Jonathan Webber
Rethinking Existentialism
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3. Freedom and the Origins of Reasons

Merleau-Ponty had been a friend of Beauvoir and Sartre since they were all students together in the 1920s. They discussed philosophy regularly throughout the years in which their philosophical outlooks were forged. They founded *Les Temps Modernes* together in 1945 and all three were still editors when the dispute between Camus and Sartre was played out on its pages in 1952. Although he had previously been a communist, by this time Merleau-Ponty was very sympathetic to the moderate and democratic politics that Camus was articulating. At the end of that year, Sartre published the first part of his book *The Communists and Peace* in *Les Temps Modernes* without first showing it to Merleau-Ponty, probably because his co-editor was likely to ask for its pro-communist message to be toned down. This was the start of a series of infractions and breaches of collegial etiquette that increased the tension between them until Merleau-Ponty resigned from the journal a year later.

This private dispute became public when Merleau-Ponty published *Adventures of the Dialectic* in 1955. The fifth chapter, comprising half the book, is a sustained attack on Sartre's politics that traces the problems Merleau-Ponty finds with it back to the central claim of Sartre's existentialism. Beauvoir responded with an essay in *Les Temps Modernes* arguing that what Merleau-Ponty has criticised is merely a crude caricature of Sartre's philosophy. Beauvoir's claim might seem rather surprising. Could it really be that Merleau-Ponty has misunderstood the central philosophical ideas of someone who had been a close friend and colleague for so long? Or is he perhaps rather aiming to portray a view of the philosophy that Sartre is committed to by his underlying ontological categories, whether Sartre agrees with this resulting position or not?

There is some misunderstanding on Merleau-Ponty's part, as we will see, particularly in his failure to distinguish between the meanings present in a situation and the reasons that situation presents. But we will also see that he is right that one of Sartre's fundamental

ontological claims is inconsistent with the idea of projects at the heart of his theory of freedom. Merleau-Ponty's conclusion that we should reject Sartre's theory of freedom is not fully justified by this argument, however, since an alternative would be to deny that ontological claim and retain the rest of the theory of freedom. Indeed, a careful reading of Beauvoir's response to Merleau-Ponty suggests that this was already Sartre's position by the time *Adventures of the Dialectic* was published.

1. Freedom, Reasons, and Projects

Freedom is the central concept in Sartre's initial form of existentialism. To say that existence precedes essence, according to the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness*, is to say that an individual is always free to change the goals and values that shape their outlook and behaviour. Sartre is often ascribed a view of freedom much simpler and less credible than the one he actually held at this stage of his career. This is partly because he develops his theory across the whole of *Being and Nothingness* without ever providing a concise statement of it. Although one sizeable tract of the book is specifically devoted to this topic (part 4, ch. 1, §§ 1-3), much of its groundwork earlier in the book is incautiously worded. As a result, Sartre is often read as a kind of staccato voluntarist who holds that we decide at every moment how to respond to the world. In its starkest form, this overlooks Sartre's account of action as responding to invitations, demands, and proscriptions that we find in the world (Smith 1970). More precisely, it ignores the distinction Sartre draws between unreflective engagement in a world that presents us with reasons inviting particular responses and the recognition available through reflection on my experience that these reasons are not features of the world independent of my experience of it (B&N: part 1, ch. 1, § 1; part 4, ch. 2, § 2). A more sophisticated form of this misreading ascribes to him the view that we are free simply to decide how the world appears to us in unreflective experience (Føllesdall 1981).

Although it is true that Sartre understands us to have freedom over how the world seems to us and the reasons it presents us with, he does not locate this freedom in voluntary decision. He does not hold that we have to make an explicit decision at every moment about how to behave. Neither does he hold that we can change the set of reasons we find in the world simply by deciding to do so. For decisions, he argues, are themselves responses to the reasons that we find in the world, even though these reasons depend on our experience of the world. 'What we usually understand by "will" is a conscious decision that most of us take only after we have made ourselves what we are', he tells us in

Existentialism Is a Humanism, because such decision 'is only a manifestation of an earlier and more spontaneous choice' (EH: 23). This remark summarises a passage in *Being and Nothingness* which argues that the deliberation leading to a voluntary action can only be a procedure of weighing up the reasons for competing actions, where the weight of each reason is silently conferred upon it by the projects that I am pursuing (B&N: 472-3).

