
I AM WHAT I CHOOSE: THE NOSTALGIA OF MY PLACE, PAST AND ENVIRONMENT

Dr. Uday Singh
Associate Professor (Philosophy)
Government Girls' College
Chittorgarh, Rajasthan

ABSTRACT: My goal is to explain what Sartre implies by place, past and environment and thus to reconstruct a key part of Sartre's philosophy in *Being and Nothingness*, i.e., the explanation how place, past and environment permit us to comprehend something non-evident on the basis of something evident, that is, how we may infer that there is freedom from the fact that place, past and environment are simply choice of my ends. The discussion in *Being and Nothingness* is perhaps dense and technical; at times obscure; my purport is to present the vigorously argued claims and positions in an interesting way without being penumbral so that readers may follow Sartre's philosophy without prior familiarity with his scholarly literature.

Keywords: Place, Past, Situation, Action, Space

MY PLACE

Sartre says that place or space is a relation between for-itself and freedom; it is a relation between freedom and facticity. I exist my place without my choosing it, as a fact of my being-there, thus there is an extension or space within which I comprehend myself as free or as not-free. Concrete placing is manifested to me from a location which I am. Distances acquire meaning by taking the for-itself as the center of reference. The for-itself is able to be not entirely *here* so that it can be totally over *there*, close to the object which the for-itself locates at seven feet from itself and from the viewpoint of which the for-itself makes its place known to itself. Sartre affirms that, I exist as a place, which is a relation between something which I am and something which I am not. This relation is given, which I must be able to escape and to nihilate it by contemplating action. But my *being there*, can be surpassed in the light of an end. It is in view of this end that my place takes on its meaning. By an internal negation I have to escape what I am and by reflux I have to be what I am not. This internal negation is known as lack. Sartre claims that "It is only in the human world that there can be lacks" (Sartre 1992, 135). "Desire is a lack of being" (Sartre 1992, 735) and desire reveals the relation of for-itself to the objects of the world and with other innumerable concrete desires which are expressed in the mode of: "*to do, to have, to be*" (Sartre 1992, 736). "Man fundamentally is the desire to be God" (Sartre 1992, 724) "but the idea of God is contradictory" (Sartre 1992, 784). Hence for human reality there is no difference between existence and choice. I exist to choose.

It is in relation to my chosen end, in relation to my being-in-the-midst-of-the-world; in relation to my projected future or in the light of *not-yet existing-being*, that my place takes meaning. Sartre notes that a place could appear as nostalgic, isolated, exiled or favourable in terms of my future project which *takes place* in the world. The for-itself is *there*, not here and *being-there* is a relation; a place *which I am*. I exist my place, but it is not indispensable that I *have to be there*.

Though the for-itself receives its place in the midst of the world, but without for-itself or human reality there would be neither space nor place. My being-there or being-here depends on the situation, and it is in the light of an end chosen that my place acquires a meaning. It is in relation to what I choose to do, that my place could appear to me as an aid or a hindrance. I am *in a situation*. Place receives a meaning in relation to a certain not-yet-existing being which one wants to attain. My place, my position, is understood in the light of non-being and future. According to Sartre, it is choice of my end which gives place an existential import. The mountain is perceived as grand if I choose to live at the *foot* of it, but if I live at its *peak*, the mountain would be grasped as a symbol of pride and prestige for me. “Thus it must be said that the facticity of my place is revealed to me only in and through the free choice which I make of my end” (Sartre 1992, 634). Sartre contends that for an emigrant who was leaving France for Argentina after the fiasco of his political party, Argentina was “very far away” as remarked to the emigrant by a person who lived in France. In relation to those who lived in France and in relation to French nationalism, Argentina will appear “very far away” as a land of banishment. However, for the international revolutionary, Argentina is a *center* of the world and not *very far away*. It is freedom or choice of my end which enlightens a *situation*: facticity of my place. My facticity is ascertained through freedom. The facticity of my place appears to me in terms of my end. It is in relation to my ambition of going to New York that living at Mont-de-Marsan is realized as agonizing. The project of going to New York is solely decided by me, and it can be just a way of choosing myself as aggrieved and dissatisfied with Monte-de-Marson. Though in being born which is my facticity in the situation, I *receive* a place, but I can account for the place, by the place which I *take* in the midst of the world. *Situation* does not restrict my freedom but reveals it in the light of the chosen end which human reality *chooses* and which engages me at my place. Sartre writes, “One must be conscious in order to choose, and one must choose in order to be conscious. Choice and consciousness are one and the same thing” (Sartre 1992, 595). In an illustrious work *Freedom As A Value*, Detmer explains that Sartrean freedom does not imply omnipotence. Detmer et al. regards Sartre’s theory of freedom to be probably ambivalent. Facticity, and co-efficient of adversity might limit my freedom and man is free in varying degrees according to Detmer. Similarly, in an insightful study, T.J. Mawson holds that though we lack omnipotence; and our freedom is not perfect; but it is a powerful freedom “in that we can do at least some of what we reasonably wish to do, even when we reasonably wish to do we know to be less than the best we could do, and even something we know we shouldn’t do” (Mawson, 2005, 65). More importantly, Sartre in his analysis of freedom claims “Without facticity freedom would not exist—as a power of nihilation and of choice—and without freedom facticity would not be discovered and would have no meaning” (Sartre 1992, 636-37). Elucidating Sartre, Mary Warnock cogently argues that “consciousness consists in the power to be aware not how things *are*, but how they are *not*” (Warnock 1967, 20). In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes human reality, and bad faith by the same formulation. He deems human reality as “a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is” (Sartre 1992, 100). Later, while explicating bad faith Sartre uses the same utterance. He holds, “Have we not shown indeed that in bad faith human reality is constituted as a being

