

SARTRE'S ABSOLUTE FREEDOM IN *BEING AND NOTHINGNESS*

THE PROBLEMS PERSIST

Iddo Landau

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre distinguishes between two types of freedom. One is the freedom “to obtain what one has wished,” which is the “empirical and popular concept of ‘freedom.’”¹ The other is the freedom “by oneself to determine oneself to wish,” which is the “philosophical concept of freedom . . . [that] means only the autonomy of choice” (483/563). The former can be termed “freedom to obtain” and the latter “freedom to choose.” “Freedom to obtain” refers to our ability to act in certain ways in the practical world. “Freedom to choose” refers to the fundamental projects that we set for ourselves and, accordingly, the meanings we confer on the situations in which we find ourselves. Sartre is unequivocal that, for example, a person with no legs is not free to walk. Nevertheless, he is free to confer meanings on his situation in a variety of ways, according to his fundamental projects in life.

We are a choice, and for us, to be is to choose ourselves. Even this disability from which I suffer I have assumed by the very fact that I live; I surpass it toward my own projects, I make of it the necessary obstacle for my being, and I cannot be crippled without choosing myself as crippled. This means that I choose the way I constitute my disability (as “unbearable,” “humiliating,” “to be hidden,” “to be revealed to all,” “an object of pride,” “the justification of my failures,” etc.). (328/393)

The term “freedom to choose” could be confusing, since many of our choices lie within the sphere of “freedom to obtain.” Sartre offers an example of a person who has a flat tire, understands that he will not arrive in time to close a deal with a prospective client, and, hence, chooses to sign a contract with a different client

or even give up the entire endeavor (505/586–87). But such a choice would fall in the sphere of what Sartre calls freedom to obtain, not freedom to choose, since it does not have to do with a sufficiently fundamental project in life and the basic meanings a person attributes to himself and his situations, but, rather, with instrumental decisions about specific courses of action. Freedom to choose, then, is a technical term relating to a certain set of general choices about one’s basic projects.

Freedom to choose and freedom to obtain are interrelated, since the specific projects we undertake assign particular meanings to the situations in which we find ourselves, and it is only within these spheres of meaning that we obtain, or fail to obtain, certain specific ends. Sartre presents the example of a mountain (488–89/569). If I take on the project of being a mountain climber, the mountain acquires the meaning of obstacle or challenge. But if my project is that of a lawyer, real estate developer, or environmental activist (to add more options to Sartre’s original example), the mountain has different meanings. Once projects are chosen and meanings conferred, we could find ourselves, in those spheres of meaning, succeeding or failing to obtain what we want. The mountain climber could, for example, fail to reach the mountain top; the real estate developer could fail to build hotels on the mountain; and the environmental activist might fail to preserve the natural habitat there. But the success or failure to obtain what they seek acquires its identity only because these individuals chose the projects of a mountain climber, real estate developer, or environmentalist.

Sartre uses this distinction to respond to anticipated criticism of one of his famous claims

about freedom: that it is absolute. He writes, for example, "I am absolutely free and absolutely responsible for my situation" (509/591);² "man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all" (441/485); and "existence precedes and determines essence" (438/513). Likewise, he asserts that we are "totally free" (555/641) and that

there is no obstacle in the absolute sense, but the obstacle reveals its coefficient of adversity across freely invented and freely acquired techniques. . . . 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. (488/569)

Similarly,

Our freedom creates the obstacles from which we suffer. It is freedom itself which by positing its end and by choosing this end as inaccessible or accessible with difficulty, causes our placing to appear to our projects as an insurmountable resistance or a resistance to be surmounted with difficulty. (495/576)

And since, according to Sartre, all people are absolutely free, they are all equal in being so; hence "the slave in chains is as free as his master" (550/594).

Such claims are problematic, however. First, they fly against empirical evidence and common experience. As is commonly known, people are not absolutely free. Rather, they enjoy only varying degrees of limited freedom. Second, such claims conflict with others made in Sartre's system. As noted above, he is quite unequivocal in his claim that a person with no legs is not free to walk. More generally, he asserts that "freedom can exist only as *restricted* since freedom is choice. Every choice . . . supposes elimination and selection; every choice is a choice of finitude. Thus freedom can be truly free only by constituting facticity as its own restriction" (495/576). Sartre also refers to what he calls "the paradox of freedom": "there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom. Human-reality everywhere encounters resis-

tance 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" (489/569–70). But such claims about restrictions on our freedom appear to run counter to his assertions that our freedom is absolute.

