

# Two Paradoxes in Sartre's Treatment of the Body

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## Abstract

The present study aims at investigating the purport of the two intriguing claims the 20th-century French thinker Jean-Paul Sartre makes about the body. The first claim equates the body with the centre of an individual's perspective on the world. The second pinpoints the body as the determinant of one's freedom. Chiefly by citing Sartre's magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*, the paper attempts to explicate these two claims while focusing on the significance of physical performance as the prerequisite for mental influence. The paper would show how in order to have a perspective or exercise freedom and, as such, have a pragmatic touch with the world around, the body's instrumental traits and hence its limitations that determine one's undertakings become the primary condition.

**Keywords:** Body, Facticity, Freedom, Instrument, Perspective, Sartre.

## Introduction

The body plays a crucial role in Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy. Being a phenomenological existentialist (Joseph & Reynolds 26), however, Sartre's primary preoccupation with the body hinges on the body's functionality with regard to an individual's way of experiencing the world and coping with it. He is interested in the body as it is lived in relation to the world around (Saliba 1). Whilst dealing with the body in his works, especially in his mammoth chef-d'oeuvre, *Being and Nothingness* (*L'être et le néant*, 1943), Sartre speaks about some of its roles that sound pretty intriguing, in fact, paradoxical. They are paradoxical because Sartre shows their fundamental truth while keeping his initial claims seemingly queer and because they are at odds with the traditional notion about the body. The present article aims at illuminating two such claims about the body's role. The first claim is that the body acts as the centre of one's perspective on the world. That is to say, the body is something through which an individual becomes aware of the world in his or her way. The claim is paradoxical as it sounds contrary to the traditional belief about the body as merely a physical object in which dwells the I (emphasis added), an abstract consciousness (mind or soul) acting as the core of one's viewpoint about the world. The second claim is that the body is the deciding factor of an individual's freedom. The paradox of this claim is chiefly rooted in the fact that Sartre brings here the body's limitations and the individual's freedom together, conveying the previous one to be the reason for the latter. Besides, the claim is also unconventional. Now the question is, what is the actual denotation of these two claims of Sartre? We will investigate the answer in the succeeding sections.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 - 80) is an eminent French philosopher of the 20th century. However, besides being a great philosopher, he is equally great as a novelist, story writer, and playwright.

He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1964 for his work “which, rich in ideas and filled with the spirit of freedom and the quest for truth, has extended a far-reaching influence on [his] age” (Desan 1). He, however, declined the award as he did not “want to be institutionalised” (VOI 1). Sartre is the principal figure of the philosophical movement known as Existentialism that initiated in the 19th century and flourished in 20th century Europe. “He is commonly considered the father of Existentialist philosophy” (Stanford Encyclopedia 1). Speaking about Sartre in his book, *Existentialism* (2008), Cogswell says, “Though existentialism draws on a tradition that goes back to Kierkegaard [1813 – 55], it was with Sartre in the 1940s that it was named and came to full recognition as a movement” (Cogswell 64). Another Sartrian scholar, Kenneth N. Douglas calls Sartre “the prophet” of existentialism (Douglas 1).

### **The Body as the Centre of Perspective**

We would begin the study with the paradox of the body as the centre of one’s perspective, that is, Sartre’s claim about one’s bodily awareness of the world. This paradox has intrigued the Sartrian scholars greatly. Evans (1992), Brewer (1995), Cassam (1997), and Longuenesse (2017), for instance, have dealt with Sartre’s notion of bodily awareness in detail in their works. Now, to speak about this paradox, it is necessary to point out that for Sartre, the world is not something objective that all and sundry discover in the same way. Instead, for every individual, the world is different, his or her world perceived from a particular viewpoint. “A world for us,” as Sartre insists in *Being and Nothingness*, “must be organised around a [certain] point of reference, seen in [a specific] perspective” (Manser 85). The centre of this viewpoint or “perspective” is the individual’s body. However, the body Sartre speaks about is not a mere physical object which concerns an anatomist or a physiologist. It is one’s “point of insertion into the world,” the foundation of one’s existence as a person (Manser 86). In the words of Katherine J. Morris, Sartre looks upon the body “not simply [as an] anatomical, physiological or physical object.” It is “our very being-there in the world and by which there is a world for us” (Morris 1).

