

“AT WHAT PRICE FREEDOM?” THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL RUDIMENTS OF SARTRE’S COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

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I. In this paper, I would like to situate the Sartrean perspective on freedom with respect to a topical, albeit broad, trend in contemporary Western civic discourse. I aim to do so, not only in the hopes of showcasing some of the most compelling aspects of Sartre’s treatment of human freedom, but also to show how such an account can serve to raise hard questions about the suppositions underlying and driving that trend.

Basically, the cultural phenomenon I would like to focus on concerns the fact that the *price of freedom* is at issue nowadays like never before. Of particular note is the way recourse is unquestioningly taken to what one might call a ‘commodification’ of freedom. We are not only asked to consider the value of freedom, but to do so in relative terms. In the process, therefore, the questions concerning freedom take on a different guise. On the one hand, what must one give up or trade for freedom? On the other, wouldn’t one rather wish to exchange freedom in favor of a life apparently more stable, less risky, and less uncertain?

There is nothing inherently new about this ‘commodification’ of freedom, it being just another version of the idea that freedom takes on a (justified) meaning only with respect to that which opposes or threatens it. Yet its most curious and distinguishing feature is that, as with any form of commodity, freedom is quite simplistically made into an object of both ‘market nostalgia’ and ‘market optimism.’ One quite easily harks back to a time when freedom appeared less of a gamble, that is, when it did not have to be traded off against anything, and one also hopes for a stage when the costs of freedom will no longer be so great.

Within this framework of understanding freedom, a critical upshot can be raised from Sartre’s perspective. One has to wonder whether the price of freedom is indeed subject to any such fluctuations. Can freedom really be now less costly, now more? As if its price were not fixed and absolute, instead of being determined on a case-by-case basis, in relation to this or that situation? As if at least certain aspects of human freedom did not involve certain costs that are incurred no matter what one values, and no matter the circumstances?

Precisely in order to show how trenchant this upshot truly is, we shall turn to the question of the price of freedom for Sartre. Indeed, in his eyes, where does it in fact lie?

II. Given the resurgence of interest in Sartre's phenomenology over the past few years, most readers will already be familiar with the stock answer to this question. It has to do with nothing other than the somewhat beleaguered notion of decentered subjectivity. Put roughly, this decentering or fracturing of subjectivity follows from the fact that human freedom can only be thought of as 'my' freedom or 'your' freedom with certain difficulties and a number of caveats.

As Sartre would have it, this is because, on the one hand, freedom lies at the core of our self-awareness – that is, the pre-reflexive *cogito* – in being that which *individuates* one's intentional acts or comportments (determining them as the intentionality of 'just this' human being) in a way that the *hic et nunc* of temporal and spatial localization never can.¹ On the other hand, despite so crucially contributing to this sense of self or 'ipseity' accompanying intentional acts, such freedom is nothing with which one can identify, and offers no position to be occupied within or with respect to it.² In other words, insofar as freedom cannot be identified with any 'egological' faculty or capacity (let alone calling into question the very need of an Ego for any basic form of self-identity), it cannot really be said either that one has such freedom or that any use is made of it. Rather, it simply is the mode in which intentional acts are accomplished, or put another way, we simply exist in light of our freedom, in the awareness of it pervading everything said, thought, felt, and done. Thus, one might say that

¹ Such empirical determinations can only apply either to what Sartre calls "the I" or to "the Ego," with which consciousness is never to be confused: "Consciousness ... can only be limited by itself. Thus, it constitutes a synthetic and individual totality entirely isolated from other totalities of the same type, and the I can evidently be only an *expression* (rather than a condition) of this incommunicability and interiority of consciousnesses." Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), 39–40. (trans. changed)

² As Sartre shows, this inability to occupy the position of freedom is clearly exemplified in the case of trying to "will a consciousness," whereupon it becomes clear that any such will must "be maintained and preserved by consciousness radically opposed to that which the will would give rise to." Sartre, *Transcendence*, 99. (trans. changed)

one's sense of self belongs to the freedom intrinsic to one's existence,³ rather than vice versa, and from this it is easy to see how Sartre can so fluidly dismantle essentialistic suppositions about self-identity and personhood.