Sartre is aware of this seeming inconsistency. He points out that

the decisive argument which is employed by common sense against freedom consists in reminding us of our impotence. Far from being able to modify our situation at our whim, we seem to be unable to change ourselves. I am not "free" either to escape the lot of my class, of my nation, of my family, or even to build up my own power or my fortune or to conquer my most insignificant appetites or habits. (481/561)

However, he takes the distinction between what he calls freedom to obtain and freedom to choose to resolve the difficulties. When discussing the example of a flat tire preventing a deal from being closed, Sartre explains, "is this not explicit recognition of my *powerlessness* the clearest admission of the limits of my freedom? Of course my freedom to *choose*, as we have seen, must not be confused with my freedom to *obtain*" (505/586–87). True, one does not have absolute freedom to reach the mountain top. But one does have absolute freedom to choose the project that would render the mountain something to climb: "it is only in and through the free upsurge of a freedom that the world develops and reveals the resistance which can render the projected end unrealizable. Man encounters an obstacle only within the field of his freedom" (488/569). Likewise, although the person who has no legs is not free to walk, he is free to choose himself to be, for example, "crippled" or not "crippled" (328/393). And when Sartre says that the slave in chains is as free as his master, he does not mean that they both have equal freedom to obtain, which is obviously false, as the one is in chains and enslaved and the other is not. Rather, Sartre is making this claim solely in relation to the freedom to choose. "Of course the slave will not be able to obtain the wealth and the standard of living of his master;

but these are not the objects of his *projects*” (550/634).

Thus, Sartre’s claims about universal absolute freedom do not collide with common experience, since they refer only to freedom to choose and not freedom to obtain. Nor do his assertions about absolute freedom conflict with his other claims about the way freedom is limited since, again, the claims concerning absolute freedom refer only to freedom to choose, while claims about the way situatedness limits freedom refer only to freedom to obtain. Or so it seems.

* * * *

Some of the secondary literature on Sartre reiterates the criticism he anticipated. For example, Albert Camus criticizes Sartre’s theory of freedom for, among other things, the “impossibility of total freedom.”³ Walter Kaufmann writes that “Sartre’s extravagant emphasis on man’s complete freedom . . . was at odds . . . with the facts of life.”⁴ Reinhold Grossmann describes Sartre’s understanding of freedom as “the ostrich view of the human condition.”⁵ Wilfrid Desan asserts that “choice is never unlimited, but rather it happens to be between A or B or C.”⁶ And Herbert Marcuse argues that acts of persecution

are the brute reality of unfreedom. To the existentialist philosopher, however, they appear as examples of the existence of human freedom. . . . If philosophy, by virtue of its existential-ontological concepts of man and freedom, is capable of demonstrating that the persecuted Jew and the victim of the executioner are and remain absolutely free and masters of a self-responsible choice, then these philosophical concepts have declined to the level of a mere ideology.⁷

Other scholars, however, following Sartre, have used the distinction between freedom to obtain and freedom to choose (sometimes by other names) to counter such critics. Margaret Whitford offers one typical response:

Sartre’s doctrine of freedom has given rise to perhaps more misunderstanding than any other aspect of his philosophy. . . . The majority of his early critics were unanimous in condemning the doctrine as self-contradictory and self-defeating. . . . It is ar-

gued, on the one hand, that it is patently not true that man is totally free, and, on the other hand, that if, as Sartre admits, there are limits to our freedom, then this freedom is not absolute and Sartre contradicts himself.

It has not always been sufficiently recognized that . . . *freedom* has more than one sense in Sartre, and he slips from one to another without necessarily indicating the transition to the reader.⁸

Whitford proceeds to present the distinction between Sartre’s two types of freedom, employing the terms *ontological freedom* and *freedom in a situation*,⁹ and adds that “this condemnation has subsequently been modified by later critics who have offered a more sympathetic assessment of Sartre’s aims.”¹⁰ Likewise, David Detmer, using the terms *ontological freedom* and *practical freedom*, writes that “the slave . . . and the prisoner are free in one sense of the word, that designated by such expressions as ‘freedom to choose’ and ‘ontological freedom,’ but relatively unfree in another sense, that designated by ‘freedom of obtaining’ and ‘practical freedom.’”¹¹ Such replies to Sartre’s critics continue in recent works on his theory of freedom. Ronald Santoni, for example, argues that “Camus, among many critics of Sartre, has misinterpreted and misrepresented Sartre’s early and controversial view of freedom.”¹² According to Santoni, if we distinguish between “absolute ontological freedom” and “practical or existential freedom,” it emerges that “it is not at all contradictory to speak of the ‘absolute’ freedom of consciousness and autonomy of choice at the ontological level, and freedom within limits at the practical/existential level.”¹³ Similarly, William Wilkerson claims that