Deliberation, decision, and voluntary action, therefore, express a prior and more fundamental choice that shapes the reasons they embody. This deeper kind of choice, according to Sartre, consists in adopting or abandoning a 'project' (*projet*). It is unfortunate that he does not provide any precise explanation of what he means by this, for it is fundamental to his theory of freedom. Given that he does not, it is quite natural to assume that he means it in its ordinary sense and to think of writing a book or raising a child as paradigm cases. Such projects are generally undertaken and pursued in clear knowledge of doing so. These projects require continual effortful commitment, which can be ended by an explicit decision to do so. If projects are like this, then it is difficult to see how they can be prior to reasoned decision in the way that Sartre describes. However, he has a broader conception of project in mind. He argues, for example, that I might accept a job for the reason that I will starve if I do not get some money soon, but this presents a strong reason for getting money only because I am already committed to a project of staying alive (B&N: 459). I might never have deliberated about whether to stay alive. It might never have crossed my mind to even consider this. But staying alive is a project rather than simply a habit because it is teleological, having the goal of staying alive, and embodies an evaluative stance, that being alive is worthwhile (B&N: 459).

Undertaking or maintaining a project, for Sartre, thus means setting oneself towards a particular goal or orienting oneself towards a particular value. He does not deny that this could be a voluntary action. Reasons grounded in some of one's existing projects might indeed motivate a decision to adopt a new project or abandon an existing one. But in Sartre's view, such reasoned deliberation is neither necessary nor sufficient for altering one's projects. That it is not necessary is shown by the example of the project of staying alive, which one might never have deliberated over. That it is not sufficient is well illustrated by Sartre's example of the gambler who has resolved never to gamble again but who finds his resolution powerless in the face of the temptations of the casino (B&N: 56-7). This character's decision not to gamble again is the result of deliberation on the basis of reasons rooted in some of his projects. Yet he has not succeeded in fully orienting himself towards this new value. In his novel *The Age of Reason*, Sartre gives another

example: Daniel wants to prove that he is not the sentimental person that people take him to be, so he gathers up his cats in a bag and goes to the river to drown them, but when he gets there he finds to his dismay that he cannot go through with it (AR: 81-91).

The patterns in a person's deliberations, decisions, and actions, for Sartre, thus result from the reasons they find in their situations, which are determined by the projects they are pursuing, the goals and values they are oriented towards, whether or not they are explicitly aware of this. When we describe people in terms of character traits, we are referring, whether we know it or not, to the projects they are pursuing, whether they know it or not (Webber 2009: ch. 2). It is a mistake to think that Sartre's theory of freedom entails that character trait terminology refers only to the patterns in a person's past actions, rather than to anything that explains those patterns and disposes towards their continuation (Morris 1976: ch. 4; Gilbert 2006: 48-9; Harman 2009: 239, 242). We should rather understand Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* as holding that freedom consists in the ability to change one's own character, thereby changing the invitations and demands that one experiences the world as presenting and to which one responds.

2. The Field of Meaning

What, precisely, is Merleau-Ponty's criticism of this theory of freedom? Its presentation in *Adventures of the Dialectic* is woven into a critique of Sartre's political philosophy and analyses of the post-war global political developments. As a result, it can be difficult to disentangle the arguments targeted specifically at Sartre's theory of freedom from the larger critique. But the comments on freedom in this later critique of Sartre simply restate the points Merleau-Ponty had made ten years earlier in *Phenomenology of Perception*. This earlier statement is entirely focused on the theory of freedom, so is clearer than the later statement. However, this version presents other challenges. It explicitly mentions Sartre only once across a lengthy discussion, but is structured as a dialectical argument that begins from a theory like Sartre's that is described in Sartre's terminology and develops towards Merleau-Ponty's own position through critical consideration of examples drawn from Sartre's discussion of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*. This implicit sparring with Sartre makes it difficult to distinguish the points Merleau-Ponty raises in his own voice from those he intends to ascribe to Sartre, which makes it difficult to see how the various points raised are intended to fit together as a single argument. Indeed, it can read like a mere scatter-gun attack on a range of distinct claims that Sartre makes about freedom, but

read in this way it seems that each of the shots Merleau-Ponty fires misses its target (Stewart 1995; Wilkerson 2010: § 2).[1]