So much for this rather fast and loose version of Sartre's treatment of self-identity, about which much more could be said. Even after such a cursory glance, its import for the question of the price of freedom should be relatively clear; freedom appears to come at the cost of the substance and stability of the self, and thus at the cost of any steady footing from which to deal with situations. All the same, the reasons for why this should be the case, for why human freedom must incur such costs, are not yet salient. Thus, while Sartre's insight into the inherent susceptibility of any such egological suppositions is indeed inseparable from his account of freedom, it does not yet make up the most basic stratum of his analyses of freedom. As I would next like to show, the central thrust of Sartre's phenomenology of freedom lies elsewhere, namely, in his identification of one of the chief features of intentional consciousness. The feature to which he persistently returns has to do with nothing other than the nature of such consciousness as an *unjustifiable* form of existence.

Indeed, can Sartre's focus on the "absolute unjustifiability" of the for-itself,⁴ which is to say, of consciousness itself,⁵ truly constitute a plausible phenomenological approach to human freedom? If it truly does lie at the core of Sartre's account of freedom—a view perhaps not to be taken out of hand—how does this play out in experience? Where lies its proof, its phenomenological evidence?

It can be helpful to approach this question from another angle. Time and again, Sartre challenges us to understand the extent to which "[his] phenomenology of subjectivity (...) features the transcendence of consciousness over its situation"⁶ instead of its embeddedness therein. Yet what for Sartre constitutes this experience of liberation of consciousness, where "each new

³ Through this "fatal spontaneity" of consciousness, as Mouillie succinctly explains, "our conscious life can surprise us and turns us into spectators of ourselves." Jean-Marc Mouillie, *Sartre: Conscience, ego, psyché* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), 40.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 481.

⁵ "[La conscience] se saisit d'abord dans son entière gratuité, sans cause et sans but, créée, injustifiable, n'ayant d'autre titre d'existence que ce seul fait qu'elle existe déjà." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 29.

⁶ Thomas Busch, *The Power of Consciousness and the Force of Circumstances in Sartre's Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 14.

involvement can give rise to a sort of bewilderment,” and where, like for Descartes before him, “what reveals itself (...) loses every reference to a world and reposes rather on an awareness of what is illusory and deceptive about every worldly connection”?⁷ It does not simply stem, as Michel Henry would have it, from an insight into our existence vis-à-vis the “pure fact” that we think, that is, have a non-objectifiable consciousness *of* appearances that is irreducible *to* those appearances.⁸ That makes up only half of the story. Rather, the full basis for Sartre’s claims lies in his grasp of the fundamental *unjustifiability* in and of consciousness itself, with which it is permeated in the “pure” original fact of its achievement. The way in which consciousness is not “susceptible to any kind of external justification or explanation”⁹ should not be seen as a mere facet, among others, of Sartre’s account of consciousness. It is the fundamental phenomenological datum in which Sartre’s insistence on the significance of consciousness for selfhood and on the necessity of “going through the *cogito*” is enrooted in the first place.¹⁰

Hence, if the “intuition of our contingency” is incontrovertible as an expression of the “failure” of consciousness to found and thus justify itself,¹¹ and yet “is not identical with a feeling of culpability,”¹² this does not at all mean it has no sort of impact whatsoever on consciousness. It is not as if consciousness could just be indifferent to or ignorant of this question hanging over it. To the contrary, only from this perspective—that of consciousness as

⁷ Roland Breeur, *Vrijheid en Bewustzijn: Essays over Descartes, Bergson, en Sartre*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 143, 22-23.