many of Sartre’s most striking and famously egregious claims about freedom, such as his claim that we are wholly and forever free or not free at all, or his claim that the slave is as free as the master, in fact refer to ontological freedom, and recognition of this makes these claims seem much less troublesome. Slaves are free to the extent that they can choose to accept their condition as natural, can choose to rebel against it in their mind, or even attempt to escape.¹⁴

As already pointed out by Santoni, there are some differences in how the authors cited above

SARTRE’S ABSOLUTE FREEDOM

understand the precise nature of Sartre's two types of freedom.¹⁵ But for the purposes of this paper, these variations on the common theme are immaterial and need not be lingered on. For all distinguish between our freedom to act and obtain in the practical world and our freedom to choose fundamental projects and attribute meanings to situations. Authors like the above cited apply this distinction also in addressing various other criticisms of Sartre's theory of freedom.¹⁶ In this paper, however, I focus only on the criticism that argues that Sartre's claim that all people have absolute freedom and, thus, are equally free, contradicts both many other claims in his system and common experience. I will propose that—early and recent replies notwithstanding—this criticism of Sartre's theory holds, and that his and others' distinction between the two types of freedom does not sufficiently contend with the criticism. Perhaps Camus, Marcuse, etc. did not notice this distinction between freedom to obtain and freedom to choose; noticing the distinction, however, need not have led them to withdraw this criticism, for Sartre's claim that all people have absolute and equal freedom is problematic even if in reference to only ontological freedom.

* * * *

There is considerable empirical evidence to suggest that we lack not only absolute freedom to obtain but also absolute freedom to choose—that is, the freedom to decide on our projects and to assign meanings to the situations in which we find ourselves. Take Sartre's example of the torturer's "red hot pincers." Sartre writes that even they "do not exempt us from being free. This does not mean that it is always possible to get around the difficulty, to repair the damage, but simply that the very *impossibility* of continuing in a certain direction must be freely constituted" (506/587). He similarly claims that "even torture does not dispossess us of our freedom; when we give in, we do so *freely*" (524/607).

But this seems to fly in face of reality. Staying with Sartre's (somewhat gory) example, almost all people will not have the freedom to choose among projects if a torturer applies red hot pincers to their flesh. The only project available to

them will have to do with the effort to stop or lessen their very sharp pain. They will not, in that situation, have the freedom to choose between the projects of minimizing or not minimizing the pain, or between the projects of minimizing the pain or becoming a mountain-climber, a real-estate developer, or environmental activist. The pain is not an obstacle because these individuals freely choose a certain project, but rather the project and meaning are imposed on them by the terrible pain they experience. The obstacle is not constituted by the project, but the project is constituted by the obstacle. The distinction between ontological and practical freedom is of no consequence here since there is no absolute freedom in either sphere.

Similarly, take Sartre's example of a slave in chains. Suppose this refers to a slave working in an Alabama quarry in 1840. The slave is not absolutely free to choose from among many of the projects Sartre mentions. Although the mine may be located in a mountain, the slave cannot select the projects of a mountain-climber or a real-estate agent. Nor can he bona fide choose, in his circumstances, the project of becoming governor of Alabama, president of the United States, a professional botanist, classics scholar, or violinist. The slave does have *some* freedom in his projects (he can choose, for example, between the project of being an inwardly submissive slave and of being a resentful one), but he does not have *absolute* freedom to choose projects and confer meanings on his situation. He is thus limited not only in his practical freedom, but also in his ontological freedom.

Whereas the slave is not free to choose such projects as becoming governor of Alabama or a real-estate agent, his master, in contrast, is free to select them for himself. Sartre is correct in stating that both the slave and his master always have some freedom to choose projects and thus confer meanings on the situations in which they find themselves. But because the situations in which they find themselves in 1840 Alabama diverge significantly, the projects they can choose and, accordingly, the meanings they can assign to their situations are similarly divergent. Thus, it is untrue that the slave in chains is as free as his

master even in regard to ontological freedom. The slave differs from his master both in practical freedom to obtain and in ontological freedom to choose.

