FREEDOM: MERLEAU-PONTY'S CRITIQUE OF SARTRE

Ronald L. Hall

October 29, 1980
Freedom: Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Sartre

Abstract

In this essay I argue: (1) that Sartre's account of freedom falls back into the Cartesian problems it is explicitly designed to escape (specifically the Cartesian problem of how a disembodied will can move the physical body in freedom); that Sartre simply pushes the old Cartesian problem of how a spontaneity can act on an object back to the level of pre-reflective original freedom, without solving it; (2) that Merleau-Ponty's account does indeed move us beyond the Cartesian dilemmas by rooting freedom in its pre-reflective ground of meaning, which, in essence, is the body's pre-reflective relationality to the world; (3) and that Sartre's account of freedom rests only on the obstacle/task dialectic while Merleau-Ponty's account seems to rest on the richer dialectics of both obstacle/task and giving/receiving.
Freedom: Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Sartre

In this essay, I want to examine Merleau-Ponty's understanding of freedom as it is discussed in the last chapter of The Phenomenology of Perception\(^1\) with the aim of specifying the points at which it is an explicit critique of Sartre's view of freedom. To set the stage for this, I will give a brief exposition of Sartre's view derived from Being and Nothingness.\(^2\) Providing this background will allow us to present Merleau-Ponty's view of freedom as a polemical response to Sartre's and hence facilitate our task of critically comparing the two views.\(^3\)

Sartre is very intent upon dissociating himself from traditional (cartesian) discussions of freedom which tend to focus on the will and the mind-body problem of how the will can move the physical body. Sartre wants to refocus the discussion on the phenomenon of action, which by its very nature presupposes the integration of mind

---


\(^3\)Of course I realize that using these chapters as representative of the views of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre tends to freeze the two protagonists in positions taken in the '40's. I also realize that they continued, until Merleau-Ponty's untimely death (1961), that friendly dialogue on freedom. For example, in Sartre's Search for a Method (1960, p. 152), he says, "Man is for himself and others, a signifying being." This may sound like Sartre has come closer to Merleau-Ponty's position. However, I think this is a superficial similarity hiding a deep disagreement: as we will see, for Sartre man, "the signifying being," creates meaning in an original act of freedom, whereas for Merleau-Ponty, man becomes free in a received context of meaning. Their original disagreement persists.
and body. To those who have been swinging on the cartesian pendulum for too long, this suggestion to dismount and start over sounds attractive and promising.

Though Sartre does re-focus the discussion on the phenomenon of action, it is not so clear as to whether he has really gotten away from the cartesian framework. Action, he says, is on principle intentional. As he begins to elaborate on this definition of action, however, the slip back into cartesianism becomes increasingly evident. If one can be truly said to have acted, then, in Sartre's words, "he knew what he was doing, or if you prefer, he intentionally realized a conscious project." Indeed, the argument seems to culminate in the claim that action is based on the actor's unencumbered, lucid choice of himself as his own conscious project. This freedom of the pour-soi is absolute. There seems, in fact, to be no positive basis for relating the freedom of the pour-soi to the utterly passive, determined en-soi. The only relation between the two seems to be negative, i.e., the pour-soi is not the en-soi, just as the res cogitans in the cartesian system is defined as not being extended (res extensa).

Negation is the very essence of the human reality for Sartre, and this power of negation is the very heart of freedom. He says, "...if negation comes into the world through human-reality, the latter must be a being who can realize a nihilating rupture with the world and with himself; and we established that the permanent possibility of this rupture is the same as freedom." Along the same line, Sartre comments, "...freedom in its foundations coincides with the nothingness which is at the heart of man. Human reality is free because it is not enough. It is free because it is perpetually wrenched away from itself and because it has been separated by a nothingness from what it is and from what it will be." And again, he writes, "Freedom is precisely the nothingness which is made-to-be at the heart of man and which forces human-reality to make itself instead of to be. As we have seen, for human-reality, to be is to choose oneself; nothing comes to it either from the outside or from within which it can receive or accept...Thus freedom is not a being; it is the being of man -- i.e., his nothingness of being."

