

Death and Liberation: A Critical Investigation of Death in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*

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Abstract

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre boldly asserts that: "To be dead is to be a prey for the living."¹ In the following paper, I argue that Sartre's rather pessimistic understanding of death is unwarranted. In fact, Herbert Marcuse forcefully suggests that Sartre is one of the "betrayers of Utopia" because Sartre's notion of death stifles efforts towards true liberation. By returning to *Eros and Civilization*, I explain and further substantiate Marcuse's critique of Sartrean freedom as originally presented in Marcuse's essay, "Existentialism: Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*."

In so far as Existentialism is a philosophical doctrine, it remains an idealistic doctrine: it hypostatizes specific historical conditions of human existence into ontological and metaphysical characteristics. Existentialism thus becomes part of the very ideology which it attacks, and its radicalism is illusory. Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*, the philosophical foundation of Existentialism, is an ontological-phenomenological treatise on human freedom and could as such come out under the German occupation (1943). The essential freedom of man, as Sartre sees it, remains the same before, during and after the totalitarian enslavement of man. For freedom is the very structure of human being and cannot be annihilated even by the most adverse conditions: man is free even in the hands of the executioner. Is this not Luther's comforting message of Christian Liberty?²

The above paragraph is taken from the largely forgotten article "Existentialism: Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*" by the "passé philosopher" Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse's penetrating paper, published in 1948 and less than five years after the publication *Being and Nothingness*, is best viewed as a stinging criticism of Sartre's

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 593. (Hereafter, *BN*).

² Herbert Marcuse, "Existentialism: Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. VIII, No. 3 1948, 309-336, 311.

ontology in particular and Existential ethics in general. In the following paper, I flesh out Marcuse's critique in more detail by assessing Sartre's idea of freedom as it relates to death. The brute "fact" of death, and more precisely of my death, is, according to Sartre, just another battle in a long and worn out struggle between I and the Other. Indeed death for Sartre is not a structure of the for-itself (*pour-soi*) at all. In fact, death is the final 'fact' that "alienates us wholly in our life to the advantage of the Other. "To be dead," Sartre continues, "is to be a prey for the living." (*BN*, 543). I show (with the help of Marcuse) that Sartre's idea of freedom not only lacks fecundity (and profundity), but is far too pessimistic because it scuttles any attempt for real, tangible liberation. After all, even "the necessity of death," Marcuse writes, "does not refute the possibility of final liberation. Like the other necessities, it can be made rational—painless. Men can die without anxiety if they know that what they love is protected from misery and oblivion." (*Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 236). In short, I will demonstrate that an ethics which is truly dedicated to freedom in all its myriad forms (social, political, economic, sexual, etc.) must not only have a philosophy *for* life, but most importantly, it must also have a philosophy *for* death.

I divide the paper into three sections. Section one explains Sartre's notion of freedom as well as the consequences this notion of freedom has for death. Section two provides a very concise elucidation of Marcuse's philosophical position. Section three shows that Sartre's position on freedom is severely impoverished as it cannot provide the ontological ground necessary for social and political liberation.

Section One: Sartrean Freedom

In order to understand Marcuse's critique of Existentialism in general, and the specific criticism he levels against Sartre in particular, it is best to begin by examining Sartre's notion of freedom. According to Sartre, freedom is neither a positive property nor an essential aspect of the human being: we do not have freedom as if we "possessed" freewill. Nor does Sartre argue freedom to be a political or social right: we are not

‘conferred’ freedom merely because we live in a particular society and belong to a specific social order. Rather, freedom is best described as a *lack* of essence, a *lack* of being, in short as a *nihilation* of being. Indeed, “Nihilation,” Sartre writes, “is precisely the being of freedom.” (*BN*, 443).

Nihilation is the very wellspring of freedom because “consciousness is not what it is and is what it is not.” (*BN*, 67). Consciousness is not what it is, because consciousness is not a ‘thing’. Consciousness does not have an essence and therefore is free because it is not forced to be what it essentially is. On the other hand, consciousness is also “what it is not,” because consciousness is the source for all negation in the world. Without consciousness we would simply be what we already are: a being-in-itself (*en-soi*). Therefore, Sartre is correct in noting that it is only with the introduction of consciousness that denial, interrogation, doubt, and destruction come into existence. (*BN*, 8). In other words, since we do not have an essence, as *pour-soi*, we are free because we are not *forced* to be any one particular thing. At the same time we are free in another sense because we can *deny* that our social or economic class for example, makes us “who we are.” Thus, we can *doubt* and *question* our very existence. But by doubting and questioning our existence as it is now we are free to create ourselves anew.

