negative light precisely because of the recognition and affirmation of something more which demands existence. "Let us not say therefore that value is lack, but that scandalous situations lack value, fall short of value. It is a question of things which have no value and not of values which fail to exist." (HT, 323)

We have now reached the heart of Ricoeur's criticism of Sartre. Ricoeur maintains that Sartre has an inadequate philosophy of being, one which sees being only as factual, thus implying that freedom is no-thing and that whatever is not thing-like is not-being. But Ricoeur's analysis has shown that values, at least, are an affirmation of being, not its negation. Being, in fact, has been shown to be at the heart of those acts which appear to be the most negative.

Ricoeur sees being in a dynamic rather than static mode—being is an *act,* the act of existing. A meditation on Greek philosophy confirms the priority of being (affirmation) over negation and understands man's existence in terms of the affirmation of being. "All (the Greeks) defined man by this act which they called *noein* or *phronein* —thinking or meditating. For them, the affirmation of being founds man's existence and puts an end to what Parmenides called 'wandering,' that is to say beyond error, the condition of wandering." (HT, 326) Being as the foundation and limit of all reality is thus seen to be dialectical in structure—it is undetermined in itself, but at the same time it is determining for the things which are founded in and through it. (HT, 327)

A dynamic philosophy of being both justifies and limits the negativity of human reality. On the one hand, embodiment requires that the originary affirmation be recovered, for it is possible to lose oneself in things without concern for the foundation. "Negativity is the privileged road of the climb back to foundation." (HT, 327) On the other hand, the limit of the philosophy of negativity is shown by its inability to go beyond extrication from things to being. The philosophy of negativity is a "mutilated" philosophy which is on the way to being but never arrives. "All the Sartrian expressions—wrenching away, detachment, disentanglement, nihilating retreat—testify with genius to this philosophy of transition; nihilation represents the obscure side of a total act whose illuminated side has not been disclosed." (HT, 328)

A philosophy of negation such as Sartre's therefore serves the purpose of putting us on the road toward a philosophy of being which is not tied to essence and thing. But Sartre himself does not carry this through. "Under the pressure of the negative, of negative experiences, we must re-achieve a notion of being which is *act* rather than *form,* living affirmation, the power of existing and of making exist." (HT, 328)

In short, Ricoeur finds that Sartre, by excluding human reality, i.e., free existence, from the realm of being is not recognizing the full range and dynamism of being. The Sartrean style is one of negation, of separation and isolation whereas the Ricoeurean style is one of affirmation, of inter-involvement and mutual reciprocity of affirmative and negative.[14]

[14]Ricoeur's position on the necessary reciprocity of voluntary and involuntary, resulting in a *limited* human freedom is developed in "The Unity of the Voluntary and the Involuntary as a Limiting Idea" found in Nathaniel Lawrence and Daniel O'Connor, eds., *Readings in Existential Phenomenology,* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967), pp. 93-112 and at much greater length in Volume I of the Philosophy of the Will, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary,* trans. from the French by Erazim V. Kohak, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966).

III.

I would like to conclude this paper with some observations on the contrasting styles of Sartre and Ricoeur and the relative adequacy of their philosophies of freedom.

As a result of their differing philosophies of being, Sartre and Ricoeur see the place and function of man in the world quite differently. Sartre is concerned primarily to preserve human freedom, a task which necessitates taking a distance from the factual and factical world to avoid being "contaminated" with being. Ricoeur, on the other hand, sees human freedom as limited by the very structure of human reality. Like Sartre, he sees that freedom is always necessarily in situation, but unlike Sartre he sees a true reciprocity between the free will and that which confronts it. For Ricoeur, the fulfillment of human reality and human freedom is found in a reciprocal interaction between voluntary and involuntary, between freedom and nature. As limited, human freedom is receptive as well as creative. Freedom is not totally unmotivated, but rather can only be exercised in the light of motives. "A fine cleavage runs through our freedom precisely because it is active and receptive, because it is a human freedom and not a creative 'fiat.' "[15] Ricoeur does not see immersion in being to be a destructive force with respect to freedom, but on the contrary finds it to be that which indeed makes a truly human freedom possible.

In my view, the Sartrean *engagement* is less than adequate, for even though the situation provides the "staging area" for freedom, there is no true interaction with it. The situation is in large degree dependent on my project, i.e., my free choice of myself. Sartre's concern for nihilation and distance makes it impossible that the situation could play any truly meaningful role in the living out of human freedom. Ricoeur's analysis is much more satisfying in that he gives full play to the limitations of freedom experienced by all men and in so doing anchors man firmly in the world with his freedom intact.

My overall impression is that Ricoeur takes the realities of the human situation more seriously than does Sartre. It appears that Sartrean freedom can be realized only through some form of mental gymnastics whereby I isolate myself from my situation and so appear to have control over it. Sartrean freedom is in every case a struggle for control or dominance over the factical situation or the Other.[16] Ricoeur's analysis, however, situates man in terms of an ideal limit, a limit which is not Sartrean creative freedom, but a freedom which is

[15] "The Unity of the Voluntary and the Involuntary as a Limiting Idea," *art. cit.*, p. 107.

[16] See "Concrete Relations with Others" in BN, pp. 361-430.

motivated, achieved, and situated by its body.[17] Human freedom for Ricoeur orients itself with respect to the situation—its creativity is balanced by and derived from what it finds and receives.

Ricoeur's critique of Sartre is thus, in my view, a telling one. He recognizes the value of Sartre's analyses and places them in perspective by showing where they fail and how they may be supplemented in terms of a more dynamic and inclusive philosophy of being. Human reality is negative, but its negativity conceals a deeper affirmation of being, an affirmation which it is the unending task of human existence to recover in its originary force.

---

[17]See "The Unity of the Voluntary and the Involuntary as a Limiting Idea", pp 94, 107f. and *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary,* pp. 482-487.