

We are our Possibilities: From Sartre to Beauvoir to Løgstrup

Matthew Ratcliffe

Abstract. This chapter develops a perspective on the phenomenology of freedom, emphasizing its dependence on a sense of relational possibilities involving other people. I draw upon and integrate themes in the works of three philosophers: Jean-Paul Sartre; Simone de Beauvoir; and Knud Ejler Løgstrup. In so doing, I propose that the experience of oneself as a free agent is not primarily a matter of how certain activities and thoughts are experienced—those that involve an elusive feeling or quale of choice or effort. Instead, it consists in a multi-faceted sense of the possible, which is inseparable from the overall structure of human experience and amenable to further analysis. Integral to it are a number of interrelated ways in which one’s own possibilities relate to the possibilities of others; I can be my possibilities only insofar as you are yours and we are ours. In particular, I suggest that the experience of freedom presupposes a basic form of interpersonal trust.

Keywords: body; freedom; others; possibility; significance; trust

Introduction

This chapter offers an interpretation and partial defence of Jean-Paul Sartre’s conception of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre’s well-known insistence that freedom involves a groundless, non-deliberative, ongoing choice of one’s life is often deemed obscure, implausible, or both. However, I have come to the view that there is much to be said for it, at least when it is regarded as a specifically *phenomenological* thesis.¹ In what follows, I will draw on Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, supplemented by themes in the writings of Simone de Beauvoir and Knud Ejler Løgstrup, in order to set out what I take to be a plausible account of the phenomenology of freedom.

Central to Sartre’s conception of freedom is the proposal that we are to be identified with our possibilities. Only a being that “is its own possibility” can experience possibilities as integral to its surroundings and understand “possibility as possibility” (1943/2018, p.155).² According to Sartre, how the surrounding world appears practically significant to us depends upon a contingent arrangement of values. It is relative to these values that things matter to us in the ways they do. Our values are not imposed from elsewhere or somehow discovered by

us. Furthermore, they do not take the form of fixed, enduring characteristics that determine the course of our actions. There is nothing outside of them to specify or justify them. Their persistence is instead akin to a *choice* that we continually make to sustain, develop, transform, or abandon networks of values. For Sartre, freedom is not a localized phenomenon; it is a matter of *being* the possibilities that we have chosen, something that envelops how we experience and relate to the world as a whole. To be what we are is to be oriented towards what we are not yet.

My aim in this chapter is to sketch a phenomenological account of freedom that I take to be broadly right, rather than simply to endorse what I take to be Sartre's position.³ This will involve agreeing with Sartre that our sense of freedom is not to be identified with a localized, episodic experience with a distinctive quality, such as a feeling of intention, volition, choice, or effort. Instead, it is something that encompasses all of our experiences and is presupposed by our actions. However, freedom, as characterized by Sartre, appears oddly bereft of structure and amenable to no further characterization. Our coming into being is a matter of pure contingency, and the organization that we give to our lives is ultimately attributable to the ongoing exercise of a groundless freedom—it is the “choice of myself within the world and, by the same token, my discovery of the world” (1943/2018, p.604). This is variously described by Sartre as “the fabric of my being”, a “nothingness”, and an “unanalysable totality” (1943/2018, p.576, p.578, p.593). I will suggest that, although the distinctive way in which an individual's life is organized can be construed as a matter of ongoing choice, the overall *form* of human experience, which is a prerequisite for having an organized life, cannot. From time to time, we might be said to explicitly recognize the contingency of a practically meaningful world that is more usually taken as given, as well as its dependence on values for which we are ultimately responsible. But this is not the revelation of a bare freedom. Our freedom has a structure, one that is amenable to further analysis. To be more specific, I will identify some of the ways in which it depends on relational possibilities involving *other people*. If we are to anticipate and actualize outcomes in light of our values, other people must offer possibilities of certain distinctive kinds. Given this, it would be more accurate to say that *we are our possibilities* than that *I am mine*.

To develop this position, I will turn first of all to *Being and Nothingness*, endorsing Sartre's view that pre-reflective freedom consists in a way of experiencing and responding to our surroundings. Then, I will consider Simone de Beauvoir's account of how the sense of freedom depends on certain ways of experiencing and relating to other people (Beauvoir, 1947/2018). Following this, I will emphasize the need for a more concrete and discerning

account of the relevant interpersonal possibilities, by drawing on Knud Ejler Løgstrup's conception of basic trust and what he calls the "sovereign expressions of life" (Løgstrup, 1956/1997; 2007). As I draw things together, Peter Strawson's discussion of "reactive attitudes" will also make a brief appearance (Strawson, 2008).