We can make better sense of this chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* if we read each of the central objections that Merleau-Ponty raises against Sartre as ultimately a facet of his rejection of the claim central to Sartre's existentialism. According to Sartre's original version of the idea that existence precedes essence, the situations that an individual faces are articulated by that individual's freely chosen projects. On this view, freedom is ontologically prior to situations. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, holds that an individual's situations are articulated by their bodily abilities and their social context. On his view, freedom is ontologically consequent upon situations: one is free only to the extent that the material and social situation allows. Whether a rock appears to me as a climbing challenge, a beautiful object, or an obstacle in my path, Sartre argues in *Being and Nothingness*, depends entirely on my projects (B&N: 504). Merleau-Ponty replies in *Phenomenology of Perception* that 'given the same project, this rock face over here will appear as an obstacle while this other more passable one will appear as an aid' (PP: 464). Similarly, the world around me is already filled with objects, languages, customs, opportunities, and limitations inscribed there by generations of people and an economic situation dependent on the activities of the people I live alongside (PP: 467-76). Together, these physical and social meanings constitute a 'field of freedom' that determines my range of possibilities and the degree of resistance to the pursuit of each possibility (PP: 481).

Sartre does not deny that an individual's situations are replete with meanings that reflect their bodily abilities and social context. Merleau-Ponty ascribes to Sartre the view that even these meanings are dependent on the individual's projects, that 'it is consciousness which gives meaning' (AD: 159; see PP: 461; AD: 196-201). But as Beauvoir points out,

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[1] This strategy of critiquing aspects of Sartre's theory without ever presenting a clear formulation of the target position is perhaps explained by an article Merleau-Ponty published in *Les Temps Modernes* soon after *Phenomenology of Perception* appeared, 'The Battle over Existentialism', which is a defence of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* against Catholic and Marxist critics. Here, he describes Sartre's thoughts on freedom as incomplete and in need of further clarification (BE: 72-3, 77). By the time he wrote *Adventures of the Dialectic*, it seems, he had concluded that the required clarification could not be provided.

Sartre devotes a considerable amount of *Being and Nothingness* to articulating precisely the point that these meanings of the situation are not dependent on the individual's projects (Beauvoir MPPS: § 1). How did Merleau-Ponty get this wrong? He had known Beauvoir and Sartre throughout the years in which their existentialism was formed and discussed philosophy with them regularly. How could he have been mistaken on this central aspect of their view of freedom?

Part of the answer lies in the development of Sartre's thought on this point. Beauvoir is mistaken to claim that Sartre's position on this matter had remained the same from *Nausea* onwards (MPPS: 210). The strange experiences that Roquentin records after his only projects have come to an end include the disappearance of the instrumental and social meanings of the environment. 'Words had disappeared', he tells us, 'and with them the meaning of things, the methods of using them, the feeble landmarks which men had traced on their surface' (N: 182). Merleau-Ponty has not noticed that Sartre has moved on from the view presented in *Nausea* that even the instrumental and social meanings of objects are experienced only as a result of the individual's projects. This is why Merleau-Ponty ascribes to Sartre a theory of 'centrifugal *Sinnbegung*', the idea that all sense or meaning is bestowed outwards onto the situation from the individual subject at the centre (PP: 461; 'centrifugal' also appears at AD: 198). Indeed, it is why he effectively classifies Sartre as a kind of 'intellectualist' who sees the mind as distinct from an objective reality that possesses no meanings of its own (AD: 124, 137-144; Whitford 1979).

3. The Field of Reasons

In fact, what Sartre holds in *Being and Nothingness* is that although the meanings of objects are given by our bodily abilities and social contexts, these meanings provide *reasons* for us only in relation to our projects. Alarm clocks, tax forms, police officers, and signs that tell us to keep off the grass are all socially constituted meanings, but it is only as a result of my projects that I experience them as having any directive significance for me (B&N: 62-3). This is the reverse of the idea presented in *Nausea*, where Roquentin's experiences of the disappearance of the meanings of things consequent on the ending of his projects are clearly evaluative as well as affective: the raw existence of objects is 'monstrous' and 'frightening', the nausea itself reveals the 'horrible' contingency and superfluity of everything (N: 183, 188). This change is slightly obscured by Sartre's imprecision of expression in *Being and Nothingness*. He writes, for example, that it is my set of projects 'which causes the existence of values, appeals, expectations and in general a world' for me

(B&N: 63). Although values, appeals, and expectations are all reasons, the addition of the phrase 'in general a world' does suggest the whole meaningful structure of the experienced world. But all of the specific kinds of structure that he identifies as dependent on projects are ones with a directive significance, not merely ones with meaning.