---

4Sartre, p. 559.
5Sartre, p. 567.
6Sartre, p. 568.
7Sartre, p. 568.
Actions, being intentional, always aim at what is not, and attempt to bring what is not into being what is. Take as an example a very simple intentional action: I am sitting at my desk and I begin to sense a lack -- I am thirsty. My conscious project then is literally a projecting towards what is not, the acquiring of that which will satisfy my thirst. My action of getting a drink of water was thus not motivated by an actual state of affairs in the past or present, rather it was motivated by a future possibility which my action tries to bring into actuality. As Sartre puts it, "No factual state whatever it may be is capable by itself of motivating any act whatsoever. For an act is a projection of the for-itself toward what is not, and what is can in no way determine by itself what is not."8

This conception of freedom, Sartre thinks, moves us considerably beyond the cartesian view of freedom. The cartesian view is basically that the will is perfectly free, while the "passions of the soul" are determined mechanically. Thus we have the basic duality of a free power, in conflict with, and always trying to master, a whole nexus of determined processes.

Sartre finds the cartesian view of freedom unacceptable on the grounds that it is unintelligible that a free spontaneity could act. He asks, "On what would it act? On the object itself (the present psychic fact)? But how could it modify an in-itself which by definition is and can only be what it is?"9 But the situation is also the same the other way around. Spontaneity cannot act on a determined in-itself and the determined in-itself cannot act on spontaneity. "Thus any synthesis of the two types of existents is impossible; they are not homogeneous; they will remain each one in its own incommunicable solitude."10

Not only is it true that it is impossible to make intelligible a relation between a free will and a set of determined passions in the cartesian system, it is also true, Sartre claims, that Descartes misconceived the very nature of the passions themselves. Sartre argues,

8Sartre, p. 562.
9Sartre, p. 570.
10Sartre, p. 570.
against Descartes, that the passions of the soul are not determined processes of a mechanical body but, like the free will, are autonomous nihilations. Passions, for Sartre, are like free actions in being intentional. To have a desire, for example, is to sense a lack and to posit an end; a passion is a project and an enterprise; a passion is a nihilation. "And if nihilation is precisely the being of freedom, how can we refuse autonomy to the passions in order to grant it to the will?"11

We have not yet come to the point at which Sartre thinks his own view of freedom radically diverges from the cartesian system. This radical divergence, he argues, will allow us to short-circuit the dilemma of free will and determinism. What then is this radically new "post-cartesian" starting point?

The will itself, Sartre says, presupposes a more fundamental freedom, what he calls original freedom. The passions, which the will is supposed, on the cartesian system, to be opposed to, also presuppose original freedom. The example Sartre cites here is helpful. If I am threatened, I can run away, or stand firm. To run away is an act of passion and to stand firm an act of rational will. Both presuppose, however, the same end, though neither posited this end, viz., the end of life as a supreme value. This end, Sartre argues, is posited by original freedom and the will or the passion is but a mode of relation to that end. Original freedom posits my ends and the relation I choose to have towards those ends. Original freedom decides whether I shall act passionately or voluntarily, irrationally or rationally. No longer is will opposed to passion; both are grounded in a more radical, more fundamental choice.

Sartre's own language may be helpful in summarizing this point. He says that volitions, like the passions, "...are certain subjective attitudes by which we attempt to attain the ends posited by original freedom. By original freedom, of course, we should not understand a freedom which would be prior to the voluntary or passionate act but rather a foundation, which is strictly contemporary with the will or the passion and which these manifest, each in its own way."12

11Sartre, p. 571.
12Sartre, p. 572-73.
According to Sartre, I am constantly choosing myself in original freedom and this determines my attitudes towards the ends which I posit. As he puts it, "Actually it is not enough to will, it is necessary to will to will." In the face of danger, when I act from will that means I have chosen myself as a rational, courageous, willful creature: I have willed to will. But if I react emotionally, by fleeing or fainting, I act out of passion, I choose myself as fearful, or as fainting: I will to not be willful. The for-itself is thus "the free foundation of its emotions as of its volitions."