which is what it is not and which is not what it is? (Sartre 1992, 107). If we take the bad faith formulation, it implies that the for-itself is always in bad faith, it is a plenitude of bad faith and there is no possibility to *make oneself sincere* or *become sincere*. If I cannot *become* it implies I cannot *act* which would further suggest that the for-itself is no longer *is not*, the for-itself is no longer a decompression of being. Does it not create some uncertainty in the notion of for-itself, bad faith and freedom? Describing two different phenomena—human reality, and bad faith—by same expression, seems a bit counterintuitive. The bad faith assertion needs a bit toning. Without being an expert in the field, I believe, Sartre could have rephrased it by a different formulation, by adding the term ‘not’, that is, instead of using the expression “as a being” in his formulation, Sartre could have employed ‘as *not* a being’ and the plausible assertion would then be: “Have we not shown indeed that in bad faith human reality is constituted as *not* a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is?” But later delving deeper in the realm of bad faith, Sartre is certain when he insists, “But if I *were not* cowardly in the simple mode of not-being-what-one-is-not, I would be “in good faith” by declaring that I am not cowardly” (Sartre 1992, 111). So, is Sartre, sometimes, not uniform in his discussion of freedom, as he has been evaluated as being not, by a few readers? I do not intend to do deal with specifics now. Allegedly which seems inimitable about Sartre is that he mystifies by asserting in an apparently arcane and enigmatic panache: perhaps he relished it. Better yet, the subtle ideas which he carves related with existence, human *situation* and condition are perhaps fresh, intriguing, concrete, profound, and subtly engaging.

MY PAST

Examining the issue of the facticity of past, Sartre explains that my past exists in the sense that I have a past, and though the past is that which is out of reach now, but what the for-itself *has been*, is the past. The for-itself is associated with the past but the past cannot determine or rule the for-itself. The past is out of reach, nevertheless, new decisions are arrived at or choices are being made in terms of the past; either by acknowledging the past or by passing over it, in either case the past is referred. The past comes to myself and to the world through my own being. We do not receive our past. We are not able not to choose it, we have a past and we maintain it in existence by our future, by our end, that is, by our projects. **1.** The end or my intention, which is a project chosen towards the future, enlightens the past. Sartre stresses that it is in terms of the past, that a new state of things in future is conceived. The past is significant to future choices. It is from my actual choice of future that the irreversible quality of past comes. My future projects are in relation to a past that is irremediable and irredeemable. I choose to *do* something in *future* because the past cannot be retrieved or reclaimed in the present. In fact, *what-is*, is the past and *what-is* takes on its meaning when it is surpassed toward “*thenot-yet-existing-state of what is* (Sartre 1992, 638). The choice of not-yet-existing-state of *what is*, is inevitable because the past is “that which is to be changed” (Sartre 1992, 638). The for-itself is this change, this engagement, this freedom, this choice of future. The past is integral to future choices. A new state of things in future is realizable because the past is necessarily unrecoverable. **2.** Sartre affirms that since there is a *Before*, which arises because of for-itself, there is a *Past* which