Sartre sometimes indicates this directive significance by use of the term 'value' (*valeur*), as when he claims that 'in this world where I engage myself my acts cause values to spring up like partridges' (B&N: 62). Sometimes, he uses the term 'exigency' (*exegence*), as when he writes that 'it is I who confer on the alarm clock its exigency – I and I alone' (B&N: 62). This term nicely captures those reasons that are experienced as making such normative demands as requiring or forbidding a particular response. But some directive significance is experienced as merely favouring some outcome, which can be outweighed by other considerations. Sartre sometimes uses the term '*motif*', which is not easily translated into English, to mean the overall motivating reason for an action, 'the ensemble of rational considerations which justify it' (B&N: 468). This encompasses aspects of the situation that require or forbid an action and those that merely favour it.

Sartre does not seem to have a term, however, for each of those aspects that could contribute to the overall *motif* of an action, each rational consideration. For our purposes, the term 'reason' is a good fit. Unlike a motive, a reason in this sense need not actually motivate a response. For a situation can contain conflicting reasons in this sense, and crucially, for Sartre at this stage of his career, such a reason can be resisted even in the absence of some conflicting reason. The use of the term 'reason', moreover, should not be taken to indicate any philosophical account of how reasons are structured. To say that the pain in my foot is experienced as a reason to stop walking, in this sense, is just to say that the pain figures in my experience as favouring or demanding that I stop walking.

Merleau-Ponty does not use any term that is equivalent to 'reasons' as I am using it here either. In a short discussion of the directive significance of pain or tiredness, he describes this significance as a 'valuation' (*valorisation*), but in the preceding paragraphs uses this same term of features of experience that present no directive significance (PP: 465-6). Despite this, Merleau-Ponty does briefly argue for a claim about the origin of experienced reasons. If the soldier resists torture, he writes, 'this is because the historical situation, his comrades, and the world around him seemed to him to expect this particular behaviour from him' (PP: 480-1). He accepts that these experienced reasons are dependent on the individual's projects, but argues that those projects are the product of the individual's

nature and history. 'I am a psychological and historical structure', he writes, and all 'my actions and thoughts are related to this structure' (PP: 482). The reasons that I find in the world, on Merleau-Ponty's view, are the necessary products of my innate nature as this has developed in response to my experience of life. There is no place in this theory for the freedom that Sartre envisages as the origin of experienced reasons. Instead, I am free to the extent that my bodily and social situation tolerates my attempts to express the motivations produced by my nature and history (PP: 481).

Should we accept Merleau-Ponty's account of the origin of reasons rather than Sartre's? Some further aspects of Merleau-Ponty's critique of Sartre can be read as attempting to answer that question. But before we turn to those, it is worth considering Sartre's phenomenological analyses of the experience of reasons in more detail. For those analyses contain powerful motivations for Sartre's theory of freedom that Merleau-Ponty has entirely ignored. Indeed, those analyses form an argument against Merleau-Ponty's account of freedom, even though they are to be found in *Being and Nothingness*, first published two years before Merleau-Ponty published his theory of freedom in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Only once we have fully understood why Sartre thinks that experienced reasons must manifest a freedom that is ontologically prior to the constitution of situations will we be able to assess Merleau-Ponty's arguments against this conception of freedom.

4. The Phenomenology of Reasons

Sartre argues that reasons feature in our experience in two different ways. The way we experience them in our unreflective engagement with the world is not the same as the way they seem to us if we reflect on our experience of the world. More precisely, Sartre argues that there are two different ways of reflecting on experience. One way is to focus our attention on the relation between the world and our own mind, keeping both of these things in view. This is what Sartre calls 'impure reflection'. This can show us that the reasons the world presents are matched by our existing desires. To borrow one of Sartre's examples, if I reflect in this way on my experience of running after the tram to catch up with it, it is clear that the tram appeared to me as something to be caught up with and that I had the desire to get onto that tram. Sartre thinks that this is the kind of reflection that Husserl employs in developing the method of phenomenology (Webber forthcoming, § 4).

But this kind of reflection distorts the original experience, according to Sartre. This becomes clear, he thinks, if we engage in a different kind of reflection on our experience, which he calls 'pure reflection'. In this kind of reflection, we do not focus on the relation between the world and ourselves. Rather, we focus attention on the appearance of the world, on how things seem. My unreflective and engaged experience of chasing after the tram is focused on the tram, which appears as receding and as something to catch up with. In pure reflection on that experience, I focus attention not on the tram, but on its appearance as receding and to be caught up with. This kind of reflection is the one Sartre employs in his phenomenology, because he considers it to provide undistorted access to how the world appears in unreflective experience. One thing that it makes clear, he argues, is that unreflective experience directed towards the world does not include explicit reference to oneself. As I run after the tram, my experience is just of the tram as something to be caught up with. The experience does not present me or my desire to catch up with the tram, although these might be inferred from what the experience does present (TE: 11-13; Webber forthcoming: § 4).