Freedom and Possibility

Central to Sartre's conception of pre-reflective freedom is the manner in which our experience is infused with possibilities. We do not experience only certain actions and thoughts as free. Rather, we already experience ourselves as free before we think and act; freedom spans our whole being. As Sartre says, it is not a "faculty of the human mind that can be contemplated and described in isolation" (1943/2018, p.61). My focus throughout this chapter is on *pre-reflective freedom*, a freedom that we take for granted in our daily lives without explicitly recognizing it.⁴ According to Sartre, reflective experiences of freedom are rare. For the most part, it is instead manifest in our responses to possibilities offered by the surrounding world. He gives the example of writing a sentence, where the words we write are called for by a larger situation; they appear on the page spontaneously and without foresight. In situations like this, we experience our possibilities through the process of actualizing them. A situation elicits responses by presenting us with various "requirements", including "matters of urgency" (1943/2018, p.75). So, if such experiences are acknowledged to include a sense of freedom, it is not to be found in a localized, internal feeling that precedes, accompanies, or is integral to an experience of action.

Sartre maintains that the possibilities we encounter in the world reflect the possibilities that we are—the two are inseparable. My writing this sentence is not an isolated act. It is embedded in the larger project of making a particular point, in the context of writing a chapter, a project that itself makes sense only relative to a set of wider philosophical concerns. In this way, the possibilities offered by our surroundings are specified by an intricate, hierarchically embedded organization of projects and associated values, relative to which the things around us matter as they do. Because our experiences are organized in light of our values, we come to live in a world "populated by requirements" (1943/2018, p.78).⁵ We do not generally act on the basis of preceding mental states that are experienced as internal to ourselves. Instead, actions are elicited by experiences of what is *lacking* in our environment, which themselves depend upon which possibilities we strive to actualize (1943/2018, p.570).

The experience of freedom is not limited to a sense of what we *can* and perhaps ought to do (something that is implicit in the demands the world places on us). In pursuing our projects, we equally experience things as impeding us in various ways. For instance, Sartre mentions the crag that appears to the climber as *too difficult to climb* (1943/2018, p.630). Something can only impede or obstruct us insofar as we confer on it a certain significance, via a project that we take up. How situations constrain our activities therefore depends on choices that we make. It can be added that our freedom is not a circumscribed part of our lives, encompassing only those experiences that include the likes of “I can”, “I am required to”, and “I cannot”. Instead, it is inextricable from and indispensable to the overall form or structure of experience. I will offer a case for this that is not explicit in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, but is—I think—implied by what he does say. A first step is to acknowledge, in line with the wider phenomenological tradition, that objects of experience are imbued with various different kinds of significant possibilities, not all of which relate directly to our own agency. As Sartre observes, when we look up at the dark clouds, the possibility that it will rain “belongs to the sky like a threat” (1943/2018, p.153). Possibilities such as this are phenomenologically irreducible. We do not first experience the clouds and then infer that it might rain or have two separate experiences: perceived clouds and imagined rain. Instead, the objects of our current experiences *always* surpass themselves, pointing beyond themselves to something else (1943/2018, p.152). In other words, all of our experiences are imbued with a sense of the possible.

The next step is to observe that our experiences of possibility are organized in specific, intricate, and interdependent ways. Implicit in my experience of any situation is a sensitivity to the differences between various kinds of possibilities that it incorporates: “I can”; “I cannot”; “they can”; “they cannot”; “we can”; “they can but I cannot”; “I can but they cannot”; “it will happen regardless of what anyone does”; “it is imminent”; “it might happen at some point”, and so forth. In the case of the “I can”, what is elicited always appears *as a possibility*, rather than as something inevitable. Alternative possibilities remain available, even if they are not salient. As I write this sentence in a spontaneous, unthinking way, I do not experience its coming as unavoidable; there remain other possibilities. I could just stop. Importantly, I experience such possibilities as distinct from those involving *epistemic* uncertainty. As a rock falls down a cliff, I do not know exactly where it will land, and a number of contrasting possibilities may appear salient. However, this is not how I experience possibilities associated with my own agency. We experience our own possibilities in the guise of “I can” rather than “it might happen”. We also distinguish this “I can” from

“others can”. As Sartre would put it, there is always a *gap* between what is now the case and how I act; I do not experience my actions as determined by what precedes them or as mere unknowns. Furthermore, this “I can” is integral to the structure of *all* experience. It is one of many kinds of possibilities in terms of which the world is organized. If “I can” could not be distinguished phenomenologically from these other possibilities, experience as a whole would lack structure.

For Sartre, our sense of freedom further involves the absence of any underlying foundation for our projects and values. Our possibilities reflect our projects, which reflect further projects, and so on. But the structure as a whole is groundless. In a choice-like way, we are responsible for the structure of our lives over time, for continuing to accept the values and pursue the projects relative to which some possibilities and not others appear to us:

...the meaning of all these minor passive expectations on the part of reality, of all these banal and everyday values, derives from an initial project of myself, which is akin to my choice of myself within the world. (1943/2018, p.79)⁶