Moreover, although the master wields more practical and ontological freedom than his slave, the former's freedom is not absolute either. Perhaps the master can choose the project of becoming a violinist, zoologist, or governor of Alabama. But—if he is tall and in his sixties—he cannot choose the project of becoming a professional jockey. Likewise, a man who has no legs cannot adopt the project of becoming a marathon runner. A deaf person cannot select the project of becoming a music critic. Similar examples abound; people's situations limit to a significant extent the projects they can choose.¹⁷

It might be objected, however, that when Sartre talks about choosing projects, he should be understood as referring only to general intentions or attitudes, unrelated to situated actions. And in that sphere of general intentions or attitudes, it could be argued, people do have absolute freedom and are equally free, so that slaves are, indeed, just as free as their masters. However, Sartre is unequivocal that ontological freedom does not relate to mere intentions or attitudes but, rather, has to do also with actions:

It is necessary, however, to note that the choice, *being identical with acting*, supposes a *commencement of the realization* in order that the choice may be distinguished from the dream and the wish. Thus we shall not say that a prisoner is always free to go out of prison, which would be absurd, nor that he is always free to long for release, which would be an irrelevant truism, but that he is always free to try to escape (or get himself liberated); that is, that whatever his condition may be, he can project his escape and learn the value of his project by undertaking some action. 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. (483–84/563–64; emphases added)

Since projects, too, have to do with situated actions, then, a person who is not in prison cannot choose the project of escaping from prison; and a

person who is in prison is not free to choose from the many projects open to people who are not imprisoned, for he is significantly more restricted in his choices.

Moreover, ontological freedom would not have been absolutely free even if it had to do only with intentions or attitudes. Our intentions and attitudes are limited by—among other things—our knowledge: the Alabama quarry slave could neither intend to be a poet, classical scholar, or professional botanist nor have an attitude of appreciation for these vocations if he had never heard of these options. People who have never heard of Buddhism can neither intend to become Buddhist monks nor have a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward Buddhism. Psychological inclinations, too, limit people's intentions and attitudes: some people may not be psychologically able to bring themselves to intend to emulate or to appreciate Jack the Ripper or Mother Teresa. One's situatedness, then, limits even one's intentions and attitudes.

What has been said here of intentions and attitudes is true also of mere wishes and fantasies. It might be suggested that the Alabama slave in 1840 was absolutely free, and as free as his master, to fantasize about becoming a mountain-climber or president of the United States. But Sartre is very clear that we should also distinguish between, on the one hand, choosing projects and conferring meanings (which he terms, somewhat confusingly, “determining oneself to wish” [483/563]) and, on the other hand, simply wishing, daydreaming, or fantasizing:

If conceiving is enough for realizing, then I am plunged in a world like that of a dream in which the possible is no longer in any way distinguished from the real. I am condemned henceforth to see the world modified at the whim of the changes of my consciousness; I can not practice . . . the suspension of judgment which will distinguish a simple fiction from a real choice. If the object appears as soon as it is simply conceived, it will no longer be chosen or merely wished for. Once the distinction between the simple wish, the representation which I could choose, and the choice is abolished, freedom disappears too. (482–83/562–63)

SARTRE'S ABSOLUTE FREEDOM

Thus, although the slave has the freedom to dream or fantasize that he is a mountain-climber or real-estate agent, he does not have the freedom to choose these projects as his own. And as with attitudes and intentions, people are not absolutely free even in their fantasies and dreams. Knowledge—alongside other factors—limits people’s freedom to fantasize and wish, as they cannot wish for or fantasize about what they have never heard of. Likewise, people’s fantasies are limited by their psychological tendencies.

Sartre seems to acknowledge that situatedness can restrict and impact projects. His response to this is that even when a project is thus affected, there is always a more primordial project in the background that remains unaffected:

If the changes which occur in my environment can involve modifications of my projects, they . . . can not by themselves effect the abandoning of my principal project which . . . serves to measure their importance. In fact, if they are grasped as the causes of my abandoning this or that project, it can be only in the light of a more fundamental project . . . since the cause is apprehended by the motivating consciousness which is itself a free choice of an end. (505–06/587)

To elucidate this principle, Sartre offers the following example:

If the clouds which cover the sky can move me to give up my project of an outing, this is because they are grasped in a free projection in which the value of the outing is bound to a certain state of the sky, which step by step refers back to the value of an outing in general, to my relation to nature, and to the place which this relation occupies in the ensemble of relations which I sustain with the world. (506/587))

Sartre argues here, then, that projects have different degrees of fundamentality, and that whenever some projects are affected by the environment, there are other, more primary ones, that are not.¹⁸ Yet this is a concession that at least some projects are affected by one’s environment, implying that our ontological freedom to choose projects is not absolute. True, Sartre claims that there is always a more fundamental project that is not restricted even when a less fundamental one is. But it is not

at all clear that this is the case. In Sartre’s own example, the most fundamental project has to do with our overall relation to the world; but people’s interactions with their environment, whether abrasive or pleasant, may well impact this project as well, making our overall relation to the world more trustful or apprehensive, optimistic or pessimistic, jovial or somber. Sartre’s discussion of the differing levels of fundamentality of projects does not show, then, that we have absolute ontological freedom.¹⁹

Thus, Sartre’s claims about absolute freedom clash with reality even if we take them as referring only to our ontological freedom to choose projects, to choose ourselves, and to assign meanings to the situations in which we find ourselves. The distinction between this type of freedom and practical freedom does not collapse the criticism of Sartre’s theory of freedom for being incompatible with reality.

Sartre’s claims about absolute freedom conflict also with other claims in his system that suggest that freedom—even ontological freedom—is limited, thus rendering the theory inconsistent. Sartre asserts, for example, that “far from being able to modify our situation at our whim, we seem to be unable to change ourselves” (481/561). Likewise,

The slave’s *facticity* is such that the world appears to him with another countenance and that he has to posit and to resolve different problems; in particular it is necessary fundamentally to choose himself on the ground of slavery and thereby to give meaning to this obscure constraint (550/634).

Similarly, through a conceptual analysis, Sartre reaches the conclusion that freedom must, in principle, always be somehow limited, for otherwise, it would not be freedom. He writes that “freedom can exist only as *restricted* since freedom is choice. Every choice . . . supposes elimination and selection; every choice is a choice of finitude. Thus freedom can be truly free only by constituting facticity as its own restriction” (495/576).²⁰ But this analysis, if valid, is applicable to any type of freedom, that is, not only to practical freedom but also to ontological freedom. It is not clear that Sartre is correct in claiming that freedom is inherently restricted. Under the tradi-

tional understanding, God is absolutely free: there is nothing whatsoever that He cannot do or that He even has any difficulty doing. Some people, of course, do not believe in God and do not hold such freedom to exist. Yet the notion itself seems completely coherent. Sartre might reply here that in order to grasp what absolute freedom might be, we need to understand what limited freedom is. However, this too does not show that the notion of an agent who is absolutely free is not incoherent in itself, and it is thus incorrect that freedom is by nature inevitably limited. Sartre's own view, however, is that any type of freedom must be somehow limited, which conflicts with his claim that all people enjoy absolute freedom. Thus, Sartre's distinction between the two types of freedom fails also to rebuff the criticism that his theory of freedom is inconsistent.²¹

Sartre's defenders might suggest at this point that the breadth of people's range of options is irrelevant; people have absolute freedom because they can always choose between some alternatives, even if very few in number. This response seems problematic, however, since the extent of one's options is quite material to one's freedom to choose: if Philip can choose to go anywhere in the world, while Jill can choose only between staying in her village and visiting a neighboring one, then Philip is freer than Jill in that measure. If Diane can choose from among the projects of becoming a scholar, hunter, jockey, artist, tour guide, or a hundred other projects while only two of these projects are options for Bob, then Diane is freer than Bob in this sphere. We hold prisoners to have less freedom than people who are not in prison because fewer alternatives are usually available to the former. This is also why handcuffs, for example, are seen to limit a person's freedom. Limitations on our set of alternatives, then, constitute limitations on freedom. Perhaps it is true that people can always choose between some alternatives, and thus they are always somewhat free. But this in itself does not entail that they are absolutely or equally free.

It might still be claimed in Sartre's defense that we have absolute freedom of choice *within* our range of available options. True, a slave whose very limited range of options consists of, say, only alternatives A and B, is free to choose

only between them. However, he is absolutely free to choose between those options. The master's range of options, albeit wider than the slave's (the master can choose from options C, D, E, . . . Z), is also limited, but he, too, is absolutely free to choose from among his available options. In this sense, then, both slave and master enjoy absolute freedom and, hence, are equally free.