exist. The For-itself does not appear in a universal time without having a Past, rather in universal time there was a moment or being when the For-itself was not born and subsequently there was moment or a being from which the For-itself was born. Sartre maintains that it is “Through birth a Past appears in the world” (Sartre 1992, 199). The unalterable which is behind me is the Past, though the past does not cease being past, “but I myself cease *to be* the Past” (Sartre 1992, 200). The for-itself is choice of an end, which freedom projects by the future which it has to be, in terms of the past. Since I am the fundamental project, Sartre deems that it is I who am to decide the meaning, which the past which I have to be can have for me and for others. I am *in situation*. In addition, the meaning is decided not by deliberating over it but by projecting myself toward my end, that is, by action, by adoption of conducts. The past exists only as “*that self which I no longer am*” (Sartre 1992, 646). The for-itself integrates the past with the situation by its choice of the future and bestows meaning on the facticity of the past, which motivates the action or conduct of the for-itself. Echoing Sartre’s philosophy, Steven Churchill and Jack Reynolds informs that “as we are essentially nothing, whatever we are, we must choose to be it. We are burdened with the constant responsibility of having to choose” (Churchill and Reynolds eds. 2014, 10).

MY ENVIRONMENT

The environment of for-itself, Sartre insists, comprises instrumental-things with their coefficient of adversity and utility of complexes. These co-efficient of adversity and objects in my surrounding cannot by itself constitute a situation, but the adversity and utility is revealed in a situation by the free choice of ends—which I am. The sudden appearance of a different instrumental-thing can play a significant part in either retracting or advancing in a situation. Sartre contends that if my bicycle tire is punctured, the distance of the next town would abruptly change. I am *in a situation*. Now, the distance is counted by steps and not by kilometres. I may conclude that I may not be able to meet Pierre at the appointed time. I cancel the deal with Pierre. The changes in environment cannot by themselves bring a modification in my project; rather it is in the light of the chosen end that I effect a retraction or advancement. The given or the unforeseen appearance of an instrument is not a clog to my freedom rather it is required by the very existence of my freedom, which *I am*. I exercise my freedom upon these givens. The environment is revealed as propitious or dismal in relation to the choice of end, pursued by the for-itself. The for-itself is consciousness of something. Consciousness is nothing apart from being directed toward something which is outside. Sartre insists, “Consciousness is consciousness of something means that for consciousness there is no being outside of that precise obligation to be revealing intuition of something—*i.e.*, of a transcendent being.....Now a revealing intuition implies something revealed” (Sartre 1992, 23). This something which is being-in-itself, is independent of my existence, independent of my choice, and independent of my action. This being-in-itself has a real being upon which my action is exercised. Action implies doing, it implies freedom to change the environment. “To be free is to-be-free-to-change” (Sartre 1992, 650). Sartre argues that the presence of the environment as an encumbrance is not an obstacle to my freedom; rather it is required by the very existence of

