

# Foundationless Freedom and Meaninglessness of Life in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper critically examines Sartre's argument for the meaninglessness of life from our foundationless freedom. According to Sartre, our freedom to choose our values is completely undetermined. Hence, we cannot rely on anything when choosing and cannot justify our choices. Thus, our freedom is the foundation of our world without itself having any foundation, and this renders our lives absurd. Sartre's argument presupposes, then, that although we can freely choose all our values we have a meta-value that we cannot choose: that values are acceptable only if they are justified by some independent factor rather than by one's free choice. I argue that we need not accept this presupposition: subjectivists may well choose to be 'proud subjectivists' who are pleased with, rather than ashamed by, their subjectivism. Indeed, many subjectivists, including those considering the meaning of life – for example, Harry Frankfurt and Brooke Alan Trisel – adopt this position.

**KEYWORDS:** absurd, choice, freedom, Jean-Paul Sartre, meaning of life, objectivism, subjectivism

Many people occasionally feel that life is absurd or meaningless.<sup>1</sup> These feelings vary from person to person in strength, duration and frequency, and are interpreted by different people differently: some take these feelings as an indication that life really is absurd, believing that when they do not feel that life is meaningless they are 'covering up'. Others believe that life is generally meaningful, and that these feelings are misleading or have to do with exaggerated reactions to idiosyncratic discontents. In his *Being and Nothingness* Sartre shows himself to belong to the former group. He describes life as fundamentally absurd, and takes it to be so whether we like it

or not, whatever we do or choose, as part of the human condition. This paper aims to provide a critical examination of one of Sartre's arguments for the meaninglessness of life in *Being and Nothingness*, an argument based on our foundationless freedom.<sup>2</sup>

Sartre does not believe in a 'human essence' or a fixed universal 'human nature' that all people share, since 'existence precedes and commands essence',<sup>3</sup> and, according to him, existence is completely free. However, he does describe in *Being and Nothingness* a fixed and universal human condition, and accepts that there are some 'general structures'<sup>4</sup> or 'certain original structures ... in each for-itself'<sup>5</sup> true of all people, whether they like it or not and know it or not. Such structures are, for example, the being-for-itself and the being-in-itself, transcendence and facticity, being-for-others and bad faith. Likewise, in all of us the for-itself is, in fact, nothingness; all of us are condemned to be free; and in all of us present free choices become choices of the past and transform into facticity. Such claims about the human condition fulfil in Sartre's system functions that, in other systems, are fulfilled by claims about human essence or human nature.

Among many other issues, Sartre also discusses the absurdity of life. Much in Sartre's claims on this topic has to do with his views on freedom. As Sartre presents it, many aspects of our being are not free. Among the factors that limit our freedom, he mentions facticity, that is, the situations in which we find ourselves. A short person is not free to become tall, and a person with one hand is not free to have two. We are also of a certain age, and live in a certain historical era. 'I am born a worker, a Frenchman, an hereditary syphilitic, or a tubercular'.<sup>6</sup> Another important factor that limits our freedom is what he calls our being-for-others, that is, the way other people's interpretations and views of us affect our identities and views of ourselves.<sup>7</sup>

Although some aspects of our being are not free, others are. We are free, according to Sartre, to choose our fundamental projects in life and the meanings we confer to the situations in which we are. For example, a person who has no legs is not free to walk. However, Sartre argues that she is free to choose, and is responsible for choosing, the meaning of her condition as related to her 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 in which 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.).<sup>8</sup>

It is as regards this type of freedom that Sartre writes that we are 'wholly and forever free'<sup>9</sup> or that 'the slave in chains ... is as free as his master'.<sup>10</sup> Sartre distinguishes between two types of freedom, the freedom 'to determine oneself to wish', which is limitless, and the freedom 'to obtain what one has wished', which is limited.<sup>11</sup> The slave is not as free as his master to obtain what he wishes, but according to Sartre slave and master are equally free 'to determine oneself to wish'. The free and restricted modes of being interact. Sartre argues 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'.<sup>12</sup>

As Sartre presents it, our freedom to choose the meaning of our condition is – within the limitations noted above – completely undetermined, and thus has no structure or essence.<sup>13</sup> But as completely undetermined, freedom also cannot rely on anything when making choices, and thus, according to Sartre, cannot justify them in any way.<sup>14</sup> Of course, we might try to justify our choices by the values to which we subscribe; but the values themselves are also chosen. Thus, our freedom is the foundation of our values as well, and we cannot rely on them when making our most basic choices:

my freedom is the unique foundation of values and ... *nothing*, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, or this or that particular scale of values. As a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable. My freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself without foundation.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, it is true that when we choose we frequently invoke reasons that our choices are based on; but the use of reasons, too, already rests on a primordial, free choice, namely the choice whether or not to invoke reasons in the first place. Our free choice, then, is also the foundation of our reasons:

But what must be noted here is that this choice is not absurd in the sense in which in a rational universe a phenomenon might arise which would not be bound to others by any *reasons*. It is absurd in this sense – that the choice is that by which all foundations and all reasons come into being, that by which the very notion of the absurd receives a meaning. It is absurd as being beyond all reasons.<sup>16</sup>