Expanding on Sartre’s notion of freedom further, our relationship to what Sartre calls the *en-soi* or the in-itself as well as our relationship to ourselves, is one of nihilation: it is a recognition on our part that we are not our genes, not our social or economic class, not our sexual persuasion etc. Rather, as a *pour-soi*, a for-itself, we recognize that all we can ever have are ‘situations.’ A situation is defined by Sartre as a confrontation between my consciousness and external ‘facts.’ This confrontation between what I wish to be and the external constraints of my environment which prevent me from being all that I can be, requires that I make choices in a situation.

By making one choice instead of another we give meaning and value to the choice we make. According to Sartre, "There is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom. Human reality everywhere encounters resistance and obstacles which it has not created, but these resistances and obstacles have meaning only in and through the free choice which human reality is." (*BN*, 489). This choice-making ability of the *pour-soi* is what Sartre refers to as transcendence: we transcend our 'facticity', (our social or economic class, race, height, weight, etc.) precisely because we can make choices in a situation and these choices determine, though only in part, the next situation. Thus, we are always responsible for our situation as well as the consequences of our actions within a situation. Since we are ultimately the ones responsible for the choices we make in a situation, "the for-itself can not appear without being haunted by value and projected towards its own possibilities." (*BN*, 96). Regardless of the context or circumstance, human beings, Sartre famously writes, are "condemned to be free," while it is this very freedom that allows us to give meaning to our choices. (*BN*, 509).

From this very brief analysis one might think that Sartre is an ontological dualist; there can be no relationship between the in-itself and for-itself because these two 'things' are fundamentally different. This conclusion, however, would be a grave mistake. As Thomas Flynn points out:

One can see why Sartre is often described as a Cartesian dualist but this is imprecise. Whatever dualism pervades his thought is one of spontaneity/inertia. His is not a "two substance" ontology like the thinking thing and the extended thing (mind and matter) of Descartes. Only the in-itself is conceivable as substance or "thing." The for-itself is a no-thing, the internal negation of things. The principle of identity holds only for being-in-itself. The for-itself is an exception to this rule. ("Sartre" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sartre/>)

The for-itself, as Flynn later explains, is spontaneous in that it is always in a situation and this situation is temporal; we are always projected towards future possibilities, while we give meaning to these future possibilities based on the choices we have made in the past. The in-itself, however, is inert and static. It simply is what it is. However, this explanation is still problematic. It begs the question: ‘What exactly is the ontological relationship between the *pour-soi* and the *en-soi* while we are alive?’

Perhaps the clearest passage that best explains the unique relationship between the *pour-soi* and *en-soi* can be found in the section of *Being and Nothingness* aptly named “Freedom and Facticity: The Situation,” where Sartre provides a phenomenological description and analysis of the rocky “crag.” Sartre writes:

A particular crag, which manifests itself a profound resistance if I wish to displace it, will be on the contrary a valuable aid if I want to climb upon it in order to look over the countryside. In itself---if *one can even imagine what the crag can be in itself*---it is neutral; that is, it *waits* to be illuminated by an end in order to manifest itself as adverse or helpful. (My Italics). (BN, 482).

The “illumination” that Sartre speaks of here we might call the ‘contribution’ that the for-itself ‘gives’ to the in-itself. It is only because human beings project, as Sartre later, writes, “an instrumental-complex” onto the in-itself that the crag comes to have discernible features in the first place such as ‘climability’, ‘hardness’, ‘jaggedness’ etc. (BN, 482-483). What’s more, the crag, or any thing for that matter, is always viewed with a particular interest in mind. An individual may view the crag as a ‘tool’ that he or she may use to observe a landscape, while another individual views the crag as an unsightly obstacle that must be leveled. Sartre’s point is that it is this projection of our freely chosen “instrumental complex” which reveals our ‘situation.’ Thus, as Sartre notes, it is only through *our* freedom “that the crag was originally grasped as “climbable”; it is therefore our freedom which constitutes the limits which it will subsequently encounter.” (BN, 482). Without the *pour-soi* there is no ‘situation’---the crag is simply being-in-itself.