Since, as argued above, the extent of freedom depends on the extensiveness of the range of available options, this argument would be problematic even if people were to have absolute freedom of choice within their range of options. But it is untrue that people are absolutely and equally free to choose even within that sphere. Consider the case of a person who suffers from acute agoraphobia. The option of becoming a tour guide is not open to him. Now consider instead a person who is afflicted with a somewhat lesser, though still considerable, degree of agoraphobia, so that despite entailing extreme difficulty, becoming a tour guide is an option for her. Yet although being a tour guide lies within the range of options for the latter agoraphobic, it would be incorrect to suggest that she is as free to become a tour guide as a nonagoraphobic person is. Likewise, it would be odd to suggest that the poor are as free as the rich, or are absolutely free, to get an excellent education, although this often exists as an option within their range of alternatives. Since there are divergences in people's freedom to choose even among their available options, it is incorrect that all enjoy absolute freedom to select any option included within that range.

What has been argued here is applicable as regards both the practical freedom to obtain and the ontological freedom to choose. The agoraphobic is not only less free to become a tour guide, but also less free to undertake this as a project. She can choose this project, but the intense fear and anxiety that this profession generates for her would make it a difficult choice: it would thus be implausible to propose that she has total freedom or as much freedom as anyone else to select this project. Generally, people tend to refrain from selecting projects they have failed at repeatedly in the past and believe they are likely to fail at in the future. Recurring failure diminishes motivation,

SARTRE'S ABSOLUTE FREEDOM

increases fears, produces tension, and decreases possible enjoyment from the project. Other aspects of situatedness, such as our psychological makeup, interests, and inclinations, also affect our freedom to choose a certain project. Thus, even if a certain project is included within our range of options, we may well not be as free as others to adopt that project and certainly not absolutely free to do so.

Some might suggest that the notion of “absolute freedom” could refer to certain enlightened states of mind. For example, a prisoner could, after years of meditation or religious practice, reach a blissful state in which he can be said to have attained freedom from his worries, tensions, fears, frustrations, and, perhaps, old self and now feels happy, serene, and liberated. However, although this is a possible application of the term “absolute freedom,” many people are not free also in this sense of the term, and it is clearly not what Sartre has in mind when he discusses people’s freedom to choose projects.

Sartre’s defenders might nonetheless maintain that when Sartre discusses absolute freedom, he is not referring to the range of options we have or to our freedom to opt for one or other of those options. Rather, Sartre is merely claiming that, *qua* free, our choices lack, in final analysis, any foundation and, thus, are absolutely free (38/76). Under this approach, the situations in which we find ourselves limit our freedom to choose in a variety of ways. However, to the extent that freedom transcends or surpasses the situation in which it is positioned, it does not rely on anything and is thus absolutely free. In this sense, it could be argued, all people are always totally free, and, hence, the master and slave are equally free. Such an interpretation of total freedom, however, is rather empty. It suggests that insofar as what limits freedom is not taken into account, freedom is unlimited or that, to the extent that we are free, we are indeed solely and completely free (which, of course, is consistent with the claim that we are hardly free at all in almost all aspects of our life).

* * * *

If what has been argued thus far is correct, it is somewhat confusing to refer, as some scholars

do, to what Sartre calls “freedom to obtain” as “freedom in a situation” or “situated freedom,” since this implies that Sartre’s “freedom to choose” is not situated.²² However, as shown above, both types of freedom are somewhat situated, even if to differing degrees. Likewise, if what has been argued here is correct, it is wrong to claim, as Sartre does, that “there is no obstacle in the absolute sense” (488/569) and that “our freedom itself creates the obstacles from which we suffer” (495/576). For as shown above, there are some obstacles even in the absolute sense, and not all obstacles are the product of freedom. It is also incorrect to describe people, as Sartre does, as “totally free” (555/641), “absolutely free” (509/591), or “wholly free” (441/485). It is more accurate to describe them as partially free, or somewhat free, or free in some ways and to some degrees but not in others.

It further emerges from the above discussion that Sartre has erred in stating that whereas freedom to obtain has to do with success, freedom to choose does not (483–84/563–64). A person who has no legs cannot select the project of becoming a marathon runner because he has no chance of succeeding at this project, and the slave in 1840 Alabama could not opt for the project of becoming president of the United States because he did not have even the remotest chance of succeeding at this. When there is no chance whatsoever of successfully achieving a particular end, the project related to that end is in fact a dream, fantasy, or mere intention. Success is also relevant when projects do lie within one’s range of options, but repeated past and anticipated future failures create tension and fear that diminish one’s freedom to select a particular project. Thus, success is relevant both to freedom to obtain and freedom to choose, even if to differing degrees.