This, then, is a brief outline of Sartre's very familiar theory of human freedom. It is clear that in it he thinks he has overcome the dilemmas of the cartesian system by founding both the will and the passions in a deep, inarticulate, but absolute and unfettered original freedom. We have yet to settle, however, the question as to whether or not Sartre has really moved significantly beyond the cartesian dilemma. It is this question that we must keep in mind as we now move on to consider Merleau-Ponty's own view of freedom and its comparison to that of Sartre.

Setting Sartre's view alongside that of Merleau-Ponty, we are immediately struck by the similarities. There is ample evidence of their friendly dialogue on the subject of freedom. Yet there is an undercurrent of criticism that turns out to be a very radical disagreement between the two. My hunch is that the difference between the two will be crucial in the question as to which of the two has moved more radically towards a truly post-cartesian definition of freedom.

In the last chapter of The Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty recapitulates his basic argument for the primacy of perception, though within the specific context of a discussion of freedom. The argument for the primacy of perception is an argument directed against the lingering ethos of cartesianism in empiricism and intellectualism especially as it manifests itself in the many forms of the mind-body problem. In the context of the

---

13Sartre, p. 573.

14Sartre, p. 574.
discussion of freedom, that dichotomy presents itself as a choice between scientism's causal determinism and absolute freedom divorced from the outside.

It is interesting to note the similarities of the two sides of the controversy that Merleau-Ponty is trying to circumvent. Both the determinists and the proponents of absolute freedom agree that if the self is involved in the world of nature, culture, body, etc., freedom is eclipsed. But both conceive of the world in an objectified sense. Because the scientistic interpretation reduces man to a thing within the world, understood as the totality of things, there can be no freedom at all. In order to save freedom, the absolutist doesn't challenge this view of the world, but accepts it, which is shown by his lifting of the self out of that situation that burdens its freedom, i.e., the objectified world. Because both conceive of the world in an objectified way, both end up objectifying the self, one in the direction of thinghood and the other in the direction of a discarnate intellect.

Merleau-Ponty, like Sartre, will have nothing to do with any compromise here. He will not allow us to be free in some actions, or free to some extent and determined in others. The reason for this is that once I am free in one action, then I can no longer be counted as a thing in the world, and hence the very presupposition of the scientistic challenge to freedom collapses. Hence no compromise will do. We need a more radical approach.

In Merleau-Ponty's critique of the proponents of choice as an unencumbered act of a pure, lucid consciousness, this more radical approach begins to be disclosed. The problem with the absolutist is that he confuses freedom with deliberate conscious, intentional action and explicit choice. On this point, both Merleau-Ponty and Sartre seem to agree -- we need to ground consciousness in a more fundamental pre-reflective relationality to the world. Merleau-Ponty says, "There is free choice only if freedom comes into play in its decision, and posits the situation chosen as a situation of freedom."\(^{15}\) But what is the nature of this pre-thematic relationality to the world? This is perhaps where the real divergence can be seen.

\(^{15}\)Merleau-Ponty, p. 437.
For Sartre the original relationality to the world seems to be an original freedom, but for Merleau-Ponty it seems to be something different. Free choice, for Merleau-Ponty, is grounded not in a more fundamental, original free choice, as in Sartre, but in a more fundamental, original horizon of meaning which makes free choice possible. Free choice presupposes a field of meaning, not a more fundamental free choice.

What is this primordial field of meaning? In Merleau-Ponty's view, it is a pre-reflexive field of meaningful possibilities that I find myself in, which I do not freely posit. This field of meaning is my givenness so to speak. It is the horizon that I dwell within prior to the objectification of the world and myself. This field of meaningful possibilities is my situation and forms the very means of my freedom. Without such a field there would be nothing to do, no way to exercise freedom. "There is not freedom without a field." 16

This field of meaningful possibilities which freedom presupposes and which is constituted dialectically in my pre-reflexive perceptual rapport with the world has at least three fundamental characteristics: spatiality, temporality and intersubjectivity.