Pure reflection also reveals, according to Sartre, something else about the experience of reasons that is not revealed in impure reflection: that a reason for action is not experienced simply as a motivation pulling one towards a particular action or outcome, but as presenting a directive claim that is to be questioned, considered, compared with other reasons, and then affirmed, reassessed, rejected, overridden, or even ignored in action. In short, a reason is recognised in experience as to be respected or negated (B&N: 55-7, 470-1; Eshleman 2011: 37-40; Poellner 2015: 236). This is why Sartre considers it a form of bad faith to ascribe one's actions simply to one's character traits. Impure reflection indicates the correlation between the reasons one finds in the world and one's desires. The patterns in these desires indicate one's character traits. But impure reflection does not show that action is mechanically produced by one's character traits via the experience of reasons. It does not disclose anything about the force that reasons actually exert over behaviour. Pure reflection on the way reasons seem to us reveals that action is not mechanically produced by their influence over us. It reveals that in our unreflective engagement with the world, reasons are experienced as making directive claims on us to which we respond by following those claims or by resisting them. To treat action as though it is simply produced by character is thus not merely to make a mistake, according to Sartre; it is to falsify our experience of reasons.

Sartre has therefore already dismissed Merleau-Ponty's theory of freedom in *Being and Nothingness* as a form of bad faith that exploits the indications of impure reflection while ignoring our actual experience of reasons in unreflective engagement with the world, an experience revealed in pure reflection. The same analysis of the experience of reasons is intended to support Sartre's view of freedom as ontologically prior to one's character traits, to the projects that one pursues. For if freedom were only as Merleau-Ponty describes it, the degree to which one can achieve the goals set by one's motivations within the constraints of the material and social environment, then one would not be free to reassess or reject the reasons that one experiences in the world as a result of one's character. One would not, on Sartre's view, experience reasons in the way that we do experience reasons, as making claims to which we can respond in a variety of ways. Freedom is not simply a matter of the ability to pursue one's projects, therefore, but includes the freedom not to pursue those projects. This is what Sartre means by his regular use of the term 'radical freedom': our experience of reasons indicates that we have freedom over the very roots of our actions, our projects.

Merleau-Ponty does not engage with this argument in either statement of his critique of Sartre. He seems to have entirely overlooked Sartre's sophisticated phenomenological analysis of the difference between the way pure reflection reveals reasons to figure in unreflective experience and the way they seem in impure reflection. We might reply on Merleau-Ponty's behalf that even if we agree that Sartre has shown that one must be able to reject or revise the reasons presented in experience, even if we accept that freedom must include the freedom to change the projects that underlie our character traits, then we still do not need to accept that freedom is prior to all reasons. For we could maintain instead that to revise or reject a reason is always to do so for some other reason. We need not be able to reject all of our reasons together, or to overthrow our entire character or set of projects, in order that Sartre's account of the phenomenology of reasons be correct. But to accept this, Merleau-Ponty would need to abandon his view that freedom is only the degree to which our situations permit the pursuit of our aims. For he would need to accept that freedom is the ability to respond negatively to the reasons we find in our situations as a result of our projects, and thus the freedom to revise those projects. Does his critique of Sartre contain any convincing arguments against accepting this?

5. Freedom Without Reasons

Merleau-Ponty focuses his critique on the idea that one can refine or reject a reason without any reason to do so. It is not simply that a reasoned decision is not necessary for a change in projects, on his reading of Sartre, but more strongly that one can orient oneself towards a new set of values, set oneself to pursue new goals, without having any reason to do so provided by one's existing set of values and goals. This is a consequence of Sartre's ontology of being and nothingness: because consciousness is not part of the ordinary causal realm, on this reading of Sartre, my values and goals can persist only so long as I continue to accept them and nothing can prevent me from rejecting them and adopting a new set. Merleau-Ponty usually frames his response to this as a rejection of the temporal claim that my past can influence my future only through my continued acceptance of past commitments (Wilkerson 2005: § 3). He objects that this would mean that 'my habitual being in the world is equally fragile at each moment', since no matter how long I have been committed to my goals and values 'freedom's gesture can effortlessly shatter them at any moment' (PP: 466-7; see AD: 106).