Intriguingly, Sartre identifies the body and not some empty vantage point or abstract ‘mind’ or ‘soul’ as the centre of one’s perspective. However, to associate the concept of this centre with the body, he seeks to correlate a person’s perception with his or her actions. If there is only static contemplation, one would never be able to cognise the objects around (persons, things, animals, etc.) which constitute the world. The person would merely surmise some attributes of the ambience without even being able to verify the truth or falsity of those attributes. He or she would, for instance, fail to discriminate a real water body from a mirage. It is solely through one’s actions that one ascertains “the coefficient of adversity of things” (Sartre, *Being* 368), that is, “their resistance, their ‘thinginess’” (Manser 85). Perspective is always more than just an affair of an object appearing in a spot to the left or right or front of a person. It is more than the inconvenience of seeing a thing obstructed by another. Perspective also points to the fact of proceeding the precise distance to the spot in the right or left or front to get to the object, overcoming particular hindrances to be where the object is, and so forth. That is the reason Sartre says, “Perception . . . is only revealed in and by projected actions.” (Sartre, *Being* 365).

It is worthy of mentioning in this context that there are people who believe that the world is perceived, and as such, one’s perspective on the world is formed by sensations or sense data (Sartre, *Being* 354). Sartre, however, refutes any such belief (Sartre, *Being* 356 - 57). For him, these people are blind to the fact that it is essential to act in the world, explore it, that is, get involved in some “projected actions” in relation to the objects around to form one’s perspective. Now, to act in the world or to explore it necessitates the instrumentality of one’s body. The instrumentality of the body spoken about here is pretty significant. The instrumentality of the objects in the world has an integral part in Sartre’s philosophy. Usually, as Sartre points out, to cognise a thing is to realise what it is for, its function. In a significant way, the kind of instrumental facet(s) a person discovers in an object forms his or her perspective about it. In the context of that perspective, the person’s relationship with the object is founded. The body is also an instrument, using which a person comes across the objects

around to cognise them (Sartre identifies the body as the centre of one's perspective). In their essay, *Instruments and the Body: Sartre and Merleau-Ponty* (1994), Kujundzic and Buschert explicates how Sartre establishes the body as an instrument in his works. For Sartre, the body is not an assortment of instruments among which one may use one or two while refraining from using the rest. Rather, the body itself is the instrument; it is what one is. One must use it to realise the "coefficient of adversity of things" around. At this point, however, Sartre also warns against the fallacy of interpreting one's actions or instrumentality in respect of the bodies of others. He says, "Here . . . is the clear risk of . . . interpreting my action as it is for me in terms of actions of another" (Sartre, *Being* 363). Evidently, one's instrument is one's own body by which he or she performs actions to cognise the objects constituting the world around. Another person's body is that person's instrument that enables the person to form his or her perspective about the world through his or her "projected actions." Thus, as every person bears an independent body, one person's perspective never entirely coincides with that of another.

Again, the fact that an individual's perspective on the world differs from that of another hinges on the body from another angle. The same context also implies why a particular individual's perspective undergoes changes with time. Here, Sartre underscores the body as the "facticity" of a person (Spade 140). Facticity signifies one's "context" in the world (Spade 140), that is, the situation a person finds himself or herself in or the way he or she lives in the world at a particular point in time. The body as the facticity of a person depends on one's past. The body's constitution, strengths, and weaknesses that one gets by being born with a particular genetic structure limits or determines its instrumental facet(s) in many ways. This is the body as the facticity from one angle. From the other, it is what one has done or what has happened to one's body in the past. For example, an inborn deformity or an injury of the past might limit a person's potential. As such, the instrumental trait(s) of a lame person (lame by birth or by an accident of the past) will evidently differ from that of a healthy one, and accordingly, his or her perspective on the world. Similarly, a person

who for an accident has become infirm at present is bound to change his or her perspective on the world (from the one he or she had before meeting with the accident) for the limitation(s) of the instrumental trait(s) the accident has brought upon him or her. Thus, the body, again, appears as the deciding factor of one's perspective.

The discussion here clearly points to the importance the body plays in constituting one's perspective on the world in Sartre's philosophy. It is not surprising, then, that Sartre claims the body to be the centre of one's perspective. The claim seems fundamentally true. He rejects every notion that epithets the "attempt to unite the mind and body as hopeless" (Moran 276), maintaining that it is through the body that one can have any idea of the world at all.