Similarly, the discussion above suggests that Sartre’s claims that “freedom precedes essence” (25/61) and “existence precedes and commands essence” (438/513) are incorrect. Essence is related, for Sartre, to situatedness, and although to a certain extent freedom does, indeed, determine situatedness or essence and gives it meaning, situatedness or essence also determines freedom, limiting the meanings people can attribute to the

situations in which they find themselves, restricting the range of projects they can choose from, and setting the context in which freedom operates. Being born “an hereditary syphilitic or a tubercular” (481/561) does determine, even if not completely, one’s freedom or existence. It would have been more accurate to say, then, that existence and essence mutually determine one another, and the former does not precede the latter.

The discussion in this paper also leads to the conclusion that Sartre’s claim that “I am without excuse . . . I carry the weight of the world by myself alone without anything or any person being able to lighten it” (555/641) is incorrect. There are some circumstances that can excuse our choice of projects, a fortiori our actions and our failure to achieve particular ends. The slave should certainly be excused for not opting for the project of becoming president of the United States, a Zen master, or a botanist if he had never heard of these options or had heard of them but did not choose them as they were completely unfeasible for him. A man who has no legs may have no excuse, or insufficient excuse, concerning some projects (such as treating himself as “crippled”), but he does have a good excuse for not opting for projects such as becoming a marathon runner. Hence, Sartre’s specific illustration of his general principle, in claiming that “we have the war we deserve,” raises difficulties too. Some people are innocent victims who do not deserve the war they endure even if we acknowledge their ontological freedom.

This essay has suggested that Sartre’s critics, such as the authors cited above, are largely correct in arguing that his claims about people’s absolute and equal freedom conflict both with empirical reality with other claims he makes, and that replies to these criticisms, both old and recent, are insufficient. Perhaps some or all of his critics were unaware of his distinction between the freedom to choose and the freedom to obtain. But this distinction is immaterial to their criticism, since Sartre’s claims regarding people’s

absolute and equal freedom clash with empirical evidence and with other claims he makes, even if understood as referring only to freedom to choose. Critics’ failure to recognize this distinction, then, is inconsequential in this context.

Of course, it could also be argued that Sartre’s assertions of absolute freedom should be read as claiming not that we have absolute freedom but, rather, only limited freedom. This interpretation would render Sartre’s theory both realistic and noncontradictory. Detmer, for example, argues, “I am absolutely free because no situation can *completely determine* how I will interpret that situation, what project I will form with respect to that interpretation, or how I will act in attempting to carry out that project.”²³ But this interpretation is problematic: if no situation can *completely* determine my choices I am somewhat free, not absolutely free. I would be absolutely free only if no situation could determine my choices in any way. Detmer adds that “Sartre’s ‘absolute freedom’ must not be confused with ‘omnipotence,’” suggesting that when Sartre refers to our absolute freedom to choose projects he in fact means that we have only nonabsolute freedom, or limited freedom, to choose projects.²⁴ This understanding, however, attributes to Sartre a very odd terminological choice and, thus, seems implausible.²⁵ Such a reading seems more of a reconstruction than an interpretation of Sartre’s theory of freedom: it offers a new, amended Sartre. The reconstructed version is, indeed, stronger than the original theory, since it eschews the latter’s conception of absolute freedom that renders the theory unrealistic and inconsistent. But as interpreters and historians of philosophy, we should explicitly acknowledge that a theory is inconsistent and conflicts with reality when this is the case, as well as distinguish between the theory and its reconstructed variations. There seems to be no reasonable way to disregard or interpret away Sartre’s problematic assertions about our absolute freedom.²⁶