Indeed, it is even possible that there is no discernible thing that we call a ‘crag’ there. That is, it is the for-itself which is responsible for ordering the world via nihilation according to our freely chosen projects.

While we are alive, the *pour-soi* is “spontaneously” projecting itself into new situations being mindful of both past, present and future yet remaining much more than any or all of these past, present or future projects. We are always more than what our mere facticity suggests. However, this continual projection of freedom to be more than the collection of our concrete facts comes to an end at death. When the individual dies, he or she passes into the state of the *en-soi*. We become, that is, an inert, static thing. Death, therefore, or more precisely *my death*, cannot appear *in a situation* because death is that which “comes to us from the outside and transforms us into the outside.” (BN, 545). Our freedom while alive, while in a situation, has no power over our death. “To be dead”, Sartre writes, “is to be a prey for the living.” (BN, 543). As Sartre demonstrates in *No Exit*, our lives simply become potential objects for Others to interpret and re-interpret according to the Other’s unique “instrumental complex.”

One cannot truly speak of *my death*, or even of Heidegger’s *Sein zum Tode* (*being-towards-death*) because we can never *encounter* death in a situation. To be sure, we may experience situations in which our death may be an outcome, but death cannot be ‘our’ possibility nor, as Heidegger writes, “Dasein’s ownmost possibility” either, because, according to Sartre, to have possibilities is to have choices, while to be dead is simply to have no choices whatsoever. (*Being and Time*, 303). Death, then, truly “is the outside of freedom.” Our lives, our legacy and the choices we make, become objects for another *pour-soi* to reinterpret and modify just as the crag was simply an object for us to illuminate according to our own peculiar instrumental complex. If Sartre is right about all this, then we truly are “prey” for the Other when we die.

Sartre's position on freedom leads to some rather perplexing questions. First, if my body and indeed my legacy are such that they are free to be re-interpreted by the Other, then in what sense are they still considered mine? That is to say, does my personal identity, in any form, continue after I am dead? Do I not have at least some degree of freedom while alive to decide how I will be remembered? Indeed, is there anything left of 'me' when I die? These are important questions, but from Sartre's analysis it does not seem as though he makes room for them. When we die, we believe that at least some of *our* facticity remains: *our* body, *our* legacy, or perhaps even the relationships we had to others are things which are irrevocably ours and remain left over. Common sense also would have us believe that these 'facts' about us remain ours and ours alone. They cannot and must not become possible projects for the Other.

Sartre may very well claim that these questions are simply less important than the questions he attempts to answer in *Being and Nothingness*. For Sartre, these objections have nothing to do with the ontological structures of the for-itself as such. Rather, the above problems are empirical, social or indeed — depending on our importance — perhaps political concerns that have only a *parasitic* relationship to the ontological dimension. However, I think this is precisely the sort of problem that Marcuse's criticism addresses. Sartre, according to Marcuse, *recoils* from true freedom because the *pour-soi* is always *responsible* for the choices it makes in a situation. Even in 'extreme' situations such as living in a totalitarian regime, the individual, according to Sartre, is free.

For Marcuse, freedom cannot merely be 'ontological' in the traditional philosopher's sense of this word, because to make freedom 'ontological' is really to conspire with the ideological: regardless of the economic or political situation in which the *pour-soi* finds itself, one is still free to act otherwise and one is still responsible for one's choice of actions. However, if such an "ontological" foundation for freedom is somehow more primordial than political, economic or social freedom, then this may lead us to accept our already pre-given "role" in society. After all, if Pierre, (the famous waiter example from

Sartre's chapter on bad faith (*Mauvaise Foi*) in *Being and Nothingness* is a *pour-soi* who only "plays" at being a waiter then he does not feel as though he is reduced to a mere instrument: a server of food. But as Marcuse notes when Pierre 'acts' out "this prescribed role in the play, (playing a café waiter) neither his part nor his interpretation is of his own free choosing." (Existentialism: Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*, 326). Accepting a *mere* ontological definition of freedom may ultimately mean that we turn our collective backs on true freedom: political, economic, social and even biological liberation. Sartre's notion of death as that which is "outside of freedom," brackets the most important factors that comprise who we are, namely our body, our legacy and indeed even *our* death. For the Freudian-Marxist Marcuse, death can be a symbol of freedom; a source of inspiration and in point of fact a worthy goal for the human being engaged in what Marcuse calls the "the Great Refusal."