freedom. I exercise my freedom only in relation to impediments. I *become* through *acts* and action is in relation to encumbrances. “Thus human reality does not exist first in order to act later; but for human reality, to be is to act, and to cease to act is to cease to be” (Sartre 1992, 613). To act is to change the *in-itself* which needs none other than itself to exist. The for-itself acts on these encumbrances which are indifferent to action. These givens or in-itself exist without performing any action. The in-itself becomes without any action; to the contrary, the for-itself *becomes* by *action*, by *doing*. It is in light of the indifference and inaction of the in-itself that the action of the for-itself becomes meaningful. The very project of for-itself is, to *act*. To act implies a choice, to carry out one’s project in a world that offers some kind of resistance and encumbrance somewhere. Our choices make us, we are made by our choices and action. I am what I choose, I am what I choose to *do*. Choice and doing are one and the same thing. The fundamental choice is not an empty wish, it implies action. Choice is my *being*. I am always choice in making or action. This is *my situation*. Sartre writes ‘Whatever our being may be, it is a choice; and it depends on us to choose ourselves as “great” or “noble” or “base” and “humiliated.” If we have chosen humiliation as the very stuff of our being, we shall realize ourselves as humiliated, embittered, inferior, *etc.*’ (Sartre 1992, 607). For Sartre, I choose myself as great or noble or base, that is, I choose all those things that *make* me great or noble or base. I am what I make myself. Echoing Sartre’s philosophy, Bruce N. Waller in his tour de force says that Sartre ‘insists that our existence precedes our essence and that we human are self-conscious self-creating “being-for-itself” with the free power—indeed, the necessity—to make ourselves..’(Waller 2011, 115-16). Further, while concisely reviewing Daniel Dennett and Jonathan Jacobs, Waller says, *contra* Sartre that you cannot change the self *now* which you have already made, but in its formative stages, you could have formed it differently. Contrariwise, Sartre’s gambler can change his habit of gambling even *now*, if he makes *not-gambling anymore* his possibility, his choice. Though seeing the gaming table his resolution may fizzle, he may feel weak, his determination may rupture, however, he can remake his resolution, his choice *ex-nihilo* and freely. He can illuminate his present situation in light of a state of affair, that does not exist but which has to be obtained, by making a choice: I am *not gambling anymore*. Waller claims a “better early education”, is “likely to fashion a superior self” (Waller 2013, 117), but from Sartre’s perspective, we cannot insist too strongly on Waller’s assertion because despite opportunities, “You’ll just have to choose” (Sartre 1989, 257).

I am *in a situation* and my situation is that in situation it depends on me what I choose. Choice and consciousness are one for Sartre. Consciousness is always consciousness of being consciousness of the choice. Consciousness cannot be ignorant of its choice. Choices of consciousness exist only as consciousness of choices. Sartre notes that ‘Pleasure can not exist “before” consciousness of pleasure—not even in the form of potentiality or potency. A potential pleasure can exist only as consciousness (of) being potential. Potencies of consciousness exist only as consciousness of potencies’ (Sartre 1992, 14). Sartre claims that, “Every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself” (Sartre 1992, 13). Consciousness cannot be distinguished from consciousness of objects. There is always non-positional consciousness of the consciousness, whenever consciousness is

consciousness of something, otherwise it would be consciousness which is unconscious. Consciousness is aware of itself *implicitly*, that is, there is non-positional consciousness of itself whenever consciousness is directed toward its objects. Consciousness is a positional consciousness of the world and non-positional consciousness of itself. This self-consciousness is the subjectivity, which Sartre writes, is “consciousness (of) consciousness” (Sartre 1992, 23). Sartre illustrates by an example, that if I am counting cigarettes there is a positional consciousness of ‘counting’ activity and a non-positional consciousness of ‘I am counting’, hence if someone should ask, “what are you doing there?” I should reply at once, “I am counting” (Sartre 1992, 13). The for-itself is always engaged in an enterprise, in an act. The act and enterprise reveal my choices to me at the instant when they are realized. But furthermore, it is freedom which reveals the in-itself as resistances and human reality relates with these in-itself or brute existents and givens, through choice of end and chooses to alter or transform these *givens*. The given appears as impediment in light of the end chosen, in the midst of the world. I am abandoned in the midst of an indifferent and brute world, because freedom cannot choose itself as freedom. This world which Sartre contends is *brute* is called “ambiguous” by Simone de Beauvoir. The for-itself cannot choose to be free. The for-itself is “thrown” or condemned to be free. I am freedom and it is the for-itself which illumines the facticity and the facticity is nothing but “being-in-the-midst-of-an-in-itself-of-indifference” (Sartre 1992, 652). Similarly, Jonathan Judaken says, “With Mailer and Sartre, Barnes recognized that we are cast adrift in a meaningless universe. Nonetheless, we wring meaning out of our experience” (Jonathan Judaken and Robert Bernasconi eds. 2012, 128).

Footnotes

1. See. Jaako Hintikka. 1959. “Existential Presupposition and Existential Commitment” *The Journal of Philosophy* 56, no.3: 125-37.
2. For Sartre’s example see *Being and Nothingness* p.655.