⁸ Michel Henry, “Quatres principes de la phénoménologie,” in *De la phénoménologie. Tome I. Phénoménologie de la vie* (Paris: PUF, 2003), 79-80. There, Descartes’s claim (*Oeuvres de Descartes IX*, 22) that “I am a thing which thinks, which is to say, whose whole being is thinking” is taken by Henry to mean that one’s being cannot *but* be “reduced purely and simply” to the “appearing of appearing,” which is the “pure fact of appearing” as such.

⁹ Rudolf Bernet, “Sartre’s ‘Consciousness’ as Drive and Desire,” in *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 33, no. 1 (January 2002): 5.

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 1958), 73.

¹¹ “The for-itself in its being is failure because it is foundation *only* of itself as nothingness. In truth this failure is its very being, but it has meaning only if the for-itself apprehends itself as failure *in the presence* of the being it has failed to be; that is, of the being ... which would be its foundation *as* coincidence with self.” Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 89. (trans. changed) These statements must be understood in conjunction with the earlier claim: “But this apprehension of being as a lack of being in the face of being is first a comprehension on the part of the cogito of its own contingency.” Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 80.

¹² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 80. (trans. changed)

“an unjustifiable fact”¹³—can one understand what is, according to Sartre, compelling and indeed disquieting about the sense of *freedom* that permeates self-awareness.

Accordingly, the success with which Sartre is able to provide evidence of such freedom hinges upon his ability to describe how consciousness, in being accomplished without support, help, recourse, or resource, instates a relationship of unjustifiability—what Sartre calls a kind of “nothingness”¹⁴—that comes between intentional acts and any motives that might seem to underpin them. This “nothing” (*rien*) tears open an interstice between the acts of consciousness and the pleasure or pain, need or danger to which they are immediately and intrinsically bound.¹⁵ This “nothing” is then nothing other than the basis of one’s own freedom.¹⁶ The following scenario ensues; consciousness can so little escape from what is given to it under the form of the obstacles of its situation and the “coefficient of adversity of things,”¹⁷ as remove its own fundamental “obligation” to be the (unjustifiable) locus of the givenness of all such causes or limitations.¹⁸ As such, we find ourselves starkly free precisely—and only!—in the face of whatever “guard rails” or “barriers” the world seems to set in our way.¹⁹

¹³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 80.

¹⁴ “It’s merely the fact that consciousness exists without any foundation at all. It’s a kind of nothingness proper to consciousness, which we shall gratuitousness.” Jean-Paul Sartre, *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phoney War 1939–1940*, trans. Quentin Hoare (London: Verso, 1984), 109.

¹⁵ “This freedom which reveals itself to us in anguish can be characterized by the existence of that *nothing* which insinuates itself between motives and act. (...) If someone asks what this nothing is which provides a foundation for freedom, we shall reply that we cannot describe since it *is not*, but we can at least hint at its meaning by saying this nothing is made to be by the human being in his relation with himself.” Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 34.

¹⁶ “... this nothing ... which grounds freedom,” Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 34. (trans. changed)

¹⁷ “The history of a life, whatever it may be, is the history of a failure. The coefficient of adversity in things is such that years of patience are necessary to obtain the feeblest result.” Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 481.

¹⁸ “To say that consciousness is consciousness of something means that for consciousness there is no being outside that precise obligation to be a revealing intuition of something—*i.e.*, of a transcendent being.” Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, xxxvii.

¹⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 39: “For the rest, there exist concretely alarm clocks, signboards, tax forms, policemen, so many guard rails against anguish. (...) I emerge alone and in anguish confronting the unique and original project which constitutes my being; all the barriers, all the guard rails collapse, nihilated by the consciousness of my freedom. (...) I have to realize the meaning of the world and of my essence; I make my decision concerning them—without justification and without excuse.” See also *Being*

However, once couched in terms of the unjustifiability of consciousness, it is easy to have certain reservations about this Sartrean conception of freedom, or at least to find it somewhat unusual. In conventional thinking, freedom is often taken to be a rather different matter, being commonly conceived, not as an experience of unjustifiability, but rather as a form of self-governance and absence of (causal) determination.