There are at least two ways in which we can understand this objection, both of which echo David Hume's influential critique of what he called 'the liberty of indifference' (1739: book 2 part 3 § 2). One is that an action that is entirely unmotivated by reasons is not an expression of freedom, but is either an action out of the agent's control or no action at all. Merleau-Ponty makes this point when he argues that 'choice assumes a previous commitment' that provides the reasons for it; 'freedom must have *a field*; that is, it must have some privileged possibilities or realities' to serve as reasons (PP: 462). A second way to understand the Humean point is that if abrupt changes in projects need not be motivated by reasons, then the broad consistency and continuity that we regularly find in the behaviour of individuals would be entirely unexplained. We should instead expect people to be abandoning projects and beginning fresh ones all the time. Yet 'after having built my life upon an inferiority complex, continuously reinforced for twenty years, it is not *likely* that I would change' (PP: 467).[2]

[2] The phrase 'it is not likely' here somewhat underplays Merleau-Ponty's point. A more idiomatic rendering of his '*il est peu probable*' would be 'it is hardly likely'.

Peter Poellner has recently argued for an interpretation of Sartre's theory of freedom in *Being and Nothingness* that does not include the claim that Merleau-Ponty targets. On this reading, Sartre holds only that overriding reasons cannot be imposed on the individual by objects in the world. This is consistent, according to Poellner, with the idea that features of the world do provide reasons for an individual independently of that individual's projects, an idea which he finds in *Being and Nothingness*. It is also consistent, he argues, with Sartre's basic ethical claim that the freedom of oneself and others is objectively valuable. There are two parts to Poellner's interpretation. First, the holism of reasons means that any reason that the world provides for me independently of my projects is one that exerts its influence on me only in the context of all of my reasons, including those that are dependent on my projects (2015: 231-3). Second, although the objective value of the freedom of oneself and others does provide an overriding reason for me, this freedom is never an object in the world (2015: 238). Sartre's repeated claims that nothing outside of the individual can determine their choice of projects should be read, according to Poellner, only as making these claims, not as making the further claim that projects can be chosen for no reason, the claim that is subject to the Humean objections (2015: 226).

Poellner is certainly right to draw attention to both the holism of reasons and the objective value of freedom in Sartre's philosophy, two features of his existentialism that are usually overlooked in analyses of his theory of motivation. Sartre's claims about the origins of experienced reasons and values, however, cannot be fully explained in this way. Poellner gives the example of a soldier fleeing an enemy attack: the danger to the soldier's life presents an objective reason to flee, which the soldier's fear correctly registers (2015: 229). This fear can motivate action only in the context of the soldier's set of reasons, but so long as that set does not include any directly countervailing reasons, on Poellner's reading, the soldier has reason to flee and does so. Taking another of Sartre's examples, Poellner argues that the tiredness felt by the hiker is an objective reason to stop walking, but whether the hiker will act on that reason depends on the hiker's other reasons, some of which depend on the hiker's projects (2015: 231-2). But this is not how Sartre describes these examples. He describes the fear of dying not as a recognition of an objective reason to act to preserve my life, but as a manifestation of a project that sets my life as valuable (B&N: 459). He describes the hiker's tiredness as having its value and practical significance for the hiker conferred on it by the hiker's projects (B&N: 476-7).

Sartre does indeed hold that the freedom of myself and others is objectively valuable. We will consider this claim in detail in chapter 9. Sartre's point, however, is not that this value

is experienced as a reason, overriding or otherwise, irrespective of the individual's projects. His point is normative: the value of freedom ought to be recognised by every individual as an overriding reason. We should not accept, therefore, Poellner's revisionary interpretation. Sartre's claim that nothing in the world can impose values or reasons on the individual cannot be understood as claiming only that reasons function holistically and that the only objectively overriding reason does not feature in experience as an aspect of an object in the world. Rather, we should take at face value his claim that 'my freedom is the unique foundation of values' and that 'nothing justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, this or that particular scale of values' (B&N: 62). Sartre does hold the view that Merleau-Ponty attributes to him here.