NOTES

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 483; *L'Être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 563.
2. See also *Being and Nothingness*, 581; *L'Être et le néant*, 670.
3. Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Knopf, 1961), 284. Camus does not specifically mention Sartre's name in his polemic against total freedom, but as Ronald Santoni convincingly argues, it is quite clear that his many points of criticism of absolute freedom target Sartre's theory. See Ronald E. Santoni, "Camus on Sartre's 'Freedom'—Another 'Misunderstanding,'" *Review of Metaphysics* 61 (June 2008): 785–813.
4. Walter Kaufmann, *Without Guilt and Justice* (New York: Delta, 1973), 144.
5. Reinhold Grossmann, *Phenomenology and Existentialism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 167.
6. Wilfrid Desan, *The Marxism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 170.
7. Herbert Marcuse, "Existentialism: Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Être et le néant*," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 8 (March 1948): 322.
8. Margaret Whitford, *Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Sartre's Philosophy* (Lexington, KY: French Forum Publishers, 1982), 56; emphasis in original.
9. *Ibid.*, 56–57.
10. *Ibid.*, 154n1.
11. David Detmer, *Freedom as a Value* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1988), 63.
12. Santoni, "Camus on Sartre," 790.
13. *Ibid.*, 791.
14. William Wilkerson, "Time and Ambiguity: Reassessing Merleau-Ponty on Sartrean Freedom," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 48 (April 2010): 209.
15. Santoni, "Camus on Sartre," 791n26.
16. For example, Wilkerson elaborates on—among other issues—Merleau-Ponty's assertions that Sartrean freedom cannot explain our activities; that it is too abstract; and that since it is present in all human activities it becomes a meaningless category. Santoni discusses Camus's criticism that Sartrean freedom conflicts with justice, allows revolutionary totalitarianism, and gives license to violence.
17. I have focused here on the conflict between Sartre's assertions regarding absolute freedom and some of his assertions about situatedness. But the claims regarding absolute freedom clash also with some of his assertions on being-for-others, such as "the Other's existence brings a factual limit to my freedom. This is because of the fact that by means of the upsurge of the Other there appear certain determinations which I am without having chosen them" (*Being and Nothingness*, 523; *L'Être et le néant*, 606; Sartre's emphasis). Similarly, "We must recognize that we have just encountered a real limit to our freedom—that is, a way of being which is imposed on us without our freedom being its foundation" (*Being and Nothingness*, 524; *L'Être et le néant*, 607; Sartre's emphasis).
18. Interestingly, Sartre is suggesting here that more fundamental projects perform for less fundamental projects the same function that projects perform for situations: they confer meaning. It appears that a choice can function as the "project" of a less fundamental choice and as the "situation" of a more fundamental one. "Being a project" and "being a situation" seem in this passage as relations between choices rather than as two distinct spheres of choices.
19. Sartre adds that choosing a project "anticipates a margin of unpredictability" (*Being and Nothingness*, 507; *L'Être et le néant*, 588), so that we expect the unexpected to possibly happen. Indeed, when we choose projects we know that things may not turn out as we hope they would. But this in itself does not rule out that situatedness restricts our ontological freedom to choose projects. Our choice of projects may be limited by our knowledge, inclinations, and other circumstances even if we expect the unpredictable to possibly happen.
20. Sartre's emphasis; see also *Being and Nothingness*, 483, 507; *L'Être et le néant*, 563, 588.
21. Detmer (*Freedom*, 65) distinguishes between inconsistency "as a general criticism of Sartre's theory of freedom" and inconsistency "as an objection to certain specific individual passages." He suggests that although Sartre's theory of freedom might be guilty of the latter, it is not guilty of the former. I find the distinction problematic. To say that Sartre's theory of freedom is inconsistent means that it includes claims that are inconsistent (that is, contradict one another),

and if claims in a theory are inconsistent, the theory is inconsistent. Perhaps Detmer means that Sartre's inconsistent claims are not central to his theory of freedom. However, Sartre's claims about absolute freedom and restricted freedom, ontological freedom and practical freedom, are among the most central—if not the most central—claims in the theory of freedom he proposes.

22. For some usages of “freedom in a situation” or “situated freedom,” see, e.g., Whitford, *Merleau-Ponty*, 57, and Wilkerson, “Time and Ambiguity,” 208–09.
23. Detmer, *Freedom*, 64 (his emphasis).
24. *Ibid.*
25. Detmer's claim also renders his discussion of the distinction between ontological and practical freedom redundant: if, when Sartre uses “absolute freedom,” he in fact means “nonabsolute freedom,” whatever he says about absolute freedom clashes neither with empirical reality nor with his claims about the limitations on freedom. It is inconsequential, then, whether in referring to “absolute freedom” Sartre is referring to ontological freedom or to practical freedom.
26. I am grateful to Lior Levy, Ariel Meirav, and Saul Smilansky for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

University of Haifa, Mount Carmel, Haifa, Israel 31905