Such a connection of freedom with control could not be further from Sartre's meaning. The kind of freedom he would describe never grants one power, and neither does it sweep away the adversity and indifference of the world encountered in one's projects, so evocatively described in *Nausea*.²⁰ Most importantly of all, however, it is never a sort of freedom that lends itself to a feeling of confidence or assurance. To the contrary, in being about its radical lack of grounding, human existence finds freedom intrinsically unsettling.

Approached along these lines, the Sartrean tack on freedom is not as counter-intuitive as it might first seem. By way of example, this sort of unsettling freedom can easily be underscored with reference to how we experience other people's freedom, or how other people meet with ours. For instance, take the insecurity one can feel in having to explain one's actions to someone. Even though I have done nothing wrong, I can still feel quite nervous when being questioned by a police officer. One might have a perfectly rational explanation that removes one from any suspicion; there might be fully corroborative proof that puts one's story beyond any shadow of a doubt. Yet standing before the other, one knows that all this is simply not enough. If recourse is to be taken to rational explanation, one must still count on, if not appeal to, the rationality of the other. If one would call on one's rights or the other's social obligation, for example, on the pretense that the police officer should at least consider what one has to say, one must still petition the other to recognize such rights or duties. None of these things go without saying, and it is at such moments that one is at a loss before the freedom of the other. Nothing I do can stop them from refusing, rather than granting, what is being asked of them. They can simply say "No."

and Nothingness, 483: "It is by means of [existents] that freedom is separated from and reunited to the end which it pursues and which makes known to it what it is.... There can be a free for-itself only as engaged in a resisting world."

²⁰ "*Superfluous*: that was the only connexion I could establish between those trees, those gates, those pebbles. And I (...) - *I too was superfluous*." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldwick (London: Penguin, 1965), 184.

With such an example, the point being made may seem commonplace, in having to do with how the other does not always do what I want him or her to, like when the officer would hold me up from getting where I was going. However, there is another, more telling side to this phenomenon, namely, in the unsettling character of the passivity I feel before the other. This inquietude cannot simply stem from the obvious fact that the other can act in ways I cannot control, for in this respect the other's lack of cooperation still leaves me with recourse, in the form of other actions by which I might circumvent them. Rather, vis-à-vis the policeman, my unease shows a more troubling issue to be at stake, namely, my failure to hold any sway whatsoever over the other's consciousness. Like the roar of a crowd that cannot control, and only exhort, an athlete's mindset before or during a competition, the heightening tenor and urgency of my pleas can only highlight all the more the utterly passive, impotent, yet imploring relationship of one consciousness to another. There is a real fear in me that, in being so utterly impotent before the other's freedom, my intentions, values, and aims shall be choked out by the vicissitudes of consciousness for which even an appeal to truth may not warrant the slightest hesitation. This excess of intentionality, this intentionality without reserve, is thus what defines the other's freedom with respect to me; theirs is the freedom of a consciousness both coeval and incommensurable with my existence.

It takes but a quick change of scene to see how similar terms apply to Sartre's account of the experience of one's own (rather than the other's) freedom. Looking at Sartre's analyses, one can discern a significant analogy between one's uneasy sense of impotence before the freedom of the other, and the impotence of any self before the freedom of the consciousness in which that self is given (in the intentional act of willing, perceiving, moving, and so on). In both cases, the same unlimited character of consciousness is at stake. In both cases, there is the lingering possibility that there will be an entirely unjustified modification of consciousness, as a kind of rupture with respect to both precedent and circumstance, and with respect to relationships with others, values, or the familiar objectives of daily pursuits.²¹

²¹ "[Human reality] must be a being who can realize a nihilating rupture with the world and with himself ... the permanent possibility of this rupture is the same as freedom." Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 439. See also: "This implies for consciousness the permanent possibility of effecting a rupture with its own past, of wrenching itself away from its own past (...) so as to be able to confer on it the meaning *it has* in terms of the