Consider first the spatiality of my body in relation to my ambience as an aspect of my pre-reflexive field of meaning. Being a body is not here an obstacle to freedom but its very conditio sine qua non, and the same is true of the world. The world that I am pre-reflexively oriented within presents itself as a field of possible projects, and as such does not hinder freedom but brings it into being. The very idea of an obstacle to freedom

16Merleau-Ponty, p. 439.
already presupposes meaning. Merleau-Ponty says, "Even what are called obstacles to freedom are in reality deployed by it. An unclimbable rockface, a large or small, vertical or slanting rock, are things which have no meaning for anyone who is not intending to surmount them, for a subject whose projects do not carve out such determinate forms from the uniform mass of the in-itself and cause an oriented world to arise -- a significance in things." And further he writes, "It is, therefore, freedom which brings into being the obstacles to freedom, so that the latter can be set over against it as its bounds." And again he says, "The mountain is great or small to the extent that, as a perceived thing, it is to be found in the field of my possible actions." The natural, spatial horizon is the place of my freedom, the means of its actualization, and I am certainly not free in spite of my situation but by means of it.

---

Merleau-Ponty, p. 436. The example of an unclimbable rockface as an obstacle to freedom is Sartre's own example, and of course Merleau-Ponty is aware of this. (Vide: Being and Nothingness, p. 627). Other "surface" similarities also are clearly discernible, e.g., Merleau-Ponty's field characteristics of spatiality, temporality and intersubjectivity are strikingly close, and purposefully so, to Sartre's "My Place, My Past, My Fellowman" (Being and Nothingness, pp. 629ff.). But again these are only surface similarities. When Merleau-Ponty says, "There is no freedom without a field" (note 16 above), we may wonder how far this is from Sartre's "Man encounters an obstacle only within the field of his freedom" (Being and Nothingness, p. 628). Yet the difference is crucial! It is the difference between a field constituted in an act of original freedom (Sartre) and a field of meaning already given in perception within which freedom becomes actual (Merleau-Ponty). One other example of the surface similarity and the deep difference: Sartre says (Being and Nothingness, p. 629), "there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom." Merleau-Ponty would agree, there is freedom only in a situation; he would disagree that the self in an absolute original freedom constitutes that situation.

Merleau-Ponty, p. 439.

Merleau-Ponty, p. 442.
The pre-reflective field of possibilities which provides room for freedom is also temporal. The very notion of possibility implies the not-yet, that is the future. Freedom emerges only within historical continuity which connects this future with both the present and the past. Merleau-Ponty argues against the intellectualistic idea of time as a series of discrete instants. The idea of an initial, instantaneous, reflective choice of a self-constituting consciousness is a confusion, since choice presupposes a prior commitment and future consequences, i.e., continuity. As Merleau-Ponty says, "If freedom is doing, it is necessary that what it does should not be immediately undone by a new freedom. Each instant, therefore, must not be a closed world; one instant must be able to commit its successors and, a decision once taken and action begun, I must have something acquired at my disposal, I must benefit from my impetus, I must be inclined to carry on, and there must be a bent or propensity of the mind."20

A basic element of historical continuity, of course, is the past -- our historical, cultural situation into which we are thrown. Merleau-Ponty does not look at this past as that from which we must disentangle ourselves, à la Sartre, rather it is seen as the means of our freedom:

Our freedom does not destroy our situation, but gears itself to it: as long as we are alive, our situation is open, which implies both that it calls up specially favored modes of resolution and also that it is powerless to bring one into being by itself.21

The third aspect of the pre-reflexive field of possibility in which personal freedom originates is intersubjectivity. Reacting again to Sartre's concep-

20Merleau-Ponty, p. 437.

21Merleau-Ponty, p. 442.
tion of the other, Merleau-Ponty says:

Another person is not necessarily, is not even ever quite an object for me. And in sympathy, for example, I can perceive another person as bare existence and freedom as much or as little as myself. The-other-person-as-object is nothing but an insincere modality of others, just as absolute subjectivity is nothing but an abstract notion of myself. I must, therefore, in the most radical reflection, apprehend around my absolute individuality a kind of halo of generality or a kind of atmosphere of sociality. 22

And in an even more direct attack on Sartre, Merleau-Ponty writes:

...My life must have a significance which I do not constitute; there must strictly speaking be an intersubjectivity... I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but on the contrary, by being this body and this historical situation and through them all the rest... I can no longer pretend to be a cipher, and choose myself continually from the starting point of nothing at all. 23

This intersubjective matrix again does not limit my freedom but on the contrary is the means of my becoming a person capable of free and responsible acts.