Since our freedom is determined by nothing, it is the foundation of our world without itself having any foundation. But because our choices have no foundation, Sartre takes them to be absurd. 'Such a choice made without base of support and dictating its own causes to itself, can very well appear *absurd*, and in fact it is absurd'.<sup>17</sup> We

tend to be engaged in projects and, therefore, to overlook the lack of justification for our choices and the absurdity that comes with that lack. But Sartre suggests that although it is not always explicit, some awareness of our freedom continuously lurks in the background and imparts a feeling that life is absurd. 'The possibility of these other choices is neither made explicit nor posited, but it is lived in the feeling of unjustifiability; and it is this which is expressed by the fact of the *absurdity* of my choice and consequently of my being'.<sup>18</sup> When we turn from our on-going commitments to consider our freedom, the absurdity of our condition moves to the foreground.

According to Sartre, the absurdity of our lives could be resolved only if we attained a state that is in principle unattainable, which he calls 'in-itself-for-itself'.<sup>19</sup> As mentioned above, according to Sartre, our free choice has no foundation; although we freely choose in the context of a given situation, our free choice, as free, always surpasses that situation. Hence, a full synthesis of the for-itself with the in-itself is impossible; it would be a condition in which the given is both surpassed (since the for-itself, in order to be free, must surpass the given situation in which it finds itself) and not surpassed (since the for-itself is fully synthesised with the in-itself). Put differently, it would be a free situatedness, which is contradictory. However, if the in-itself-for-itself *were* possible, it would solve the problem of our unfounded free choices,<sup>20</sup> since being both free and situated it would be a free choice that does have a foundation. Sartre believes that our inability to realise the in-itself-for-itself is a source of constant suffering and unhappiness:

The being of human reality is suffering because it rises in being as perpetually haunted by a totality which it is without being able to be it, precisely because it could not attain the in-itself without losing itself as for-itself. Human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, because people cannot attain the in-itself-for-itself they 'are condemned to despair: for they discover at the same time that all human activities are equivalent ... and that all are on principle doomed to failure'.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, curiously, although Sartre is a subjectivist as regards our values – he thinks that people are completely free to choose the meaning of their lives and that there are no justifications or objective criteria on which they can rely – he is an objectivist as regards the meaning of life.<sup>23</sup> Subjectivist theories of the meaning of life maintain that there are no objective criteria to which one can resort to prove one's views about the meaning of life, and that people

decide for themselves, according to their own criteria, whether their lives are meaningful or not and what makes them so. Hence, people cannot be wrong about the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of their lives. According to objectivist theories of the meaning of life, on the other hand, there are some objective criteria of meaningfulness and people may well be wrong in their views on whether their lives are meaningful. But although Sartre thinks that we are absolutely free to choose our values, our projects, and the specific interpretations or meanings we confer on the situations in which we find ourselves, he does not think that we are free to choose *whether* our lives are meaningful; our lives are meaningless because our choices cannot be ultimately justified, and there is nothing we can do about it. This is true of the lives of all people, all the time, whether they like and understand it or not.

Sartre also emerges as a pessimist with respect to the meaning of life. True, we do give meaning to all sorts of issues and projects in our lives; but all of that is not enough to save those lives from being absurd. As Sartre presents it, there is no purpose in life that could be realised, no achievement that could be attained, or experience that could be had that would make life non-absurd. Life is not made meaningless by one's choice to become, say, a drug addict rather than a loving father or a great composer, and there is nothing that could be done to make life meaningful. For this reason, even people whose lives are sometimes taken to be paradigms of meaningfulness, such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Shakespeare or Rubens, have, in fact, led meaningless lives.

Most people do, at some point in their lives, have fleeting sensations that life is absurd. But do Sartre's explanations show that life is indeed objectively and irredeemably so? Some might reject Sartre's claims of meaninglessness because they reject his theory of freedom and, hence, his radical subjectivism.<sup>24</sup> This, however, is not the route I will take here. At least for the purpose of this discussion, I will grant Sartre's subjectivism. I will argue that even if we accept Sartre's presuppositions – that is, grant that the notion of choice that relies on no justification is coherent, that we are indeed a 'foundation without foundation', that our fundamental choices cannot be justified and should be understood along subjectivist lines, etc. – there is no need to accept Sartre's view that life is absurd.