Section Two: Marcusean Philosophy

Marcuse's notion of "The Great Refusal" is notoriously and purposely ambiguous. One way to understand this concept is to think of the Great Refusal as a new ethos for the modern subject. "The Great Refusal" is a conscious refusal to accept pessimistic and cynical depictions of humankind and of modern society in general. It is to refuse to accept so called "realistic" or "pragmatic" interpretations of how society and the human being therein, functions. It is, in other words, to believe in Utopian possibilities.

Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* for example, may be interpreted as a sustained effort on Marcuse's part to show why we must refuse to accept Freud's rather depressing and dystopic account of the human condition as presented in *Civilization and its Discontents*. The human animal, according to Freud, can never escape his or her unhappiness in civilization. Human beings are merely concrete manifestations of the epic and eternal battle continually being waged between Eros, (the love instinct) and Thanatos, (the death drive). This battle, as Freud describes it in the last chapter, is played out on two planes of

human existence: the ontogenetic (the individual plane) and the phylogenetic (the plane of the species).

Ontogenetically, the Ego is responsible for fulfilling the demands of the Id through socially accepted norms, codes and mores. However, the Ego can never satisfy the libidinal wish fulfillments of the Id as the Id desires them to be satisfied (i.e. sexually, via the Pleasure Principle). The Ego must fulfill these desires via the Reality Principle: the rules, norms and laws that govern individual and collective behavior in a civilization. However, this is unsatisfactory since there is always a remainder of desire that goes unfulfilled and repressed. Eventually the individual tires of this persistent struggle to accommodate the wishes of the Id with an appropriate substitute that is socially acceptable and seeks death: a tensionless, eternal, state of peace.

Turning to the phylogenetic level we can see this same pattern in the course of human evolution and civilization. The "Performance Principle," like the Reality Principle is simply the re-direction of libidinal energy into work and the satisfaction of need *now* for the sake of gratification later. This sacrifice of immediate pleasure to satisfy need, combined with the renunciation of a polygamous and polymorphous sexual life for a monogamous one, are two of the most important factors that allow civilization to grow and flourish.

But, here too, there remains something repressed. Eros seeks to form bonds between individuals in a permanent and eternal order. But, once again, the Performance Principle, on the phylogenetic level, re-directs this instinct towards work (much like the Reality Principle forces the Ego to re-direct the erotic desires of the Id towards socially accepted outlets). As a result, the same frustration the individual experiences in his or her daily life is writ large onto the fabric of civilization itself producing the drive towards death (Thanatos) and destruction: a return to nothingness, a return to peace. (Freud, S. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 86).

Marcuse's thesis in *Eros and Civilization* is that we must 'refuse' Freud's account of the origins and 'end' of civilization even though, prima facie, this account appears "sensible" and "realistic." In a very illuminating passage in the second to last chapter entitled "Eros and Thanatos," Marcuse convincingly argues that Thanatos and Eros are not antipodal to one another, but indeed may be reconciled. Marcuse denies that the struggle between Eros and Death is eternal, as Freud suggests. (Freud, S. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 86). Rather, Marcuse implies that the primeval struggle between these two great forces is contingent and historical. (*Eros and Civilization*, 235-6). As civilization progresses (in terms of technological advancement), it is *possible* to achieve a state of gratification where every want and need, *for all individuals*, may be fulfilled. The individual would no longer be subject to the Performance Principle nor would the Ego be subject to the Reality Principle. Instead, the long forgotten, self-regulating structures of desire contained within the Id would be revitalized, allowing society to place renewed importance on aesthetic creativity, play and perhaps even sexual experimentation. With the reservoirs of a complete and evolved Eros released from the shackles of genitalia, the individual would be free of boredom, anxiety and guilt. In essence, we would be free from our very 'humanity.' (*Eros and Civilization*, 235).

Obviously we are very far from being truly free in modern society despite the great technological advancements of the 20th and 21st centuries. There is no need to expend eight hours of the working day towards fulfilling basic needs, yet many of us continue to work eight each day. And for those living in the third world it may be considerably more. The Performance Principle, which says that we must satisfy need first before desire, that we must repress desire in order to exist, is no longer the basic law of human survival. It no longer applies to the human animal. The sort of 'necessary' repression we now encounter is much different from the sort early man faced. It is not a form of repression necessary for survival, but is rather one entirely of our own making.