The concept of a field of meaning is clearly primary for Merleau-Ponty. That is, freedom would not be possible without such a field. Freedom emerges from within the world and presupposes an integral pre-reflective relationality of self and world that cartesianism tries in vain to establish on a purely reflective level. For Merleau-Ponty a person must already be intertwined in a world of meaning before a personal act of freedom can exist.

22Merleau-Ponty, p. 448.

23Merleau-Ponty, p. 448, 452.
Now here is the fundamental difference between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty: for Sartre freedom creates meaning and hence is more fundamental, while for Merleau-Ponty meaning is more fundamental and is presupposed by freedom. For Sartre, we are condemned to be free, for Merleau-Ponty we are condemned to meaning.²⁴

This major, radical difference allows us to see to what extent Sartre is still bound in the cartesian framework and to what extent Merleau-Ponty has given us a radical alternative. Sartre's own criticism of Descartes comes back to haunt his own view: how can we render intelligible the claim that the free self creates meaning in an utter vacuum of meaning? The cartesian ego, like Sartre's free self in its original choice of itself, lacks a place to stand to launch its decision, or better it lacks a body related to the world as the context of free choice. Sartre simply pushes the old cartesian problem of how a spontaneity can act on an object back to the level of pre-reflective original freedom, without solving it. On the level of original freedom the problem still persists: how can I choose myself and posit ends if I do not presuppose a field of possible projects? Prior to the unfettered act of original freedom such a field of possible projects does not exist. Indeed original freedom, for Sartre, constitutes ex nihilo this field. But how was it a choice of anything, a choice between possible projects?

²⁴Merleau-Ponty's stress on meaning is already apparent in the "Preface" of The Phenomenology of Perception. For example, he says, "In the silence of primary consciousness can be seen appearing not only what words mean, but also what things mean: the core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape." (p. xv). It is important to note here also that "meaning" is only one of the possible translations of the French sens. It can also be translated as "direction," "sense," "tenor," etc. Yet there is a common strand, as Merleau-Ponty says, "In all the uses of the word sens, we find the same fundamental notion of a being orientated or polarized in the direction of what he is not, and thus we are always brought back to a conception of the subject as ek-stase, and to a relationship of active transcendence between the subject and the world." (Phenomenology of Perception, p. 430).
For Merleau-Ponty, the matter is different. Freedom is a phenomenon situated in a field of meaning. Freedom is the task of deciding upon the many possible meaningful projects that loom before me in the world. Freedom is not so much a power of nihilation as it is a power of appropriation. By situating the self bodily in a meaningful relation to the world prior to reflection, Merleau-Ponty has refused to objectify either the world or the self. For such an incarnate self, the cartesian problem, Sartre's problem, has been dismantled literally before it can "get off the ground."

What Sartre does not adequately see, I think Merleau-Ponty would say, is that the historical given of a particular place and time is not presented, at least at the immediate pre-reflective level of experience as a task only, something to be overcome, but it also presents itself as a gift. As Kierkegaard has so eloquently put it: "...actuality (the historical actuality) relates in a two-fold way to the subject: partly as a gift that will not admit of being rejected, and partly as a task to be realized." By concentrating only on the task of being a person, Sartre misses the point that when I come to choose, to take up my task, I do so in a setting which is, in the most literal sense, given to be received. Prior to the level in which my presence in the world as a gift to be received is taken up by me as the field of my projects, i.e., prior to my body's coming to relate itself to itself, I cannot be said to have emerged in the fullest sense as a free and responsible person. And yet, every free action, every task uptaken, has its origin in and retains its relation to my pre-reflective presence in the world which is my body in its relationality to its environment. Sartre's program seems to stall in the dimension where freedom is viewed under the categories of obstacle/task; Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, breaks through to see the richer dialectic of freedom as being that of giving/receiving and obstacle/task. Merleau-Ponty does not deny the tasks of personal existence but grounds those projects in a deeper sense of the world's presence to me as a gift to be received.


Ronald L. Hall
Department of Sociology and Philosophy
Francis Marion College
Florence, South Carolina 29501