However, while this analogy (between Sartre's accounts of both of these experiences of freedom—the other's and my own) is helpful in furnishing a further sketch of what is at stake in Sartrean freedom, it is still only a limited one. This is because, on the one hand, it seems relatively clear to say the other's consciousness is not limited in relation to me, and to maintain that this lack of limitation constitutes the other's unsettling freedom over against me. On the other hand, it seems an altogether more complicated matter to claim, as does Sartre, that one finds the freedom of one's own intentional consciousness disquietingly unlimited, for instance in a feeling of "anguish" that, like consciousness itself, appears to be "bound by *nothing*" at all.²² While Sartre has no trouble in showing that one consciousness cannot be limited by another (up to and including those special cases in which one comes under the other's gaze), it seems less straightforward simply to extend this to a much broader claim as to the absolute boundlessness of consciousness for itself. Given that he would avoid saying that only some factors, like other persons, prove ineffectual in limiting consciousness, how is it that there can be an experience of freedom with respect to anything and everything which might seem able to limit or condition consciousness?

Let us once again approach our question from a different angle. It is well known that Sartre calls into question the efficacy of motives,²³ the stability of emotive states like love or hatred,²⁴ and the constancy of resolutions and decisions.²⁵ None of these can work upon consciousness as limiting or driving factors imposing themselves on its intentionality. Rather than lying in their "grip,"²⁶ it is precisely consciousness that makes *them* work, that is, be effective and exigent, which is why it is "all activity" according to Sartre.²⁷ Nevertheless, can we not simply ask: what if consciousness was indeed in their "grip," yet simply did not know it? What if the anguish haunting intentional consciousness

project of a meaning it *does not have*." Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 436. (trans. changed)

²² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 35.

²³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 34.

²⁴ Sartre, *Transcendence*, 66.

²⁵ The gambler's resolve, in the here and now, not to fall back into his past ways, cannot take root in some *present* newfound moral fiber or strength of will. Accordingly, in light of its unjustifiability, his resolve can just as easily be a source of anguish, as something that the gambler must constantly and thanklessly "rediscover (...) *ex nihilo*" in its exigency. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 33.

²⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, xxxv.

²⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, xxxv.

were merely the product of “ignorance of [its] underlying psychological determinism”?²⁸ How can Sartre rule out that this freedom is not a matter of self-deception, just as a gambler, despite averring to the contrary, might be prey to a hidden addiction? On what evidence does one experience nothing to limit, constrain, or drive consciousness, and so nothing to justify why it is, how it is?

In the face of such questions, one further prong of Sartre’s phenomenological analysis of consciousness proves effective at shoring up his claims regarding its unjustifiable freedom that “can only be limited by itself.”²⁹ It lies, namely, in his account of the spontaneity of consciousness, thanks to which he can elaborate how nothing seems able to hold consciousness back in its achievement, while at the same time, nothing seems capable of pushing or driving it either.

The description of consciousness in its spontaneous character plays a crucial role from early on in Sartre’s conception of freedom, and its most compelling traits are already usefully set out in his early work on image-consciousness. In his theory of the image, Sartre, like Husserl before him, held that the givenness of an object in an image is essentially (and not quantitatively) different from its givenness in (sensuous) perception, but he was also not blind to the fact that images seem founded on some kind of sensuous content which comes to be transformed into the givenness of an imaginary object. However, even though some such forms of sensuous content, like paintings or photographs, seem to do more than just act as neutral screens or ‘windows’ for the apprehension of an absent or unreal object through them,³⁰ this cannot do away with the strange fact, as Sartre observes, that an “indefinable quality” of “spontaneity (...) attaches itself” to every such image-consciousness.³¹ An image-consciousness thus involves a curious form of self-awareness (or “transversal” awareness³²) of how it alone supports the givenness of an object in an image, and beyond that, how the image is a “nothingness” in and to the world.³³

²⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 33.

²⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, xxxi.

³⁰ That is, they seem to ‘motivate’ the apprehension of the imaginary.

³¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Routledge, 1948), 14.

³² Sartre, *Psych. Imagination*, 14.

³³ Sartre, *Psych. Imagination*, 14: “An imaginative consciousness ... is given to itself ... as a spontaneity which produces and maintains the object as an image. This is a sort of

Here, it is imperative to note how acutely observed and concrete Sartre's phenomenological concept of nothingness is; this "nothingness" of the image certainly does not mean that one is either oblivious to or removed from reality in the course of the imaginative act. While one might be caught up in a certain life of images, one cannot say, from Sartre's perspective, that their "nothing [is] but sweetest knowledge,"³⁴ washing consciousness of its concerns for the world. For Sartre, the imaginary offers consciousness no refuge, no point of retreat. To the contrary, the "nothingness" of images betokens a constant threat coming from the world, in light of the fact that it seems to have no reason at all to be with respect to that world, and as such, exists in what Husserl had already referred to as "*Widerstreit*" [conflict] with the world.³⁵

In the specifically Sartrean version of this "*Widerstreit*"³⁶ (which he also denotes as "the phenomenon of quasi-observation"³⁷), the image-consciousness finds itself caught between, on the one hand, being intentionally driven or motivated to apprehend the imaginary object and, on the other, being at the same time a "*sui generis* act of consciousness,"³⁸ with no motivation and no continuity whatsoever with respect to the perceptual grounding of the imaginary apprehension.³⁹ That is, in contrast to the apparent "passivity" to which

indefinable counterpart of the fact that the object occurs as a nothingness." See also Sartre, *Psych. Imagination*, 13: "However lively, appealing, or strong the image is, it presents its object as not being."

³⁴ John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 53.

³⁵ "And for the sake of its unity, the whole image object, as soon as we take and consider it as a whole, has this character of conflict." Edmund Husserl, *Phantasy, Image-Consciousness, Memory (1898-1925)*, trans. John Brough (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 55.

³⁶ For Husserl already distinguishes between different sorts of "*Widerstreit*" in the image. Cf. *ibid.*

³⁷ Sartre, *Psych. Imagination*, 5.

³⁸ "Only, if I wish to represent for myself the mural tapestry behind the cupboard, the empty intentions involved in the perception of the visible arabesques will have to be detached, posed for themselves, *made explicit*, and *degraded*. At the same time, they will cease to be founded on a perceptual act in order to constitute a *sui generis* act of consciousness." Sartre, *Psych. Imagination*, 140. (trans. changed)

³⁹ As Mouillie has importantly underlined, "an imagining or remembering consciousness 'embarks' from perceptual life." This is because the 'material analogon' underpinning the imaginative intention is, by Sartre's account, itself grounded in an ever-prior perception of the "potentiality" [*virtualité*] for representation that an object possesses. (Sartre, *Psych. Imagination*, 39-40) Jean-Marc Mouillie, "Sartre et Husserl: une alternative phénoménologique?" in *Sartre et la phénoménologie*, ed. J.-M. Mouillie (Fontenay-aux-Roses: ENS Éditions, 2000), 99.

consciousness is subject in perception,⁴⁰ the imaginative consciousness finds itself spontaneous precisely in the interruption of such perceptual passivity. Thus, while the painted canvas, with its beckoning contours, colors, and shapes, may seem to impose the image upon my consciousness, apparently by dint of its “resemblance” of an object,⁴¹ this cannot do away with the awareness I have of the image as wholly unjustifiable, *superfluous*, as “*de trop*,” in relation to the painting itself. The *presence* of the imaginary object simply does not fit in anywhere amongst those unctuous brushstrokes on the canvas, or amongst the finely grained detail of the photograph; it devolves from consciousness alone, which tears those sensuous elements apart in order to let it emerge there. For this reason, which has as much to do with how those sensuous elements of the painting ultimately *fail* in their ‘plot’ or intrigue to make something present, there is in the self-awareness accompanying the image-consciousness no evidence of any “force” or ‘action’ of the painting upon consciousness. Rather, there is only the pervasive redundancy of moment upon moment of consciousness, stretching back endlessly like “a wave among waves.”⁴²