There is, I think, something importantly right about Sartre’s claim that we are ultimately responsible for the underlying values and projects that give our lives structure. We cannot simply choose to undo it all instantly and start again. Similarly, though, we are ordinarily deemed responsible for our well-established beliefs. Although we cannot change them in an instant, we can interrogate and revise them over time. Furthermore, there are times in our lives when projects and values are profoundly disrupted—sometimes due to our own decisions and actions but often as a result of contingent events. The unexpected bereavement, the illness, the injury, the accident, the financial collapse, the war—with such events, an organized world that one took for granted can cease to be sustainable. Situations no longer offer the possibilities that they previously did and there is no basis for one’s actions (or, at least, a substantial subset of one’s actions). One is thus required to act in ways that involve reaching out without a basis, so as to consolidate new projects and systems of values that then come to reorganize one’s world (Ratcliffe, 2022). In certain extreme scenarios, we could think of such world-constituting actions in terms of groundless choice—the ongoing choice of having a world that is organized in one or another way, to be contrasted with choosing something against the backdrop of a world that is already constrained by entrenched projects, values, and prescriptions.

Yet, even if something along these general lines is accepted, the sense of freedom still has a structure. Hence, what I do not wish to accept is that freedom eludes phenomenological characterization, beyond talk of the groundless choice of oneself and one's world (1943/2018, pp.603-4).⁷ It is important to distinguish the *content* or organization of a life from the overall *form* of experience that is required for it to have any such organization. The phenomenology of freedom is integral to the latter. I also part company with Sartre by maintaining that freedom is not simply something that we either have or do not have. During times of upheaval, the overall form of experience can be fragile and malleable. Being deprived of the idiosyncratic and contingent organization of a life is compatible with retaining a sense of freedom and, with it, a capacity to reconstitute one's life. However, it can further involve changes in the structure of experience that erode freedom itself, denying one the ability to sustain or restore a world of organized possibilities that include the "I can". Hence, the extent to which a challenging situation might constrain the scope of potential activities is to be distinguished from how the sense of freedom is itself susceptible to change. I will now propose that central to the structure of freedom, and also its malleability, are distinctive kinds of possibilities involving other people.

Freedom and Other People

To appreciate how freedom depends on other people, it is first necessary to acknowledge that it has a structure, one that is amenable to description and further analysis. Here, it is helpful to draw a comparison with Sartre's discussion of the body, given that the relationship between freedom and the body is—I suggest—analogous to that between freedom and our relations with other people.⁸ For Sartre, we are our possibilities, we are our freedom, and we are also our bodies. It is only through a body that the world can appear to us as an organized arrangement of possibilities. Sartre summarizes his position succinctly by referring to the body as the "*contingent form taken by the necessity of my contingency*" (1943/2018, pp.416-7). In order to have any kind of world, it is necessary to have some kind of body. However, this body could take any number of more specific forms—which bodily characteristics and capacities one has is a contingent matter. The contingent features of one's body influence *which* possibilities show up. For instance, certain things appear to us as *above* or *below*, *left* or *right*, *accessible* or *inaccessible*. Even so, our bodies do not fully determine which possibilities we experience, as the significance of our bodily abilities and limitations also depends on which projects we pursue.

In my view, Sartre's most convincing argument for the necessary dependence of world experience, and therefore freedom, upon having a contingently structured body is as follows:

...if in fact the ends that I am pursuing could be attained through a purely arbitrary wish, if it were enough to wish for something in order to obtain it, and if the use of implements were not determined by definite rules, I would never be able to distinguish within me a desire from a volition, or a dream from an act, or the possible from the real. (1943/2018, p.439)

Sartre thus recognizes that intentionality (construed phenomenologically) has an intricate structure. Our pre-reflective experience distinguishes between what is currently perceived, what is imagined, what is remembered, what we try to do, what we actually do, what we can do, what others can do, and so forth. Almost all of our experiences and thoughts presuppose such distinctions.⁹ A being with no bodily constraints and an unlimited capacity to actualize possibilities would not in fact experience any possibilities at all, as such constraints are a necessary condition for encountering situational possibilities in structured ways. In their absence, the distinction between possibility and actuality would collapse and, with it, our freedom.

Although the precise form that the body takes is indeed contingent, it seems implausible—on the basis of Sartre's analysis—that just any kind of object could serve as a body. Consider, for example, an impregnable, immobile cube, with no capacity for acting upon its surroundings or being affected by them. Even though the properties of our bodies are contingent, the form that our contingency necessarily takes can still be characterized in more specific terms. As Sartre recognizes, a body has capacities, limitations, weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and a cohesive, practically engaged point of view. In addition, one might argue that the likes of change and finitude are essential to the body, that to be one's possibilities is also to be constrained by ageing. The sense of freedom therefore requires the body to have properties that can instantiate such characteristics. Only with such a body can we experience a world organized in terms of various different kinds of interrelated possibilities, which appear to us pre-reflectively as distinct from one another—a world in which we can try, succeed, fail, be threatened or harmed, find safety, or run out of time.