References

- Anderson, Thomas C. 1992. *Sartre’s Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity*. Chicago and LaSalle: Open Court.
- Anderson, Thomas. 1973. “Neglected Sartrean Arguments for the Freedom of Consciousness”. *Philosophy Today* 17, no.1: 8-39.
- Bell, Linda A. 1977. “Sartre, Dialectic, and The Problem of Overcoming Bad Faith”. *Man and World*. 10. 9-30.
- Busch, Thomas. 1992. “Sartre on Surpassing the Given”. *Philosophy Today*.no.35(1): 6-31.
- Caputo, John D.2019. *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Catalano, Joseph S. 2010. *Reading Sartre*.New York:Cambridge University Press.
- Caws, Peter. 1979. *Sartre*. London: Routledge and Keagan Paul.
- Churchill, Steven and Jack Reynolds.eds. 2014.*Jean-Paul Sartre: Key Concepts*. New York: Routledge.

-
- Detmer, David. 1988. *Freedom As A Value: A Critique of the Ethical Theory of Jean-Paul Sartre*. La Salle: Open Court.
- Dreyfus, H. L. and Mark A. Wrathall.eds. 2006. *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Flynn, Thomas R. 1997. *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason: Toward an Existentialist Theory of History*. vol.1. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gray, Glenn J. "The Idea of Death in Existentialism". *The Journal of Philosophy*. 48, no.5: 113-17.
- Haynes-Curtis, Carole. 1988. "The 'Faith' of Bad Faith". *Philosophy*. 63, no.44: 69-75.
- Judaken, Jonathan and Robert Bernasconi.eds. 2012. *Situating Existentialism: Key Texts in Context*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kaufmann, Walter. ed. 1960. *Existentialism from Dostevsky to Sartre*. New York: Meridian Books.
- LaCapra, Dominick. 1979. *A Preface to Sartre : A Critical Introduction to Sartre's Literary and Philosophical Writings*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd.
- Levy, L. 2014. "Sartre and Ricoeur on Productive Imagination." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 5:43-60. Accessed March 07, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjp.1049>
- Linsenbard, Gail. 2010. *Starting with Sartre*. London: Continuum.
- Manser, Anthony. 1967. *Sartre: A Philosophic Study*. London: Athlone Press.
- Mawson, T.J. 2005. *Belief in God*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Murdoch, Iris. 1967. *Sartre—Romantic Rationalist*. London: Collins Fontana.
- Parker, E.A. 2015. "Singularity in Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 53:1-16. Accessed July 7, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjp.1093>
- Philips, D.Z. 1981. "Bad-Faith and Sartre's Waiter". *Philosophy* 56, no.15: 3-31.
- Santoni, Ronald E. 1995. *Bad Faith, Good Faith, and Authenticity in Sartre's Early Philosophy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1957. *The Transcendence of the Ego. An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*. Translated and Annotated with an Introduction by Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick. New York: The Noonday Press Inc.
- . 1962. *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*. Translated by Philip Mairet. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.
- . 1964. *Essays in Aesthetics*. Selected and Translated by Wade Baskin. London: Peter Owen Ltd.
- . 1965. *Nausea*. Translated by Robert Baldick. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- . 1966. *Existentialism and Humanism*. Translation and Introduction by Philip Mairet. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd.
- . 1974. *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. Translated by John Matthews. London: NLB.
- . 1986. *The Age of Reason*. Translated by Eric Sutton. Introduction by David Caute. London: Penguin Books in Association with Hamish Hamilton.
- . 1989. *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert (*No Exit*, and *The Flies*) and Lionel Abel (*Dirty Hands*, and *The Respectable Prostitute*) New York: Vintage International.
- . 1992. *Being and Nothingness : A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. Translated and with an Introduction by Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Washington Square Press.
-

-
- Silverman, Hugh J. 1978 “Sartre and TheStructuralist”. *The International Philosophical Quarterly* 18, no.3: 341-58.
- Smith, Steven G. 2017. *Full History: On the Meaningfulness of Shared Action*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Thody, Philip. 1960. *Jean-Paul Sartre: A Literary and Political Study*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Waller, Bruce N. 2011. *Against Moral Responsibility*. Massachussets: The MIT Press.
- Webber, Jonathan. 2009. *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre*. New York: Routledge.
- Warnock, Mary. 1967. *Existentialist Ethics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wild, John. 1966. *The Challenge of Existentialism*. Bloomington Press.
- Remley, William L. 2018. *Jean-Paul Sartre’s Anarchist Philosophy*. London: Bloomsbury.