Accordingly, as regards the “pure spontaneity”⁴³ of consciousness in which the image’s “nothingness” is enrooted,⁴⁴ it is not a simple matter of some Cartesian dictum of self-reliance,⁴⁵ that is, concerning how no one can “comprehend for me,”⁴⁶ imagine for me, and so on. Furthermore, it has little to do with any sheer indifference on the part of consciousness. Instead, it is a question of how consciousness finds itself on the other side of whatever would push or limit it, beyond necessity and the justification for its existence that this would bring. As we have learned, this is precisely Sartre’s crucial point as regards the “nothingness” of the image and the “spontaneity” of the image-consciousness; despite the unavoidable fact that I apprehend the subject of the painting only through this painted canvas before me, it still seems to me as if I

⁴⁰ “A perceptual consciousness appears to itself as passivity.” Sartre, *Psych. Imagination*, 14.

⁴¹ Sartre, *Psych. Imagination*, 23.

⁴² Sartre, *Psych. Imagination*, 14.

⁴³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, xxxv.

⁴⁴ Sartre, *Psych. Imagination*, 14.

⁴⁵ See Jean-Paul Sartre, “La liberté cartésienne,” in *Situations philosophiques* (Gallimard, 1990), 62.

⁴⁶ Sartre, “La liberté cartésienne,” 64.

alone have “created” this image, as if it is the sole product of my consciousness.⁴⁷

From this theory of the image, Sartre will extend this same sense of the “spontaneity” of consciousness to the gamut of human experiences in later works like *Being and Nothingness*. What most importantly distinguishes it is the way it allows him to show that the boundless character of human freedom does not consist in any ignorance of or indifference to limitation or necessity. Just the opposite! The “spontaneity” of consciousness is shown precisely in the constant flirtation of consciousness with necessity, and hence with a grounding and justification for its being. In each case, the limit or condition seemingly imposed on and appearing to consciousness *fails* to fulfill the promise of determination and necessity it would initially seem to hold. Moreover, the greater this failure, the deeper consciousness peers into its unfathomable freedom;⁴⁸ this is why anguish before freedom can seem especially overwhelming in crisis situations. To sum up, it is the confrontation with whatever would limit or drive consciousness that reveals the boundless character of consciousness and the spontaneity of my freedom. As Sartre succinctly writes, “It is not *because* I am free that my act is not subject to the determination of motives; on the contrary, the structure of motives as *ineffectual* is the condition of my freedom.”⁴⁹

“Spontaneity” thus describes for Sartre how consciousness occurs as a form of interference with the motives and conditions we experience in daily life. Such is the case, for Sartre, with the consciousness of pleasure. The “[pleasure] cannot exist ‘before’ consciousness of pleasure,”⁵⁰ he writes, nor vice versa, but at the same time, consciousness shows itself to be neither enrooted in nor entailed by the pleasure. This is because, as is easy to see, consciousness so easily can (and often does) occasion the ruin of the pleasure in which one would take enjoyment. This happens, for instance, as soon as desire is brought into play. No matter how intense or refined the pleasure might be, consciousness always fails to be fully consumed by the pleasure, such as when one finds something lacking or something dissatisfying about it. A soda can or cigarette

⁴⁷ Sartre, *Psych. Imagination*, 14.

⁴⁸ The one is the condition of the appearance of the other, and this is ultimately what is at stake in Sartre’s quite sophisticated notion of facticity; it concerns not simply the evidence of ‘the fact that’ there is consciousness, but how freedom *must* appear.