6. Projects as Commitments

What has Sartre to say in defence of his idea that projects can be modified or abandoned for no reason? He does anticipate the objection that he has described 'a pure capricious, unlawful, gratuitous, and incomprehensible contingency', as he puts it, and that his theory entails 'that my act can be anything *whatsoever* or even that it is *unforeseeable*' (B&N: 475). His response is that the interdependence of an individual's projects provides them with stability. Projects peripheral to the set could be altered without much noticeable change in the individual. But to alter a project that is more central to the set would require substantial changes across the set of projects, with implications for the individual's self-image and relations with other people. It should not surprise us, Sartre argues, that people tend to preserve their projects, at least the ones that we most identify with them, given these implications of changing an important project. We tend to act on reasons presented in our situations because the cost of doing otherwise is generally high. 'There is no doubt that I could have done otherwise' in any given situation, he writes, but 'at what price?' (B&N: 476). His eventual conclusion is that the price is often 'a fundamental modification of my original choice of myself', 'another choice of myself and my ends' (B&N: 486).

We might question whether projects are really as holistic as Sartre suggests here. Or we might question why we should expect people to be so committed to the overall coherence of their projects. We might wonder why that coherence could not be preserved by temporarily suspending a project in order to resist a reason it grounds, rather than permanently altering or abandoning that project. But we need not consider these questions here. For even if we accept what Sartre says about the cost of changing projects, this point does not fully address the Humean objection that Merleau-Ponty raises. That

objection presents a problem for the very idea of pursuing a project at all. Freedom 'could not commit itself' to any goal, Merleau-Ponty writes, if 'it knows quite well that the following instant will find it, in every way, just as free and just as little established'. If a commitment is to be made then 'what it does must not immediately be undone by a new freedom'; rather, 'I must benefit from my momentum, and I must be inclined to continue' (PP: 462). If one can simply change course at any moment for no reason at all, then one cannot be committed to anything and it makes no sense to talk of undertaking or maintaining a project (McInerney 1979).

We can approach this same problem from another angle. One of Sartre's most famous examples concerns a student who asked him during the war whether he should stay at home to look after his mother or instead leave home to fight against the Nazis (EH: 30). What makes this a difficult decision, argues Charles Taylor, is that each of the two mutually exclusive options embodies a value that the student cannot simply choose to abandon. For otherwise, 'the grievous nature of the predicament would dissolve' (1976: 291). If the student could simply abandon the set of projects that grounds the reasons in favour of one course of action, then he would have no difficulty in deciding and would not really be facing a dilemma at all. The difficulty stems from his being deeply committed to values that seem to make incompatible demands in this situation, unable simply to refuse one of those demands in favour of the other. Sartre even recognises this kind of commitment that resists a simple decision to abandon it, as we have seen in his cases of the gambler who has resolved not to gamble again and Daniel's attempt to drown his cats. In the face of such commitments, decisions made against them can be, in Sartre's apt phrase, merely 'cheques without funds to meet them' (AR: 86).

The very idea of commitment to a project, therefore, already requires that one cannot simply abandon the project on a whim. One cannot respond to the Humean objection to Sartre's theory of freedom by appealing to the holism of projects, therefore, since this move would presuppose that there could be such things as projects, which is what is in question. This is perhaps why Merleau-Ponty often presents his objection to Sartre's theory of freedom in temporal terms: at its core, the objection concerns the fundamentally temporal idea of a project or a commitment. Beauvoir accuses Merleau-Ponty of employing a 'ruse of paradox' in claiming that Sartre does not hold various claims that he in fact does hold (MPPS: 210). We can be more sympathetic and read Merleau-Ponty's claim that Sartre's theory does not accommodate projects or commitments as the claim that, given his underlying ontology, Sartre cannot accommodate them. But if we do this,

then we should accept Beauvoir's further point that Merleau-Ponty develops his critique of Sartre in an arbitrary way (MPPS: 234). Rather than reject Sartre's entire theory of freedom because of one ontological claim, why not just reject that claim? We should agree with Poellner, therefore, that Sartre's texts suggest a theory that does not include the idea that projects can be abandoned for no reason. But rather than explain away the passages in which Sartre endorses that idea, we should accept that he does hold it in *Being and Nothingness* even though it is inconsistent with the rest of his theory.