Much the same point applies to how we anticipate and experience other people. In a number of different ways, the structure of freedom depends on relational possibilities involving others. Sartre recognizes something of this, but emphasizes a certain kind of

relation: that of being alienated from one's own possibilities and thus coming to recognize one's "facticity" or object-like nature, which would otherwise be phenomenologically inaccessible. Focusing on the relational experience of shame, he refers to discovering an "aspect of *my* being": I cannot be "vulgar" or "clumsy" on my own; they are possibilities that only appear with the interpersonal, requiring the recognition that "*I am* as the Other sees me" (1943/2018, pp.307-8).

Shame, as conceived of by Sartre, is not a reflective experience whereby we first evaluate our appearance or actions as they are encountered by others and then respond to that evaluation emotionally. Instead, it is a spontaneous, pre-reflective, bodily experience, an "immediate shudder" (1943/2018, p.308). Integral to this experience is a sense of alienation from one's own possibilities (which are experienced *through* our bodies and can thus be affected by changes in bodily experience). Rather than appearing dynamically in the guise of our freedom, they become the frozen object of another's gaze. Although they are still recognized as our own, there is an experience of distance or detachment from them: "my freedom is over there, outside the freedom that I live, like a given attribute of this being that I am for the other" (1943/2018, p.360). So, instead of being a mere object *within* one's world, the other person is encountered as a locus of possibilities that has "stolen the world from me" (1943/2018, p.351). Sartre adds that we are able—to varying degrees and in various ways—to contain and limit this reorganization of our possibilities around the other. Nevertheless, our most fundamental relation with others, our sense of what it is to share a world with them, is constituted by the "constant possibility of my *being seen* by the Other" in a way that involves the reorganization and deadening of possibilities (1943/2018, p.352).

I do not seek to deny that the possibilities offered by other people include our being affected in some such way. Nevertheless, this is just one aspect of what it is to experience others in a distinctively *personal* manner. Importantly, it is also only one of the ways in which interpersonal experience relates to the sense of freedom. At this point, we need to step beyond Sartre's account, which emphasizes how interpersonal relations *alter* our pre-reflective sense of freedom, our dynamic engagement with possibilities that reflect our projects. What is required is a wider-ranging analysis of interpersonal possibilities, which acknowledges how the interpersonal is also essential to an initial, pre-reflective experience of freedom. As such, it is established in advance of anything that might be described in terms of an alienation from one's possibilities or the revelation of one's "facticity".

We can come to see how interpersonal experience sustains a pre-reflective sense of being one's possibilities by further drawing on the analogy with the body. As with bodily

capacities, limitations, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities, it is important to recognize the ways in which various different aspects of interpersonal experience contribute to our sense of the possible. We need to look past the likes of shame, fear, and pride, which Sartre associates with the “look” of the other; relational possibilities involving other people are also essential to the pre-reflective, practically organized world.

In addressing how interpersonal experience contributes to the sense of freedom, it is informative to consider Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, first published in 1947. Beauvoir offers a largely complementary view of human existence as irrevocably incomplete, always oriented towards significant possibilities that reflect projects and values: “the goal toward which I surpass myself must appear to me as a point of departure toward a new act of surpassing” (1947/2018, pp.27-8). Her discussion, like Sartre’s, is concerned with something that envelops human experience as a whole, rather than something that accompanies only certain activities: “no action is conceivable without this sovereign affirmation of the future” (1947/2018, p.124).¹⁰ Beauvoir further identifies some of the ways in which freedom depends on other people, departing in the process from Sartre’s emphasis on a self-alienating gaze. For instance, she suggests that having any projects at all requires a sense of there being distinct, interdependent, and potentially conflicting projects. To have practical possibilities is also to have an appreciation of their being given by others, potentially taken away by others, and embedded in shared practical meanings. Thus, in a manner reminiscent of Heidegger (1927/1962), others are presupposed as conditions of intelligibility for the projects upon which our possibilities depend (Beauvoir, 1947/2018, p.76). If this is accepted, then our pre-reflective freedom requires that of others, insofar as the intelligibility of our projects depends on there being both shared and competing projects, which are themselves intelligible only on the assumption of freedoms beyond our own. Others, as loci of projects that are distinct from one’s own, do not just take away one’s possibilities; they can also grant, sustain, and further them.¹¹

According to Beauvoir, relational possibilities involving others also play a more fundamental role in the constitution of our freedom. She and Sartre agree that we are essentially incomplete, always striving towards possibilities that themselves point to further possibilities. Yet one’s own life has a determinate endpoint when those possibilities will be extinguished. One cannot anticipate such an endpoint *and* continue to sustain a sense of there being possibilities stretching out in an open-ended way. According to Beauvoir, the only way to maintain our sense of the possible in the face of a limited lifespan is to recognize the interdependence of our own freedom and that of others. This allows possibilities to extend

indefinitely, beyond the bounds of one's own life: "we can only be free with an open future and only others can extend it beyond our own life". Consequently, the "me-others relationship" turns out to be just as indispensable to the structure of my experience as the relationship between subject and object (1947/2018, p.78). Beauvoir goes on to endorse the following, more general position:

...it is not true that the recognition of the freedom of others limits my own freedom: to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom. (1947/2018, p.97)

The phenomenological role of others is therefore comparable to that attributed to the body by Sartre. The other is not encountered first of all as a modification of our freedom that reveals our otherwise inaccessible objecthood. Like our bodies, others operate to constrain and enable, contributing to our sense of what we can and cannot do, our vulnerabilities, what is given to us, and what we are dependent upon. Moreover, our experiencing an open-ended arrangement of possibilities, shaped by but not determined by our past, depends on certain ways of relating to others just as it does upon having a body. In order to have an open future, at least one of the following must apply: (a) some of these possibilities are experienced as "ours", rather than just "mine" or "yours"; (b) some of "my possibilities" are directed towards furthering possibilities that I recognize as "yours" or "theirs". Otherwise, my possibilities die with me. In this way, Beauvoir promotes a conception of human lives as dynamic, open-ended, and interdependent.¹²

However, in addressing the relationships between human freedom and interpersonal experience, we can also be more discerning. There are many ways of anticipating and experiencing other people, which affect our own possibilities differently. Furthermore, different kinds of relational possibilities predominate in different kinds of human relationships and situations. Experiencing the world as a structured arrangement of possibilities, of a kind that can sustain coherent patterns of practically meaningful action over time, involves being open to all of these. Furthermore, there is interpersonal and temporal variation in the kinds of interpersonal possibilities we are receptive to. This renders not only the contingent organization of a life but also the phenomenological structure of freedom susceptible to change. The price we pay for our possibilities is fragility and vulnerability, something that applies to our interpersonal relations just as it does to our bodies.

People and Possibilities

Sartre does not limit his discussion of interpersonal possibilities to shame and the look. Having also mentioned pride and fear, he goes on to describe a range of “concrete” interpersonal relations, which give rise to “entirely new modes of being of the for-itself” (1943/2018, p.479). However, he adds that all of these somehow incorporate the conflictual relation that he has already identified. As he writes, “conflict is the original meaning of being-for-the-Other” (1943/2018, p.483). Hence, the dynamics of human relations can be characterized in terms of various tensions between retaining one’s own freedom and striving to possess the freedom of others. I have proposed that even the pre-reflective, undisrupted experience of freedom depends on others. So, the scope of our concrete relations with others should be construed more broadly. In particular, I want to suggest that the structure of freedom depends upon a form of pre-reflective, non-localized, interpersonal *trust*. In a given situation, we might distrust Sue to do *p*, or distrust Bob full stop. However, localized distrust arises against the backdrop of a wider pattern of interpersonal anticipation. This involves continuing to depend on specific others, and others in general, in a number of ways—they will tell me the truth; they will not harm me for no reason; they will help me if I am in great need. Without this, an organized network of ongoing, changing, and developing projects would become unsustainable. Trust, at least as I conceive of it in this context, is a pre-reflective anticipatory structure common to a wide range of interpersonal situations, spanning relations that take the form of “we”, “I-you”, and “I-them”.¹³

A detailed account of the phenomenological fundamentality of trust is offered by Knud Ejler Løgstrup, in *The Ethical Demand* and some of his later writings (1956/1997; 2007). For Løgstrup, trust is our basic, default way of anticipating and encountering other people. Episodes of distrust and more enduring attitudes of distrust towards specific individuals or collectives involve its modification. Trust, according to Løgstrup, consists in a kind of openness to others’ influence. We allow ourselves to be vulnerable before them; to trust is to “lay oneself open” (1956/1997, p.9). Trusting relations of this kind enrich our sense of an open future by pointing to new possibilities. Interpersonal encounters include the potential to be affected in ways that alter one’s possibilities, opening up the future in new and sometimes unanticipated ways: “By our very attitude to one another we help to shape one another’s world” (1956/1997, p.18). It can be added to Løgstrup’s account that this is also something we *anticipate* from our encounters with others, contributing to our sense of what it is to experience someone in a distinctively personal way. And, I suggest, a fully rich sense of

an open future is not only a matter of pursuing certain possibilities in light of one's projects, but also of appreciating the potential for its interpersonal transformation.

Trusting others involves tolerating a degree of indeterminacy—even if it is unclear what is the case or what will happen, we can depend on them when navigating situations. So, trusting expectations involving others enable us to act under conditions of uncertainty. In addition, they involve recognizing that the outcomes of our actions do not depend on us alone and that our lives can move in unanticipated directions, potentially involving profound shifts in our projects and values. A sense of there being certain *kinds* of interpersonal possibilities is therefore an important aspect of how we experience the future—a qualitative enrichment of our openness to new possibilities. In this way, having an open future involves accepting one's dependence and vulnerability, being “in the power” of others’ “words and conduct”. In contrast, encountering others on the basis of inflexible assumptions or suspicion is to not let them “emerge through words, deeds, and conduct”, amounting to a “denial of life” (Løgstrup, 1956/1997, p.14). If this is broadly right, then trusting anticipation is not just one of the ways in which we encounter others—it is inseparable from the potential to be affected by someone in a specifically *personal* way.¹⁴