Sartre seems to presuppose that, although we choose all our values through our unconditioned freedom, we also have some kind of a meta-value that we do not choose, according to which values are acceptable only if they can be justified by some independent factor

rather than by one's free choice to adopt them as axioms. Perhaps Sartre takes this meta-value to be part of the basic structure of our being mentioned above; but it is unclear why this meta-value should be seen as such rather than as one of the many values we can choose either to accept or reject. If we are so free to give meanings to the situations in which we find ourselves, and are so free as regards our values, then we should be free also as regards the this meta-value that requires values to be independently justified. Thus, it is unclear why knowing that our values have no objective foundation *must* make us accept that our lives are absurd. Subjectivists may well choose to be 'proud subjectivists' or 'subjectivists with no guilt feelings' who are pleased with, rather than ashamed by, their subjectivism. Indeed, many subjectivists, including subjectivists as regards the meaning of life such as Harry Frankfurt and Brooke Alan Trisel, are quite comfortable with the lack of any objective justification for their values.<sup>25</sup> They are content to hold that, after a certain point, the basic values they support cannot be justified by any other values or facts, but should be understood as axioms that one endorses. They do not think that their subjectivism renders life meaningless in any way. Sartre, on the other hand, presents us as subjectivists who must feel guilty about our subjectivism, since he holds an objectivist standard that calls for objectivist confirmation. But why would this standard not be within the sphere of what subjectivists can choose? I see no reason, outside Sartre's system or within it, to believe that, although we are free to choose our values, we are not free to choose the meta-value regarding the justifications of our values.

Interestingly, at the very last pages of the Conclusion of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre himself wonders whether it is possible for us not to aim for the ideal of the in-itself-for-itself, yet find our freedom sufficient and coherent.<sup>26</sup> His questions about the possibility of such a prospect, however, do not follow the route suggested here. Sartre writes that even if we will be able to reject the ideal, we would continue to experience anguish. Moreover, he suggests that in such a state 'freedom chooses ... not to recover itself but to flee itself, not to coincide with itself but to be always at a distance from itself'.<sup>27</sup> He also wonders whether, if the ideal of the in-itself-for-itself is rejected, freedom will be less or more situated than it generally is.<sup>28</sup> However, according to the suggestion presented in this paper, the in-itself-for-itself need not be sought, no anguish need be experienced, and freedom needs neither to flee from itself, nor to be at a distance from itself, nor to be more or less situated than it would otherwise be. If we opt for subjectivism, we may do so while feeling quite well about it.

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## Notes

1. Sartre does not distinguish between absurdity and meaninglessness, and I follow him in this essay in using these terms interchangeably.
2. Sartre also presents other arguments for the meaninglessness of life in *Being and Nothingness*, relating meaninglessness to death. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 539–541; *L'Être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie Phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 623–625. However, the argument for the meaninglessness of life from our foundationless freedom and the arguments for the meaninglessness of life from death are independent of each other, and in this paper I focus exclusively on the former. For some other discussions of the absurdity of life in Sartre see André Espiau de La Maëstre, *Der Sinn und das Absurde* (Salzburg: Otto Muller, 1961), 87–133; Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Jean-Paul Sartre und die Konstruktion des Absurden* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966). These discussions, however, follow a different route from the one proposed here.
3. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 438; *L'Être et le néant*, 513.
4. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 512–513; *L'Être et le néant*, 594–595.
5. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 456; *L'Être et le néant*, 533.
6. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 481; *L'Être et le néant*, 561.
7. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 523–524; *L'Être et le néant*, 606–607.
8. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 328; *L'Être et le néant*, 393.
9. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 441; *L'Être et le néant*, 485.
10. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 550; *L'Être et le néant*, 634.

11. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 483–484; *L'Être et le néant*, 563–564.
12. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 495; *L'Être et le néant*, 576; emphasis in original.
13. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 438; *L'Être et le néant*, 513.
14. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 39; *L'Être et le néant*, 77.
15. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 38; *L'Être et le néant*, 76; emphasis in original.
16. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 479; *L'Être et le néant*, 558; emphasis in original.
17. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 479; *L'Être et le néant*, 558; emphasis in original.
18. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 480; *L'Être et le néant*, 560; emphasis in original.
19. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 90; *L'Être et le néant*, 133.
20. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 362, 627; *L'Être et le néant*, 429, 722.
21. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 90; *L'Être et le néant*, 133–134.
22. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 627; *L'Être et le néant*, 721–722.
23. For a typology of theories of the meaning of life see Thaddeus Metz, 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life', *Ethics* 112, no. 4 (2002): 781–814.
24. Critiques of Sartre's theory of freedom abound. See, for example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Nonsense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 72–78; Herbert Marcuse, 'Existentialism: Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Être et le néant*', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 8, no. 3 (1948): 320–334; and Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1992), 50–51. For some defences of Sartre's theory of freedom see, e.g., Ronald E. Santoni, 'Camus on Sartre's "Freedom" – Another "Misunderstanding"', *Review of Metaphysics* 61, no. 4 (2008): 785–813; David Detmer, *Freedom as a Value* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1988); and Margaret Whitford, *Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Sartre's Philosophy* (Lexington, KY: French Forum Publishers, 1982), 56–57.
25. Harry Frankfurt, 'Reply to Susan Wolf', in *The Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, ed. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 250. Brooke Alan Trisel, 'Human Extinction and the Value of Our Efforts', *The Philosophical Forum* 35 (2004): 378–379.
26. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 627–628; *L'Être et le néant*, 722.
27. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 627; *L'Être et le néant*, 722.
28. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 628; *L'Être et le néant*, 722.