This historical re-interpretation of the Performance Principle is what Marcuse refers to as “Surplus Repression.” Surplus Repression is a form of repression that simply put, creates “needs” that are not truly needed, (i.e. surplus) yet demand fulfillment at great cost to the happiness of the individual in question. Such a form of repression prevents liberation because it deludes us into believing that what is merely ‘extra’ and indeed superfluous is in fact a basic need of life. There are many different forms of Surplus Repression, ranging from the self-imposed, those imposed by culture, and, as Marcuse investigates in *One Dimensional Man*, those imposed by the advertising industry. But the most stultifying form of Surplus Repression that prevents us from refusing pessimistic interpretations of the human condition is that of death.

“The brute fact of death,” Marcuse avows, “denies once and for all the reality of a non-repressive existence. He (the individual) is resigned before society forces him to practice resignation methodically.” (*Eros and Civilization*, 231). Sartre’s analysis of death lends itself to this sort of resignation. Not only will I die, but my life, the choices I make, the things I have accomplished, are truly meaningless since the Other can re-interpret these things in a completely different manner than the manner in which I interpreted them. Thus, not only does this antagonistic relationship between myself, Others and the environment exist while I am alive (as Sartre explains most vividly with the rocky crag example), it also continues even when I am dead. But if my own death removes all meaning from life then how can my life have meaning while I am alive? Sartre cannot answer this question. And because he cannot answer it, his ethical position and all Existential ethical positions which hold the same Sartrean position with respect to freedom and death, are, Marcuse boldly asserts, without value.

Section Three: Marcusean Death as non-category

I contend that Sartre’s notion of death leads to an impasse because there is something fundamentally wrong with his phenomenological depiction of our ‘situation.’ To view the environment and the Other in such obviously confrontational and antagonistic terms is to

supplant ontology with ideology. It is to “Betray the promise of Utopia.” (*Eros and Civilization*, 236). Nowhere was this clearer than in the relationship between the Other and the dead. Sartre writes: “But the fact of death without being precisely allied to either of the adversaries (I and the Other) in this same combat gives the final victory to the point of view of the Other by transferring the combat and prize to another level—that is, by suddenly suppressing one of the combatants.” (*BN*, 544). However, this pessimistic outlook both in terms of our relationship to Others and how the Other views my death conspires with “the powers that be.” And “the powers that be”, Marcuse writes,

Have a deep affinity to death; death as a token of unfreedom, of defeat. Theology and philosophy today compete with each other in celebrating death as an existential category: perverting biological fact into ontological essence, they bestow transcendental blessing on the guilt of mankind which they help to perpetuate.” (*Eros and Civilization*, 236).

What Marcuse wants to emphasize instead is the dynamic and progressive inter-relationships which exist between human beings and their environment. Therefore we should not confront the *en-soi* as something that is hostile and obstructive to our projects rather we must recognize — much as Marx recognized in 1845 — that “the thing, reality... is a *human sensuous activity, practice* (author’s Italics).” (Marx, K. “Theses on Feurbach” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Ed. Robert C. Tucker, 143). That is to say, when we “confront” the outside world we are really confronting ourselves, because this sensuous activity to which Marx refers is always dialectical: there is a dynamical rapport between the environment, others and me. Relationships that I establish between myself and other things, other people and the relationships we all have to society as a whole, are reciprocal, dynamic and most importantly mutable. They are only “instrumental” or “confrontational” if we desire them to be. It is only by emphasizing and educating our fellow human beings with regard to this fundamental insight about the human condition that will allow us, collectively, as a society and as a species, to *refuse* to accept death as a

natural limit. Indeed this may even mean refusing to accept death as a *concept*. Death would then become a non-category: a mere *flatus vocis*. Even when dead, Marcuse seems to be suggesting, we must refuse to surrender. We must exclaim: "I will not be prey for the Other." Thus, the dead are not "prey for the living" but rather fallen brothers and sisters who have fought, struggled and given their lives for the sake of human emancipation. It is only with this Marcusean response, this refusal to accept death as a limit that will enable us, collectively, to wage war against death and win for humankind its greatest achievement, namely, the conquering of death itself. (*Eros and Civilization*, 235).

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