In addition to this, trust is a condition of possibility for constructing, sustaining, and developing a coherent arrangement of projects. In fact, it plays multiple roles. Becker (1996) draws helpful distinctions between trust as “credulity”, “reliance”, and “security”. We are epistemically reliant on others and—for the most part—credulous. Otherwise, we would be faced with a level of chronic epistemic uncertainty that would undermine much of what we do. Most of our projects also involve one or another form of practical reliance upon others. They may work with us or for us, and almost all of our own efforts depend in some way on the reliability of their labours—the power will not go out; the tools will not fall to pieces; the car will start; the delivery will arrive. Most of our goal-directed activities further presuppose a non-localized sense of safety or security—they will not harm me, ridicule me, destroy what I have done, or undermine what I do for no reason. If one ceased altogether to anticipate people in these ways, an organized world of future-oriented possibilities would become unsustainable.¹⁵

Radically different ways of anticipating and experiencing other people, bereft of basic trust, therefore amount to privations of an open future—of a world of meaningful possibilities that include the “I can”. And it is plausible that these sometimes occur. For instance, Eugene Minkowski (1970) describes a form of experience that involves encountering others only as the undifferentiated judges of one's own guilt: “he was not persecuted by living men but by

men who were transformed into persecutors and were only that. He no longer saw the total, complex life of the human being” (1970, p.189). This transformation of interpersonal experience is, Minkowski suggests, inseparable from a future that is bereft of the potential for positive development and a past that is set in stone—no longer subject to reinterpretation in light of meaningful, unfolding events. R. D. Laing (1960) describes another predicament, where others appear only as an existential threat, something that is similarly incompatible with sustaining a coherent perspective upon a world of organized possibilities.

To put all of this in more Sartrean terms, we could say that trust is integral to the constitution of the for-itself, to the ability to choose any kind of organized world, and thus to our freedom. Without at least some degree of trust, we could not experience a fully open future or sustain the various possibilities that depend on having stable networks of projects and values. Hence, non-localized trust, as manifested in the anticipation and experience of concrete relations with others, is integral to the phenomenological structure of freedom. In its most basic form, trust is not something that is chosen, something that is contingent and groundless in the way that an arrangement of values and projects might be said to be contingent and groundless. Instead, it is a condition of possibility for having any system of projects. Exactly who we trust and when we trust are contingent. However, *having trust*, like having a body, is a necessary condition for freedom. As Løgstrup (1956/1997, p.18) suggests, this is not something that we choose or acquire, but something that is given as a condition of our being:

Trust is not of our own making; it is given. Our life is so constituted that it cannot be lived except as one person lays him or herself open to another person and puts her or himself into that person's hands either by showing or claiming trust.

Different aspects or subtypes of trust (such as epistemic and practical) are amenable to further analysis, as are the ways in which and the degrees to which trust can be eroded. Thus, insofar as trust is integral to freedom, our sense of freedom is equally amenable to analysis. However, the interpersonal conditions of freedom are not limited to trust. In developing a wider perspective, it is again informative to draw on Løgstrup and, more specifically, what he calls the *sovereign expressions of life* (Løgstrup, 2007).¹⁶ These are said to include the likes of trust, mercy, and openness of speech, although Løgstrup does not provide a comprehensive taxonomy. Such “expressions”, as he understands them, are not “applied” by us in the context of already established interpersonal situations. Instead, they are integral to how we pre-

reflectively experience and respond to interpersonal situations, arising spontaneously as “claims” that a situation makes upon us. They are thus analogous to Sartre’s account of writing as a spontaneous, pre-reflective response to requirements that emanate from our experienced surroundings. The sovereign expressions, for Løgstrup, play an essential role in both opening up and transforming interpersonal situations. Hence, they are also implicated in a wider-ranging sense of openness and possibility. They are to be contrasted with “obsessive and encircling movements of thought and feeling”, such as envy and jealousy, which fix upon something in a rigid way and perpetuate themselves by precluding openness to meaningful change (Løgstrup, 2007, p.53).

Løgstrup (2007, p.59) remarks that, unless we acknowledge how the sovereign expressions operate in the context of concrete encounters, we will be left with an account of human experience that is too abstract, culminating in “existentialism’s vacuous talk of the vacuous self”.¹⁷ Nevertheless, we can—I suggest—reconcile the two by conceding that, although the continuing organization of a life might resemble a choice, the basis for that choice has a structure—our bodies and our relations with others together open up certain kinds of possibilities that would otherwise be inaccessible to us. So, a sort of groundless choice is in fact compatible with Løgstrup’s insistence that “we live off something that we cannot credit to ourselves”. The conditions of freedom are to be found in the capacity for certain kinds of interpersonal relations; there is a “positive experience of the freedom of existence in the realized sovereign expressions of life” (Løgstrup, 2007, pp. 67-8).