### **The Body as the Determiner of Freedom**

Let us now consider the second paradox about the body in Sartre – the body as the determinant of one's freedom. Here, it is worth mentioning that freedom plays a significant part in Sartre's philosophy. Sartre believed that the world is fundamentally without meaning or value. As a result human beings are necessarily free. "Man is condemned to be free," he declares in his *Existentialism is a Humanism* (Sartre, *Existentialism* 23). The same sense of freedom is again the predominant tone of Sartre's novel, *Nausea* (1938). Antoine Roquentin, the protagonist of the novel, eventually realises that "he is an entirely free agent in a world devoid of meaning" (Cover copy). A great many scholars have also underscored the importance of freedom in Sartre in their works. Works like Simon de Beauvoir's *What is Existentialism?* ([1944] 2004), K. L. Helstom's *Sartre's Notion of Freedom* (1972), David Detmer's *Freedom as a Value: A Critique of the Ethical Theory of Jean-Paul Sartre* (1988), István Mészáros's *The Work of Sartre: Search for Freedom and the Challenge of History* ([2012] 2013), Aaron James's *Surfing with Sartre* ([2017] 2018), etc. have all emphasised the import freedom poses for Sartre. When freedom is so significant for Sartre, it becomes pretty intriguing as he relates it to the body. Now, to comprehend how the body ascertains one's freedom, we should once again recall the ideas of the body's instrumentality and facticity. Sartre establishes his claim through two steps. At first, he conveys the limitations of bodily

existence. Then he shows how those limitations paradoxically become decisive of one's freedom.

As stated earlier, for Sartre, a person's body is that person's "point of insertion into the world," one's "very being-there in the world." In this sense, the body becomes synonymous with the person. However, in this context, Sartre also says that one does not live one's body. The life of a person is made up of projects in the world. As such, the person's body is something he or she goes beyond (and strives to go beyond) unceasingly. The body here poses as the past or facticity, which the person literally transcends (goes beyond) to exist in the world. The body as one's facticity, as indicated in the previous section, embodies one's limitations. But these limitations cannot be apprehended from within. To state it differently, the body's limitations, according to Sartre, are no limitations in and by themselves. It is only when a person compares what he or she can do with another person's capabilities that the limitations of the body become palpable. It is, of course, a matter of pure contingency that a person should possess the body he or she has, was born in a particular family, at a specific point of time or place, etc. The body, to the degree, that it characterises the situation a person finds himself or herself in, is the contingency. Sartre says that one's body "is the contingent from which the necessity of [one's] contingent existence takes" (Sartre, *Being* 372). By this, Sartre appears to mean that existing in the world is to possess an assortment of possible facets in the body; but which particular assortment one would bear is solely a matter of chance. Moreover, we have seen that a body is conditioned by what one has done to or by it in the past, "and some of these results are irreversible" (Manser 87). Facticity, the factor of existence with one's limitations, as such is the means of living in the world, in a sense, the body itself.

Having spoken about the body as facticity, Sartre now claims that this facticity makes freedom possible. Sartre's claim might, at first, appear strange. However, a closer examination of his argument clarifies that the claim is true at the bottom. He says that the primary condition for choice and therefore, freedom is finitude. An infinite being (without limitations) needs not and cannot have a choice. It is because such a being "could be" everything at once.

As a matter of fact, Sartre says, a being "that could be everything world have actually to be so; possibility and hence choice exist only for the finite" (Manser 88). The phrase "could be" in relation to someone/something infinite would sound troublesome, even contradictory. So, limitations are the necessary precondition for exercising choice and freedom.

Relating thus the body's limitations to freedom, Sartre retreats to the issue of its contingency. He does that to underscore the absurdity of the sense that a person is less free than another because of the assemblage of his or her bodily traits (Sartre, *Being* 374 - 76). If, as Sartre says, a person thinks that he or she is not as free as another because of some bodily impairment that the other is without, the person is prey to a fallacy. This fallacy emerges, quite obviously, from the comparison of the attributes of the person's body with those of the other. In order to eschew this fallacy, one needs to think of exercising choice or freedom in the context of one's own body. A person's freedom, according to Sartre, is characterised by the range of possibilities his or her facticity, that is, bodily traits at a particular situation or time, ascertain. The assemblage of these traits (determining the body's instrumentality), though purely contingent, is never abstract. It is concrete, signalling the condition(s) of the "projected actions" the person undertakes (through his or her limitations) and therefore of his or her freedom.

## Conclusion

The discussion above clearly reveals how the body functions both as the centre of one's perspective and the determiner of freedom. Sartre's treatment of these two facets of the body indicates his radical thoughts about the way an individual comes into contact with the world where "the body is constantly at play and always implicit in the field of action" (Sartre, *Being* 353) and accordingly, determines his or her way of existing in it. These and similar claims about the body, seemingly philosophical conundrums but fundamentally true (Warnock 17 - 18), greatly influenced Sartre's contemporary and succeeding philosophers.

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