7. Sartre's Progress

Merleau-Ponty aimed to establish that freedom is nothing more than the extent to which one's material and social situation permit the pursuit of aims determined by one's nature and development. His strategy was to argue for this through a critique of Sartre's contrasting view that the projects we freely choose and maintain ground the reasons that we find in our situations. Merleau-Ponty has not properly addressed Sartre's theory, however, because he has not appreciated the distinction between the meanings and the reasons that a situation presents. His argument that meanings are not dependent on the individual's projects misfires, because the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* holds only that reasons are dependent on projects. Sartre here is in agreement with part of what Camus has Meursault discover towards the end of *The Outsider*, that values are not grounded in the meanings of situations themselves but in something that the subject brings to those situations. Camus and Sartre differ over just what it is about the subject that grounds the values they experience in the world and, consequently, as we will see in chapter 9, over what truly is valuable.

Sartre's distinction between meanings and reasons is partly phenomenological. In our unreflective engagement with the world, reasons are presented as to be considered, compared, accepted, or rejected. This is revealed in pure reflection, but is not manifest in the impure reflection that simply reveals the correlation between our motivations and the reasons we find in situations. It is this phenomenology of reasons that grounds Sartre's view that the reasons we find in the world reflect our prior commitments, the values at the heart of our projects. Merleau-Ponty has overlooked this phenomenology of reasons and so has failed to engage with Sartre's motivation for postulating a metaphysical freedom that is ontologically prior to our experience of the world. We should agree with Merleau-Ponty, however, that Sartre is wrong to think that this metaphysical freedom allows us to revise or abandon a project for no reason, because this is inconsistent with the very idea of

a project. But we should take this inconsistency as a reason to reject that Sartre's claim that projects can be abandoned for no reason, rather than agreeing with Merleau-Ponty that it is a reason to reject Sartre's entire theory of freedom.

There are indications in Beauvoir's response to Merleau-Ponty that she considered Sartre to have refined his theory of freedom in this way by the time *Adventures of the Dialectic* was written. Sartre does not hold that projects can be abandoned at any moment for no reason, she argues, for this would be incompatible with the 'temporal thickness' required by his conception of projects (MPPS: 242-3). The claim that Sartre already agrees with Merleau-Ponty on this point contrasts sharply with her review of *Phenomenology of Perception* ten years earlier, where she describes Sartre's view of 'the nihilating power of the mind in the face of being, and the absolute freedom of the mind' as setting him clearly apart from Merleau-Ponty (RPP: 163). Towards the end of her later article, moreover, she writes that 'throughout the development of his work Sartre has insisted more and more on the *engaged* character of freedom' (MPPS: 252). She does not tell us precisely what she means by this, but she clearly intends to indicate that Sartre has been moving away from some details of the theory of freedom articulated in *Being and Nothingness*. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, repeated in *Adventures of the Dialectic* the critique published a decade earlier in *Phenomenology of Perception* precisely because he thought that Sartre's core philosophical theory of freedom had not changed in the interim, but had simply been restated in a new social and political context (AD: 188-93).

As we will see in the next chapter, Beauvoir's own theory of freedom, her form of the basic existentialist claim that 'existence precedes essence', differed from the one Sartre articulated in *Being and Nothingness* even at the time that book was published and, ironically, the central difference concerns a point on which Beauvoir agrees with Merleau-Ponty. We will see in chapter 7 that Sartre had accepted Beauvoir's form of existentialism by the time he wrote *Saint Genet*, published in 1952. By the time Beauvoir wrote her response to Merleau-Ponty's critique of Sartre in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, then, Sartre's theory of freedom had developed in a way that brought it closer to the view that Merleau-Ponty had articulated in *Phenomenology of Perception* ten years earlier. However, as we will also see in chapter 7, the reason that Sartre is required to accept Beauvoir's form of existentialism is distinct from Merleau-Ponty's critique of his initial theory of freedom.

This progress of Sartre's thought can help to explain something that otherwise seems rather odd about the dispute with Merleau-Ponty: why was it Beauvoir, rather than Sartre, who responded in defence of Sartre and why does her response display the

comprehensiveness and vehemence that one might expect only from someone's defence of their own work? Beauvoir had discussed philosophy with Sartre and had given him detailed critical feedback on his writing for all of their adult lives, of course, so in a sense everything he published is partly a product of her work. This would also go some way to explaining why she considered herself better placed than Merleau-Ponty to understand Sartre's philosophy, despite his long friendship with them both. But these points do not fully explain the firmness of her endorsement of Sartre's theory of freedom. This is not at all puzzling, however, if the theory of freedom underlying Sartre's *The Communists and Peace*, ostensibly the target of Merleau-Ponty's attack in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, and articulated in *Saint Genet*, to which Beauvoir refers in her response to Merleau-Ponty, is essentially the theory that she had held for over a decade and to which Sartre had only recently been converted.

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