This account of trust and the sovereign expressions points to the prospect of distinguishing and further describing the various kinds of possibilities integral to interpersonal experience and how they relate to one’s being a locus of possibilities. Effectively, what Løgstrup provides us with is a partial phenomenological account of what Peter Strawson has called the “reactive attitudes” (Strawson, 2008). These are the attitudes that characterize “participation in a human relationship”, consisting of reactions to the “good or ill will or indifference of others” (Strawson, 2008, pp.9-11). Strawson emphasizes just how much it matters to us whether others’ actions involve one or another attitude towards us, from goodwill and affection to indifference and malevolence. Furthermore, he suggests that an organized arrangement of reactive attitudes is so deeply engrained in our conceptual scheme that it could not—in practice—be abandoned. By adopting a phenomenological approach along the lines set out by Løgstrup, we can see why. The kind of experiential world we are able to sustain depends on the kinds of attitudes we anticipate from others in general. Our own reactive attitudes, such as gratitude and blame, relate to what we anticipate from others

and, more specifically, what we require or demand of them. The full spectrum of reactive attitudes is a reflection of the various different kinds of *possibilities* that we associate with other people, what we expect from them. However, we do not merely anticipate and respond to the attitudes of others within the context of an already established world. Interpersonal expectations of various kinds are also integral to the *constitution* of that world. The attitudes that we anticipate from others, how we respond to those attitudes, and what we anticipate from others in response to our own words and deeds contribute to the sustenance of a world and to the sense of being a free agent.

The task of analyzing the structure of freedom therefore includes that of analyzing the various attitudes we anticipate from and adopt towards others—how they are interrelated and which, if any, could be said to have priority. This encompasses Løgstrup’s “sovereign expressions” and—potentially—much else besides. Some forms of interpersonal expectation are integral to unproblematic, pre-reflective freedom, while others might be said to modify it or disrupt it, opening up new possibilities for self-experience and self-conception. What elicits the “reactive attitudes” is not experienced solely in the guise of psychological states possessed by oneself and others. Interpersonal expectations are also embedded in the experienced world, operating as conditions of intelligibility for projects and associated practical possibilities. This perspective also allows for numerous permutations: different ways of being in the world and with others.

In conclusion, I have suggested that, with certain qualifications, talk of existential freedom is quite plausible. Freedom involves a sense of “I can”, along with various other interrelated possibilities. These are integral to experienced situations and depend in various different ways on our relations with others. Our pursuit of possibilities is dynamic in nature—changeable in both form and content. In one sense, it is groundless; the specific organization of a life is contingent and malleable. However, our freedom also has a phenomenological structure, including both bodily constraints and a multi-faceted arrangement of possibilities concerning other people. If this is right, then much of the required philosophical work was not done back in the 1940s. It remains to be done, in the guise of a detailed analysis of the necessary conditions for experiencing a dynamic, interpersonal world of organized possibilities, some of which take the form “I can”.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to Ellie Byrne, Martin Gunnarson, and Fredrik Svenaeus for a very helpful discussion of this chapter. Thanks also to the editors of this volume for feedback on an earlier draft.

References

- Beauvoir, S. de. 1947/2018. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Trans. Bernard Frechtman. New York: Open Road.
- Becker, L. C. 1996. Trust as Noncognitive Security about Motives. *Ethics* 107: 43-61.
- Blankenburg, W. 1971/2012. *Der Verlust der natürlichen Selbstverständlichkeit*. Berlin: Parodos Verlag.
- Fonagy, P. and E. Allison. 2014. The Role of Mentalizing and Epistemic Trust in the Therapeutic Relationship. *Psychotherapy* 51: 372-380.
- Heidegger, M. 1927/1962. *Being and Time* Trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Laing, R. D. 1960. *The Divided Self: A Study of Sanity and Madness*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Løgstrup, K. E. 1956/1997. *The Ethical Demand*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Løgstrup, k. E. 2007. *Beyond the Ethical Demand*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Minkowski, E. 1970. *Lived Time: Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies*. Trans. N. Metzler. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Ratcliffe, M. 2015. *Experiences of Depression: A Study in Phenomenology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ratcliffe, 2017. *Real Hallucinations: Psychiatric Illness, Intentionality, and the Interpersonal World*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Ratcliffe, M. 2022. *Grief Worlds: A Study of Emotional Experience*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. 1943/2018. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*. Trans. S. Richmond. London: Routledge.
- Strawson, P. F. 2008. Freedom and Resentment. In his *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, pp. 1-28. London: Routledge.
- Webber, J. 2018. *Rethinking Existentialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹ As Webber (2018, p.40) observes, Sartre's account of freedom is often regarded as implausible, but on the basis of a "view of freedom much simpler and less credible than the one he actually held at this stage of his career".

² I will be referring throughout to Sarah Richmond's 2018 translation of Sartre's 1943 *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1943/2018). Page numbers refer to the English language text.