⁴⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 34. (emphasis added)

⁵⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, xxx.

butt can besmirch an entire pristine beach, and the perfect preparation of a meal can be brought down by a flaw in the service or a single off-color remark. Nothing seems more difficult than purely to surrender to the pleasure, and for Sartre, this redundant truth evinces how consciousness of pleasure can find no reason for (its) being *in* the pleasure.⁵¹ In its constant “overflow” of whatever it would be, that is, pain or pleasure, its “nature” or its past,⁵² it finds itself nowhere at home in the world.

All the same, it would be an unforgivable mistake to think that this Sartrean account of radically unjustifiable, unlimited, and spontaneous freedom thereby leaves consciousness ‘outside,’ uninvolved with, or disengaged from the world, in some sort of caricature of a Cartesian thinking substance. Nothing could be further from the truth, for Sartre insists that “at each instant we are thrust into the world and engaged there.”⁵³ The Sartrean account of freedom just given is, moreover, wholly consistent with this basic fact, for as we have just seen, consciousness can only apprehend its spontaneous freedom in light of whatever ways the world would hinder or push it in one direction or another.

Consciousness *must be* a so-called form of ‘engagement’ with the world precisely in order to grasp its own freedom, which is to say, in order to find itself occurring superfluously with respect to its situation. Such engagement with the world is hence nothing other than the “intolerable necessity” for consciousness never to be checked for a single moment and never simply to let the way of things take their course. Rather, in its very structure as “presence to” the world,⁵⁴ consciousness shows itself always, ceaselessly, to be “making itself” choice and desire with respect to its circumstances “without any help whatsoever.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ This is not to say consciousness finds some other reason to exist, aside from the pleasure. Rather, even though it finds no necessity for itself in the pleasure, it is wholly enmeshed with it in this unjustifiable relationship—it has no other being than this unjustifiable relationship. See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, xxx–xxxi: “There is no more first a consciousness which would subsequently receive the affect ‘pleasure’ like the water which one stains, than there is first a pleasure (unconscious or psychological) which would subsequently receive the quality of conscious like a ray of light.” (trans. changed)

⁵² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 35.

⁵³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 37.

⁵⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 121.

⁵⁵ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 441.

III. On the basis of these analyses, we have to see that Sartre would not only show the cost of human freedom to be high (despite whatever good or value that might thereby accrue to it), but also that these costs are fixed and unchanging. This boundless and unjustifiable, that is, excessive, flailing, and even absurd character of intentional consciousness never goes away, Sartre shows, precisely because there is no aspect of life in which we do not encounter potential conditions and limits. Neither, therefore, does the experience of profound unjustifiability haunting human existence ever get sublated or overcome. This most basically given fact then constitutes a deeply rooted and insuperable inquietude in self-awareness.

We thus have to consider the implications of the fixed, absolute price of freedom that Sartre's phenomenology works so consistently to establish. In short, this stems from the unsettling fact that there is something about ourselves that is non-negotiable, and that never evolves or changes. Yet as such, this entirely non-progressive freedom at the core of our self-identity does not offer us any secure base or stability of self that we must simply recover or return to from time to time; to the contrary, living with such freedom means we can act just as ridiculously and gratuitously in the prime of our lives as when we are children, and appear just as foolish at a wizened old age as when we are callow teenagers.

It is not hard to see that the contemporary discourse on the trades, gains, and losses made in the name of liberty and security departs from quite a different perspective on freedom. It would be far too easy simply to put these discrepancies down to irresolvable conceptual differences between dialogues on civil liberties and phenomenological approaches to freedom. Instead, on the strength of Sartre's findings as to what the exercise of freedom truly consists in, one has to wonder whether the current market of civil society, with its fluctuating commodities of freedom and security, truly reflects what we need concerning our liberties or rather what we would want. In short, with the help of Sartre, it seems worthwhile to ask; does not the current commodification of freedom reflect a desire to evade the unbearable price of freedom, in light of which all of its supposed pragmatic honesty ultimately becomes suspect?