³ One could also use the term "free will". However, I avoid it here, as it has connotations of effort, volition, or choice. For Sartre, our experience of freedom involves something more pervasive and fundamental, a sense of the possible that is presupposed by any localized occurrence that we might identify as an exercise of will. The will, he says, "requires" an "original freedom" (1943/2018, p.582). In this chapter, I also refrain from engaging with metaphysical debates concerning free will. I am concerned exclusively with the relevant phenomenology.

Nevertheless, phenomenological analysis has the potential to inform metaphysical debates by clarifying the phenomena at stake.

⁴ This can be contrasted with the reflective awareness of freedom that Sartre maintains can be acquired through “anguish” (1943/2018, Part One, Ch. 1).

⁵ Echoing Heidegger (1927/1962), Sartre emphasizes our interactions with organized arrangements of equipment that reflect our various goal-directed projects: “as I *am* my possibilities, the order of equipment in the world is the image, projected into the in-itself, of my possibilities, i.e., the image of what I am” (1943/2018, p.281). However, we can also think of the many ways in which things *matter* and the underlying values relative to which they matter in broader terms. For instance, we could include the full range of aesthetic and moral experiences, along with enduring commitments and pastimes that involve repeated patterns of activity rather than interacting with equipment in moving towards a practical goal.

⁶ It should be added that the sense of freedom is not, according to Sartre, something that precedes an arrangement of projects and is responsible for their appearance. That would involve a misleading abstraction. He maintains instead that our freedom is always manifested *within* concrete arrangements of projects: “the for-itself’s freedom is always *committed*; the freedom in question here bears no relation to some undetermined power, able to pre-exist its choice” (1943/2018, p.625). One is not free to summon a world out of nothing, but instead to sustain, modify, or abandon projects that are more or less central to the organization of one’s life.

⁷ In this respect, at least, I depart from Sartre’s position, which involves maintaining that freedom is an existence without essence, something that cannot be “contained within a definition” (1943/2018, p.575). This would seem to conflict with the project of providing a phenomenological analysis of its structure.

⁸ It can be added that the phenomenological roles played by the body and by other people are inextricable. It is together that they determine the kinds of possibilities accessible to us. Although I focus on bodily and interpersonal experience, I do not claim that they are together sufficient for a sense of freedom, only that they are both necessary.

⁹ See Ratcliffe (2017) for a discussion of forms of experience that involve changes in the overall structure of intentionality, in the pre-reflective sense of perceiving as distinct from imagining or remembering.

¹⁰ Beauvoir adds that the nature of our freedom is routinely obscured in various different ways, giving rise to both individual attitudes and larger political orientations that fail to acknowledge our essential dynamism and incompleteness. Ethics, she maintains, involves the “triumph of freedom over facticity” (1947/1998, p.48).

¹¹ Sartre does explicitly acknowledge that, when we confer significance upon things in light of our projects, we already encounter those things within a context of shared practical meanings. Whether or not something is a car or a computer does not depend on my freedom alone (1943/2018, p.663). However, Beauvoir’s point is also concerned with how the intelligibility of one’s own projects depends on there being distinct projects attributable to others.

¹² See Webber (2018) for a wider-ranging discussion of historical and philosophical relationships between Sartre’s changing conception of freedom and Beauvoir’s position. Webber also considers Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Sartre on freedom, and how the three philosophers conceive of the “sedimentation” of projects and its implications for the sense of freedom.

¹³ Hence, trust is not specific to a form of *we-intentionality*, something that Sartre takes to be derived from a more basic experience of conflict (1943/2018, p.564).

¹⁴ Løgstrup (1956/1997) adds that there is a unilateral demand that we care for those who place their trust in us, which originates in the recognition of our own life as a gift. For current purposes, I set this aside, as nothing that is said here requires its acceptance.

¹⁵ Such points can be complemented by a developmental perspective. For example, Fonagy and Allison (2014) offer an account of how epistemic trust depends on attachment and of how different attachment histories give rise to different epistemic dispositions. Epistemic trust, they maintain, is a precondition for accessing shared knowledge through interpersonal interactions. Without it, one may live a life characterized by “rigidity”, “lack of flexibility”, and constant searching for an affirmation that cannot be obtained due to a pervasive lack of security. Couching this in more phenomenological terms, we might say that one lacks access to certain kinds of interpersonal possibilities, in a way that alters how one experiences and engages with the world more generally, as well as one’s orientation towards an open future. See also Blankenburg (1971/2012) for a discussion that integrates phenomenological and developmental perspectives on how the structure of experience is affected by loss of the capacity for trust.

¹⁶ In developing his account of the sovereign expressions, Løgstrup engages with themes in two of Sartre’s plays: *The Devil and the Good Lord* and *The Condemned of Altona*.

¹⁷ In fact, the complaint is reminiscent of Sartre’s own criticisms in *Being and Nothingness* of overly abstract thinking (1943/2018, p.34).